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ONLINE PEER FEEDBACK IN EFL WRITING CLASS: HOW IT IMPROVES STUDENTS' WRITING AND THE PROBLEMS THE STUDENTS FACE

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Abstract

The study was aimed to see how teacher's weblog could be utilized to encourage collaborative learning in a portfolio assessment of a foreign/second language writing. A model of teacher's weblog with a Facebook login was designed. Students collect their first draft of writing text by publishing it on the weblog, then their peers read and provide feedbacks for improvement of the second draft. Twenty six students of English Teacher Education Department of Sultan Agung Islamic University Semarang Central Java taking the course of **Writing 3** participated as the subjects of the study. Data collected by questionnaire show that they were happy to have their works published on the weblog. Since the writings would possibly be read by many people, they would prepare the writing assignment better. They also admitted that they could learn from the writing posts of their peers. From 5 categories of peer feedbacks (organization, content, grammar, style, and mechanics), grammar feedback in which students identify the errors or mistakes in grammar and provide suggestions for improvement, is the most frequent feedbacks offered by students (48.8%), followed by style (15.6%), mechanics (14.1%), organization (12.5%), and content (9.4%). This practical model of portfolio not only eases the teacher but also encourages the students to learn collaboratively. Students can help each other improve the quality of their writing by receiving or providing feedbacks for their peers.

Key words: *foreign language writing, portfolio assessment, weblog, peer feedback, collaborative learning.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, second/foreign language writing instruction has shifted from product approach to process approach in which the goal of writing instruction was more on communication rather than on grammatical accuracy (Leki, 1992). This shift has not only moved the focus of writing instruction from the finished product to the whole process of writing which, following Harmer (2004), includes planning, writing first draft, revising, and final product but also changed the assessment model. Second/foreign language writing instruction by process approach requires that the teacher see the whole process of writing rather than only the final product collected by one time writing test. For that purpose, portfolio is believed to be the most suitable model of assessment (Hancock, 1994) since it involves the learner him/herself and requires a shared responsibility between teacher and student.

In portfolio-based writing assessment, the learners have the opportunities to write their drafts and develop the ideas. Teacher and their friends are expected to help by providing them feedbacks. In this way, new ideas can possibly be generated, new sentences can be written, and inappropriate or ungrammatical sentences may be revised. However, this kind of shared

responsibility is rather difficult to be implemented when it is a paper-based portfolio in which the learners collect the draft in printed papers. Paper based portfolio will not be able to accommodate peer feedbacks since the students don't have enough access to their classmates' portfolio as the portfolio may reside in the teacher's desk.

To overcome this difficulty, educators turn to use Internet or more broadly speaking the information and communication technology (ICT). ICT can be used to implement portfolio assessment digitally by the use of e-portfolio which is, according to Lorenzo & Ittelson (2005), a digitalized collection of artifacts representing individual, groups, communities, and may or may be printed (Trevitt, Macduff, & Steed, 2014). Examples of e-portfolio available today are pebble pad-based e-portfolio, web-based portfolio, facebook-based portfolio, wiki and weblog portfolio (Babaee, 2012). A benefit of having e-portfolio is concerning with the file management problem. If in a traditional portfolio, a teacher must keep the sheets or copies of paper which may accumulate from week to week, in an e-portfolio, the files will very easily be saved and made accessible for other students and even anyone in the world. Teacher and students can also comment or revise their draft anytime easily and conveniently even when their writing works have been published, since the students still have control over them.

This paper will first present one type of e-portfolios mentioned above namely weblog portfolio and analyze its effectiveness. However, it is different from other studies because instead of using students' weblog, it used the teacher's weblog since the majority of the subjects participating in the study did not have their own weblog.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Peer Feedback

Feedback which may be defined as tutor and learner comments on learner's contribution, is an important element in the writing classroom (Moradi & Karimpour, 2012). The focus of feedback usually is not on formal grading; rather it helps students identify the strengths and weaknesses of their writing performance so that the writer can improve it (Dippold, 2009). In a process approach writing, peer feedback is a common feature and it has got an increasing attention in second language writing classroom (Lin & Yang, 2011).

Feedbacks are useful not only for the learners who wrote the drafts, but also for the learners who provide them (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). It is because when a learner wants to provide feedback, she/he must be able to judge the draft based on certain criteria, for example the appropriateness of grammar used in the draft, the structure of the text, the word choice, etc. Therefore, she/he must be critical as well as objective, the quality which, when it is transferred to him/herself, in turn will help improve his/her own writing performance.

