

The impact of peer-feedback on students' writing skills

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT						
<p>Keywords: Peer feedback, writing skills, blogs</p>	<p><i>People nowadays are getting addicted to using the internet, especially blogs. Then this phenomenon inspires English lecturers to use blogs as a medium to teach writing in an EFL class. This research, therefore, discusses the students' experience of writing using blogs. Here, the blog is used by the students to post their writing assignments based on lessons and discussions in the classroom as well as provide and receive feedback. It is integrated into the English Department at an Islamic university in Semarang. While carrying out the research, the qualitative research method is employed. Data are mainly gathered through students' writings posted to their blogs, peer feedback questionnaires, and interviews. The research reveals that 95% of students in the class agree that posting their writings on a blog is an interesting thing to do, and 93% argue that providing and receiving feedback helps them to revise their writing, mainly in the case of grammar and vocabulary. It shows that the experience in writing using blogs and interactions between students can enhance their writing abilities. Moreover, the chance to revise their writing is the developing process that can build their motivation and confidence. In the end, it is hoped that this research might inspire English teachers to implement a blog peer feedback process and design suitable activities in an EFL writing class.</i></p>						
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1. Introduction

When compared with other fundamental skills such as listening, speaking and reading; writing is the most difficult skill to acquire in academic contexts. Tanathakul (2008: 1) argues that it happens because writing requires students to have a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization in foreign language to produce a good writing. Hence, a language teaching method is needed here. As said by Cahyono & Cahyani (2012: 2), the use of language teaching media is likely to make teaching more successful and more interesting. Media, here, relates to the use of technology and one which is in the top of popularity is internet.

As we know, people nowadays always use the internet in their daily life. They use many kinds of internet services, such as email, instant messaging, video call, discussion forums, social networks, online shopping sites, and blogs. In view of this, new technologies like wikis, blogs, podcasts, Twitter and online forums are becoming popular in writing classes. Among these user-friendly technologies, blogs appear to have suitable features and characteristics

that can fully support writing activity. Besides, blog is the one that can be used in all aspects of life. In line with that, Campbell (2003) suggests that a blog is an online journal that can be updated frequently by an individual and used for personal educational, and commercial purposes.

Blog deals with writing entries or posts that are published online. Since then, it has been used as one of the media in teaching writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Gardner (2013) supports that teaching with blogs provides the opportunity to engage students in the literacy activity. The strategy has the additional benefit of enabling students to publish their writing easily and share their writing with an authentic audience. Moreover, a blog is considered as a channel of social communication and a great educational resource (Gedera, 2012).

In addition, Paquet (2003) declares that the five features of a blog are personal editorship, hyperlinked posting structure, frequent updates, free public access to the content via the Internet, and archived postings. There are three types of educational blogs that can be used in EFL classrooms: the lecturer blog, the student blog, and the class blog (Campbell, *ibid*). Therefore, blogs are very useful to use in the class of writing since each feature can help the students interpret their ideas into one of the types of blogs. The creation of features and the writing process of the blog is an ideal tool for students to construct and manage their own websites. As Campbell (2004) emphasizes simple customization of templates can help students build a sense of ownership and unique online identity. Most students will write more carefully if they know that they are going to publish their articles online for authentic readers.

Lecturers may get some advantages by using blogs in the EFL writing class like students. They can create, edit, or delete their teaching handouts, such as notes, homework assignments, and review materials. All these lecturer's messages will be organized in a reversed chronological order with the latest postings on the top, and it is quite simple for lecturers to put the materials online with links to their source websites; students have more chances to read related articles. The most important part is lecturers can easily use the blog to organize a collaborative learning environment in which students can peer edit others' postings (Dieu, 2004: 26). Students should be encouraged to comment on their partner's postings, which other classmates can also share.

When students write and comment on their peers' entries, blogs become an integral part of a lively literacy community. Once a student posts an entry, others in the class can respond, provide supportive feedback, and offer additional suggestions or perspectives. By writing and commenting on blogs, students write for real readers (not just for their lecturers). As a result, students focus on clear communication and get immediate feedback on their effective communication. This activity is called peer feedback.

Peer feedback has been defined as the use of students as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that students assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained lecturer, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing (Liu & Hansen, 2002: 1). This method is very effective to apply in the EFL writing class since after students finish a writing assignment, the lecturer has two or more than two students work together to check each other's work and give comments to the peer partner. Peer feedback can be in the form of corrections, opinions, suggestions, and ideas to each other. Thus, peer feedback here refers to the two-way process in which one cooperates with the other by

providing and receiving and sharing comments and suggestions for improving their peers' work.

A more positive note was also shown by Liu & Hansen (ibid), who stated that peer feedback not only increases the awareness of the audience by creating a collaborative drafting process but also provides opportunities for ESL students to practice English in a meaningful context. Yang et al. (2006) add the effects of peer response in an EFL environment. It is likely that peer response could also be successfully introduced into the ESL environments, as the dominant culture does not affect peer feedback. They also found that peer feedback, while not always integrated in later drafts, promotes better self-editing skills, displaying more autonomous writing skills. Moreover, Li (2009) states that peer feedback allows students to gain confidence and reduce apprehension by seeing peers' strengths and weaknesses in writing.

Another research by Lundstrom and Baker (2009) concludes that both givers and receivers of feedback improve their writing ability and enhance their critical thinking skills. Another positive issue proposed by Lin and Chien (2009) is that collaboration with comrade students increased their motivation and encouragement to write. The authors claim that even though the number of comments on a paper may not be quantifiable at the beginning of the writing process, it will greatly assist the students in developing and organizing their work in a better way before they start the actual writing.

On the other hand, some researches show contradictive results. One of them deals with the difficulties in carrying out peer feedback activities; then some scholars provide several reasons, such as students' inability to provide helpful feedback, uneasiness to provide feedback to their friends, and the defensive nature of students (Amores, 1997). They point out that peer review is a difficult task. According to them, this is due to various reasons. First, students sometimes do not focus on in-depth matters. They do not pay attention to the revising issues and provide unclear and unhelpful comments. Second, students can be sarcastic and critical in their comments. Moreover, Leki (1990) states that the students feel uneasy when they provide comments on their peers' drafts.

Students can be defensive when they receive criticism from their peers. They might feel hesitant to accept the comments if they are not sure of the validity of these responses. However, the new ways of providing and receiving feedback seem to be beneficial and effective as well. With the shift of focus from traditional methods of giving feedback to computer-mediated feedback, the ways of giving and receiving feedback on writing have changed. This shift has brought about significant changes to the pedagogy of writing (Morra & Romano, 2009). It has been described above that a number of researches have been done to prove the effectiveness of blogs in EFL writing classes. As such, this research aims to discuss students' experience receiving and providing peer feedback using blogs integrated into the EFL writing class. In addition, the discussion of the research suggests different types of activities that can be carried out using blogs in the EFL writing class, indicating how they can be helpful in developing students' writing as well as editing skills. For this purpose, the research questions are put forward as follows: 1) How are the students' interests in writing blogs? 2) How are the students' writing abilities in blog peer feedback?

2. Research Methodology

The participants of this research are the students of A-Class, which consists of 39 students enrolled in the English Department of an Islamic university in Semarang in an Essay Writing

Class. They are considered competent in writing skills since they have already passed the previous two writing subjects: sentence writing and paragraph writing. They were chosen as the participants since this class had the highest score among the other classes in the previous two writing subjects. This research is carried out over a period of one semester. Moreover, this research employs the descriptive qualitative design, in which a key aspect of qualitative research is to capture the subjectivity of human experiences (Cohen, 2011). The qualitative method leads to the making of detailed descriptions of what is happening in natural settings. When carrying out this study, the data were mainly gathered through semi-structured interviews, peer feedback questionnaires, and students' writings posted on their blogs. Students use their blogs as an online portfolio, where they share their experiences and post writing assignments based on lessons and discussions.