Based on the mode, peer feedback can be categorized into two namely face-to-face peer feedback and online peer feedback (Sayed, 2010). Face-to-face feedback happens when students exchange their work and comment on each other either orally or written somewhere in the draft. This mode of feedback practice will enhance collaborative learning in which learners will have an opportunity to learn and help each other. Psychologically, this will motivate learners to learn more and enable them to distinguish between accepted and unaccepted forms of the target language use.

Online feedback is the one that is given virtually either in synchronous or asynchronous mode. Synchronous mode is when two students or more are engaged in the conversation virtually in a real time such as in chats or web conferencing. While the latter happens in an offline way of communication as mail, comments, and so on. In an asynchronous mode, the

engagement in a real time is not necessary because a learner can check the comment sometimes later, and feedback can be made delayed even when the learner who made the comment has been offline. Delayed response can be either an advantage or a disadvantage. It is an advantage because the learner will experience less stress of making immediate response. A learner will have enough time to think critically. While it is a disadvantage because the communication is off, further clarification if necessary will not be able to be made immediately. Whether feedback is provided either online or offline, studies suggest that peer feedbacks have the advantages of improving the writing quality and enhance writing confidence of the writing learners (Lin & Yang, 2011). With peer feedback, learners can enter into dialogs related to performance and standard (Liu & Carless, 2006).

2.2 *Portfolio Assessment*

Portfolio is a cumulative collection of work learners have done from beginning of the semester to the end (Johnson, 1996) which documents students' effort, progress and achievement in their learning (Yang, 2003). It is an alternative approach to writing assessment that emphasizes the composing process, learner independence and self-reflective capacity (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). The primary purpose of portfolios in EFL context is to increase the level of students' motivation and to give them a sense autonomous learning. Portfolio develops learning, supports self-assessment, and encourage reflection (Madden, 2007). According to Lam (2013), portfolio assessment for writing class involves at least collection, selection, reflection, and delayed evaluation. Collection is when students are required to submit their writing work, but not necessarily the finished work. In collection stage there may be some activities as writing up the first draft, making self evaluation, doing peer review/peer feedback, writing second draft, etc.. In selection stage, the learner reviews all the drafts and considers the strengths and weakness of each. The learner selects entries that showcase his best ability during the portfolio compilation, while in reflection stage, the learner develops capacity to review the progress that he/she has made in the portfolio. And finally, the learner proposes the best draft for grading by the teacher. Grade is only given to the final products of writing.

Concerning portfolio assessment, Endacott et al (2004) proposes four models namely the shopping trolley in which the portfolio only acts as a repository for artifacts collected during the course. There is little cohesion evident in this type of portfolio, and little attempt to link the evidence to learning outcomes or competencies. The second one is the toast rack in which the portfolio is made up of discrete elements (the toast) that assess different aspects of practice and or theory. They remained separate when collected into a binder, with the binder (the rack) simply acting as a convenient device for keeping the elements in one place. The third is spinal column. The portfolio is structured around practice competencies or learning outcomes, and evidence was slotted in to demonstrate how each competence had been met. Within this model there may be reflective accounts that consider more than one competencies, and overarching competencies that require multiple pieces of evidence as proof of achievement. While the last one is cake mix in which evidence from theory and practice is integrated into the portfolio and the whole ('cake') is assessed. There is an overarching narrative which combined elements and the narrative rather than the discrete components.

Previous study by Nezakatgoo (2011) found that portfolio assessment is useful for ESL students. In a study intended to determine the effect of writing and assessing portfolios on final examination scores of EFL students' writing, it was found that portfolio assessment provides a greater degree of student empowerment. Students can again and again reflect and improve

previously written papers and select their best papers for final grading. There was a significant correlation between the portfolio method of writing and assessment and student final scores.

Another study by Taki and Heidari (2011) also found that portfolio-based writing assessment had a positive effect on language learning. The students' abilities in writing were not significantly different in the pretest but after implementing portfolio-based writing assessment it was observed that the scores of the students in the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the students in the control group. Portfolio assessment also has positive backwash effect on learning. Students thought that portfolio gives them more time to read, to prepare, to write and to revise their writing work which in turn to encourage them to be more autonomous, disciplined, and more confident in writing (Syafei, 2012).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Twenty six students of English Teacher Education Department of College of Languages of Sultan Agung Islamic University taking the course of **Writing 3** of group E1 in the odd semester of 2014/2014 participated as the subjects of the study. There were 3 groups but E1 group was chosen purposively as the researcher was assigned to teach the group. The course was aimed at providing students with writing competence on genre writing. The texts covered in the syllabus among others were description, recount, narrative, procedure and explanation. The subjects were at the third semester of their study and had passed **Writing 1** course for sentence-based writing and **Writing 2** course for paragraph-based writing. However, in the beginning of the class, it was clearly evident that the student writing competence still needed improving. Besides, their writing competence was very heterogeneous, some students did perform well during the instruction, but some others needed to work very hard to keep with it.

3.2 Procedure

The class met once a week for 100 minutes. In the first day of the class, they were told that portfolio assessment would be applied to assess their competence in writing. The students were required to submit their writing assignments not in printed form, instead they published them in the teacher's weblog at www.colasula.com. They were told the procedure; the steps on how to publish their writing assignment on the web were demonstrated to assure that they would be able to do it themselves. For one type of assignment, text of description for example, they were required to write the first draft, publish it, reflect and see whether it had met the standard, check and consider the feedbacks from their peers if any, and then write the revised versions. Students were also suggested to read their peers' work and provide feedbacks for improvement. Students might revise and publish the assignment as many times as possible and in doing so, they might accept or reject the feedbacks of their peers.

3.3. Data

The data of the study were collected from the students' writings and feedbacks published on the teacher's weblog of www.colasula.com and students' perception on the use of the model which were collected by questioner. It was a Likert-model questioner with 4 scales of "1" (Totally Disagree), "2" (Disagree), "3" (Agree), and "4" (Totally Agree). The data were analyzed descriptively.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Model

In order for the students to be able to publish their writing in the teacher's weblog, the weblog was equipped with a feature of **Facebook Login**. Facebook Login can be used by anyone who has a Facebook account to login and get limited access into the dashboard of a weblog as to add, edit, delete and view posts of their own. It is different from the full access of the dashboard when an administrator logs in by using the username and password. As the Facebook symbol under Facebook Login is clicked, a facebook-sign up will appear and the student who has got a facebook account just needs to type his email and password to login.

When posting a new text is successful, the name of the student is listed as an author and appears on the main page of the blog together with the number of posts he has already made. For example, Agus Jumirno, a student who served as the subject of the study, has posted 7 texts; therefore, his name is written **Agus Jumirno (7)**. The teacher can easily and quickly check all the posts of a certain author just by clicking the name. To this stage, the weblog has performed two functions namely collection of the students' work as prescribed by Lam (2013), and group as well as sort them based on either the authors or the categories.

There is a threat embedded here, however. Though it didn't happen during the research, with Facebook login, uninvited and unintended individuals may easily login, post undesired and irrelevant materials, or even misuse the web for personal purposes. Therefore, the teacher who has a full access to the dashboard has to monitor it very frequently and clear the weblog from such kinds of waste posts.



Picture 1: Facebook Login in the teacher's Weblog



Picture 2: The Authors in the teacher's weblog.

The weblog was also equipped with **+Share** facility and **Facebook Like** button. **+Share** facility enables the students to share the posts on the web to social media as Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, Google, or even an email. In this study since the class also had a Facebook group, the students shared the posts to Facebook group of **Writing 3_E1_14** administered by the teacher. While, **Facebook Like** button is to facilitate readers to rate the posts in the form of likening.

As a writing work was published, other students were suggested to comment either in the blog -by writing it in the comment box just under the post- or in the Facebook group. The comments would serve as feedbacks for reflection, and input for improvement when the students wanted to write the revised version of their text. As students had collected their writing work, made reflection, and written a revised version, the next step was to select the one they thought as the best version and posted again for grading by the teacher. To this point, the process of portfolio as collection, reflection, selection, and grading was done.

The data from the questioner suggest that this kind of web-based portfolio is much more practical than printed paper portfolio as indicated by the mean score of 3.9 of Likert scale from 1

“Totally Disagree” to 4 “Totally Agree”. The respondents were happy to have their works published on the weblog because the writings would possibly be able to be read by many more people (score: 3.65), they were not worry or even ashamed with their writing (score: 2.08), would prepare the best for them (score: 3.49), and could learn from the writing posts of their peers (score: 3.49).

4.2 The Feedbacks

As **Writing 3** was devoted for genre-based writing, students were assigned to write some types of texts as description, recount, narratives, etc. However, this study only took the description texts as data for analysis. Students were required to write descriptive texts of about 250 to 300 words on topics related to their classmates, hometowns, and campus. Twenty six students (100%) wrote and posted their first drafts on the weblog. Twenty students wrote topics about their hometowns, 5 students wrote topics about their campus, and the rest wrote topics on classmates.