Integrating blogs into EFL writing class is started by asking the students to create their own blog provided by free-of-charge Blogger.com service. Students create their blogs in three simple steps - (1) create an account, (2) name the blog, and (3) choose a template. In the first step, the students only have to fill in all the basic information such as username, password, email, etc. Then, they have to give the blog a title and decide its URL address, for example, <http://asuseno.blogspot.com>. Finally, after the students pick up their favorite template, they can start writing down their thoughts and publish them in cyberspace, which then ends up with commenting on peers and editing the drafts of their writings. All students' blogs are linked to the class blog, which is created by the lecturer. Students use their blogs as an online journal, a place to publish their assignments and writings, and most importantly, a space for providing and receiving peer feedback. On the other hand, the class blog is mainly used for sending guidelines, announcements, assessment criteria and resources such as readings, video clips and links to web pages. The students are asked to write 5 writing assignments in their personal blogs. The whole process of writing is conducted in the classroom since the environment provides the internet.

3. Findings

First, the nature of the blog peer feedback in this EFL writing class must be stressed. To enhance the students' understanding, they must follow very comprehensive cycle of learning. During the whole semester, the students are always given the material and involved in the discussion about the type and topic of their essays. They are also provided with several options of resources from the class blog, such as links to websites and articles.

In the writing process, the students are involved in developmental writing. First, they are asked to finish the first draft of their essays and publish their work on their blogs. After the students finish publishing their essays in their personal blogs, they are asked to provide feedback on their peer's work in the comment feature of the blog. To ensure that all students give and receive feedback, each student is asked to choose two of their friends' essays freely, and in each assignment must be different peers. From this calculation, each student gets more than one comment. Giving them the freedom to choose their peers is believed to give them the convenience to provide and receive the feedback of their peers. Before they start providing comments and suggestions for their peers' works, they are given a guideline that consists of some questions related to the writing assignment. It is done in order to help them to stay focused. The questions are about the organization, the content, and the grammatical mistakes. Moreover, they are also free to give comments if they find some mistakes or something that need to be revised that are not mentioned in the guidelines. The next step is

the revising and editing of the first draft based on the feedback that their peers give. Then, the lecturer checks the second draft. As the last step, the students also need to revise their essays based on the lecture's feedback.

Another activity that can be found unpredictably is on the part of descriptive writing. In that activity, the lecturer plays a video clip of a song and asks the students to make a description of the clip. It is interesting to note that though the students are not required to include the clip or video captions, they still publish attractive and interesting postings. It is also wonderful to see that the students are actively writing in their blogs, though it is not the writing assignments from the teacher. Moreover, the students are also very active in checking and giving some comments or questions in the class blogs related to any information about the blog posting activity.

4. Discussion

The blog feedback questionnaire is distributed to the students at the end of the semester. First of all, though blogs are already well-known all over the world, not all the students have heard about them. These 36 students (92%) have already heard about the blogs and know how it works, but just 7 students (18%) have already had them before. After all the students had blogs, the research revealed that 37 students (95%) agreed that posting their writing on a blog was interesting. They become interested in writing since they are also free to design and decorate the fonts. They also argue that adding pictures and templates gives them so much fun.

The rest of the students who belong to passive response students are not totally disliked with this activity. 1 student is a little bit left out since he has some problems with attendance in the class and the other is because of a problem with the personal computer which cannot connect to the internet. These problems make them cannot design the blogs as interesting as the other friends and even cannot fulfill some editing process after receiving feedback from their peers.

How are the students' writing abilities in peer feedback on blogs?

When answering how they feel when they receive feedback from their peers, no one claims that it is embarrassing, and they are not disappointed or angry; they are even receptive to constructive criticism. According to all 39 students (100%), providing feedback through blogs also appears less stressful, as they do not need face-to-face peer feedback. Compared to the situation in which students have to provide feedback orally or in written forms, they face some unavoidable issues. In some cases, students struggle with their accents if feedback is oral, and they find it hard to read their unclear handwriting if it is written. Doing peer feedback online allows them to read all their peers' essays at their own pace, place, and time, whereas, in a typical face-to-face classroom setting, they may not get to read others' essays due to time constraints and understanding. Thus, compared with face-to-face feedback, blogs provide more flexibility.