From all the posts of the descriptive texts, there were 62 peer feedbacks provided by 19 students (73.1% of the total students in the class). One post got no feedback at all, 8 posts got one feedback, 5 posts got 2 feedbacks, 8 posts had 3 feedbacks, 2 posts had 4 feedbacks, and 2 posts got 6 feedbacks. Though, not all students participated in peer feedback provision, the data clearly shows that, by using the weblog, students could be engaged in such kind of collaborative work. The students could help each other improve their writing work by identifying the weakness or not standardized forms found in the text and suggest them with the ones more acceptable as one of the following feedback shows:

“I do appreciate it, Azza. But let me correct some ungrammatical sentences. On the first paragraph " Usually College of Language is called by COLASULA." should be "Usually people called by COLASULA." On the second paragraph, "My college has a big mosque usually people called by Abu Bakar As-segaf mosque which have two floors" it is passive sentence form, so you should write "My college has a big mosque, it is usually called by the people such the name of Abu Bakar Assegaf mosque which HAS TWO FLOORS." (provided by Evi Parmenas, September 26 at 10:02 am).

At this stage, the teacher did not give any feedback yet considering that a student would probably value the teacher’s feedback as more important than that of peer feedbacks which eventually might lead them to neglect the ones of their friends. Secondly, teacher’s feedback could discourage students to provide peer feedbacks because they would think that the teacher’s feedback was final. When the teacher commented a student’s work as by writing ‘good’ for example, students apparently would treat it as a sign that the writing work had met the standard. It was, therefore, teacher’s feedbacks would be given as the students had revised their drafts and posted them on the weblog as the second or third draft.

The areas of peer feedbacks under investigation were categorized into content, grammar, mechanics, organization, and style feedbacks. Mostly one feedback focused on one specific area, but there were also some which offered correction for improvement on two areas as grammar and style or content and organization. The biggest number of peer feedback were grammar feedbacks (48.8%). It is followed by style (15.6%), mechanics (14.1%), organization (12.5%), and content (9.4%).

The followings are some examples of the feedbacks:

- Feedback on grammar:

“On the third paragraph (the third sentence after coma) , It is no very grammatically . I think that the sentence ``she also often brings.....``because it is present tense, and the subject is she (pattern of simple present tense is S (he,she,it)+ verb (s/es)+). keep your writing .” (provided by Atik Z. on September 26 at 9:26 am)

- Feedback on style:

“Demak is my hometown too, and you described it well. But... I have one suggestion for you. Take a look at the 1st sentence of 2nd, "..... it is the eldest mosque of a one in indonesia". I think it would be much better if you write "it is one of the eldest mosque in Indonesia" it sound better. Keep on writing mahmudah.” (provided by Hannin Ratna Sari on September 27 at 5:21 am).

- Feedback on mechanics:

“It seems that the sentence " because his father works away and sometimes when her father returned, she got a new phone, how wonderful it ! she love singing, I hope someday she can be a famous singer like taylor swift." (on the last paragraph) is not correct in writing. Because on the first alphabet beginning the sentence (after full stop) should use the uppercase. Comma is used to separate the three / more items in sequence , separating non -essential relative clause from the main clause , separate the adverbial conjunction in the sentence , and so on. it is better to use full stop to end a sentence in the form of a statement. Thank you. Keep writing.” (provided by Isna Rafika Dewi on September 26 at 2:04 am).

- Feedback on organization:

“I think that it can be more better, if you move the sentence "morosari beach...." at the 2nd paragraph move to at the last paragraph. Because at the 2nd paragraph all at this describe about the Great Mosque of Demak.” (provided by Maulida Kholimarurohmah on September 28 at 3:23 pm.)

- Feedback on content:

“According to me, content of the text is not in appropriate with the title. because from the text, you describe yourself, not your hometown. Thanks, keep writing.” (provided by Isna Rafika Dewi on September 26 at 9:02 pm)

From the examples of the peer feedbacks above, it was found that the peer feedbacks were carefully prepared by the students despite problems with their English. When they wrote feedbacks actually they exercised not only their knowledge and understanding about the topic but also their language as well. As Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) suggest, providing feedback is useful not only for those who receive it but also for those who provide it. Data from the questioner even reveal that students were happy if their writings were commented or given feedbacks (score: 3.65), and believed that the feedbacks were useful for them to improve their writing (score: 3.68).

5. Conclusion

Process approach writing requires teachers to see the whole process of writing of their students instead of measuring their writing competence through one timed writing test. Portfolio is, therefore, a good model for assessment. When nowadays more and more students have easy access to internet, weblog-based portfolio can be an option. It has more advantages over paper

portfolio in some respects as the easy way of collection, access of students to their peer works, access to provide feedbacks, as well as easy revision. Teacher's weblog can be utilized to apply portfolio assessment by giving access to students to posts their writing works on the weblogs. This practical model of portfolio not only eases the teacher but also encourages the students to learn collaboratively. Students can help each other improve the quality of their writing by either receiving or providing peer feedbacks.

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