The research also shows that there are 36 students (93%) who argue that providing and receiving feedback helps them to revise their writing, mainly in the case of grammar and vocabulary. It shows that the experience in writing using blogs and interactions in peer feedback between students are able to enhance their writing abilities. Those students say that the peer feedback in the blog shows them the real comparison of their earlier drafts and their writings towards the end of the course, which portrays notable improvements in their

vocabulary and grammar. Most of them make some grammatical mistakes in the first draft and they revise it in the second draft as well as the revision of the dictions as checked by the lecturer. Surprisingly, the students are willing to provide the second feedback on their peers' revisions, though the teacher does not ask them to do that. Otherwise, the students who feel that they have not made some improvements in their writing skills are just 3 students (7%). They think that their writing skills are just the same as before.

Another finding is in the students' way of thinking. The questionnaire shows that there are 37 students (92%) become more analytical and critical. It is believed that students who are aware that their postings and comments will be read by their peers should be more careful before posting them. Moreover, the process of giving feedback makes them more critical because they have to be able to provide some comments and suggestions. This process is as well as the editing process leads them to be more analytic since they have to understand the feedback they receive and make the revision.

When stating their opinions about using blogs in the EFL writing class, students point out that it is an effective way to receive and provide feedback that assists them in increasing their confidence. 35 students (90%) became more confident with their published writing assignments. They consider that their peers' feedback inspires them to produce better writing. Not only that, their confidence in providing feedback also increases since the lecturer's guidelines help them. 36 students (92%) agreed that peer feedback guidelines are helpful in providing feedback to their peers. All the students follow the feedback guidelines when providing comments and suggestions to their peers. This results in fulfilling linguistics as well as pragmatic functions. Other skills that can be given to the students are summarizing and paraphrasing. The students say they feel better doing these skills when they get the descriptive writing topic. This assignment is based on the activity of the video clip played in the class by the lecturer. It clearly shows the autonomous and independent nature that the students developed through the experience of learning with blogs and carrying out the peer feedback.

However, there are some concerns that need to be addressed. First, some students (4 students - 10%) are not so sure about giving the feedback. The uncertainty is about their peers' mistakes and whether they are mistakes. The next concern is given to some students (3 students - 8%) who feel guilty because they cannot give suggestions for the comments given. Generally, a positive thing is noted; when the lecturer provides feedback in the next draft, students learn the parts they missed or were unsure of. Thus, they can learn from their own and their peers' mistakes.

6. Conclusion

The interactions and sharing of the students' experiences using blogs improve their ability in writing. The most important thing is that they can express their ideas in writing their assignments and reflect, change, or edit what they write. Learning is a developmental process, and thus, they can improve their self-editing skills and become more independent students. Besides, they also learn how to give constructive feedback. In addition, blogs facilitate the students to be the actual audience, hence increasing students' self-confidence and motivation to write more and share their experiences with their peers at unlimited times, as blogs can record the entries or posts that are published as long as the owner does not make some deletions. Reading and writing also give them motivation and knowledge.

Some limitations of this research need to be anticipated for further research. A period is the first limitation. Since this research is carried out in one semester, further research needs to take longer with classes of different proficiency levels. It will be necessary to find out the probable effects of peer feedback on their writing development using English and compare their abilities among the classes. It is also suggested that the lecturer join online discussions with students about their problems and difficulties during the blog peer feedback. It will be far better for the lecturer to ask the students to join the online communities to write articles and news so that they can lead them in the right direction and probe them to view things from different angles. Despite the limitations, this research concludes that blog peer feedback facilitates student-centered learning and allows students to explore and share their learning experiences outside the classroom.

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