The Student-Bloggers' Voices on the Contribution of EFL Writing Through Blogging

Silvana Devinta Sari

Surabaya

silvana.devinta@gmail.com

Abstract

Blogging is an effective way to help students write better as it positively enhances the students' EFL writing skills. The following study is an attempt to evaluate student-bloggers' opinions on blogging activity as it gives valuable contributions to student's EFL writing skill. The research aimed at investigating student-bloggers' attitudes towards the application of class blog in an informal learning situation. A descriptive case study was conducted to get more information on blogging contributions to student-bloggers' EFL writing both for the process and the product of writing. The subjects were the student-bloggers of a language course whose blogging activity was intense. The data gathering was employed by probing interview and observation. Additionally, the thorough and meticulous analysis on the product of the writing was performed and scored using a rubric. Findings gathered from the interview depict the benefits and positive contributions of blogging to student-bloggers' EFL writing. Blogging was certainly seen as a fun writing activity by the student-bloggers. It resulted from the fact that contrary to school learning, while blogging the students experienced autonomous learning, getting direct feedback from readers, and most importantly a complete freedom in writing. Some of blogging contributions for EFL writing are multi-literacy, direct feedback from readers, motivation, autonomous learning, critical thinking and language awareness, networking, freedom to write, and self confidence.

Keywords: blogs, blogging, student voices, student-blogger, contribution, EFL writing

Introduction

The development of the Internet in the 1999 marked a new era in the establishment of Web 2.0 technology. Among a plethora of new properties, methods and technological solutions not present in Web 1.0 the most stunning and perhaps cardinal feature of Web 2.0 is new, technologically advanced and free environment which allows for a greatly increased interaction and collaboration between users. Examples of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies are social networking website and weblog. Weblog, commonly referred to as "a blog", is another example of the Web 2.0 technology. Zhang described a blog as a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet(Zhang, 2009). In a report about Weblog and English writing, Noytim (Noytim, 2010) stated that weblogs provide learners with the opportunities for a real communication in an authentic learning environment. Comment, correction and input on writing posted by readers help bloggers to write better. These are feedback given by the readers which will be positive input for student-bloggers' EFL writing. The input also motivated bloggers to produce more writing and to create better writing quality. The learning motivation and opportunities for autonomy and readership are things that cannot be easily gained with paper-based writing only. Blogs equipped with easy applications provided spaces for student-bloggers' to maximize their writing experience. In addition, blogging enhances analytical and critical thinking skills, because bloggers, due to the fact that they are genuinely interested in what they write about, compose and monitor their writing carefully.

Though a reliable statistics pertaining to Indonesia students' writing ability has not been found, it has been known that despite a great potential many students still lack the ability to produce a satisfactory piece of writing. In an article questioning why Indonesian youth find it so

difficult to produce coherent pieces of writing a critic toward writing exercises at school highlight the national curriculum which neglects the importance of reading and writing as very crucial subjects at school (Efendi, 2011). The teaching and learning process which focuses more on memorizing and answering multiple school subject choice questions in exams could possibly be blamed for students' low writing ability. Furthermore, poor appreciation on literacy affects students' interest on literatures. The condition is compounded by the national exam which does not require students to write a composition either in Bahasa Indonesia or English. Taking into consideration the lack of substantial writing practice at school, blogging seems to be a promising way to help students to create better writing. Questions which addressed in this study are what are the student-bloggers' opinion on EFL writing through blogging, what are the student-bloggers writing experiences and what are blogging contribution on their writings.

Theoretical Framework

Constructionism

Constructionism is a theory proposed by Seymor Papert. Papert's theory is developed from Piaget's Constructivism, whose cardinal belief is that knowledge is constructed by the learner. Constructivism stresses that a person generates knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. Each person (student) constructs their own, unique meaning for everything that is learned. The philosophy of constructivism states that learners will construct their own unique meanings for concepts. Papert sees that a perspective is created when learners generate and construct idea when they construct a public artifact. The artifact of tools, media, and other visual learning product are a result of one's knowledge construction (Ackerman, 2001). Seymour claims that students will be more deeply involved in their learning if they are constructing something that others will see, critique, and perhaps use.

Through that construction, students will face complex issues, and they will make the effort to problem-solve and learn because they are motivated by the construction (Guzdial, 1997). During the artifact production learners learn and acquire things, this point is what Papert highlight as a differentiator with Constructivism Papert's differentiates Constructionism and Constructivism as the following.

> "Constructionism—the N word as opposed to the V word— shares constructivism's view of learning as "building knowledge structures" through progressive internalization of actions… It then adds the idea that this happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it's a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe."(Ackerman, 2001)

Blogging is a learning activity in which blogger learns and gains his knowledge through his artifact production, the postings. In blogging, bloggers learn how to use blog's feature and all supporting applications. The experiences which are transformed into knowledge enrich the blogger's knowledge horizon. The trial and error on artifact publishing directly taught bloggers on brand new knowledge. Through online publishing, a blogger is not capable to see and learn what is happening in the blogging process but can also consciously engage in the construction of the public entity.

Writing as Metacognitive Activities

Writing involved mental process during writing production which consists of thinking about one's cognitions, analyzing, drawing conclusion, learning from and putting into practice (Peirce, 2004). Writing is recursive rather than linear. Ability in strategizing and coordinating

thoughts to create a piece of writing is needed. The relationship of both metacognition theory and learner autonomy explains how knowledge is constructed by students. Writing is seen as both process and product and they requires metacognition awareness and also full support of autonomous learning.

Writing does not only require writers' role but also the readers' role. Writers need input from readers to avoid readers' confusion of not supporting enough info, illogical organization, word choice etc. Feedback acts as corrector, judgment evaluator, and also advisor on writers writing performance. Flower in Keh (Keh, 1990) states that feedback serves as comments, questions, suggestions from readers for writing to produce "read-based" prose. Feedback given on the result and the process of writing aimed to give input and critique to writers.

The Self Determination Theory

The self-determination theory states that to be self-determining means to experience a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions' (Keblawi, 2006). The way to be self-determine as mentioned in the theory is referred to as autonomy. According to the theory, there two kinds of motivations: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is an individual's motivation to perform a particular activity because of internal rewards such as joy, pleasure and satisfaction of curiosity. On the other hand in extrinsic motivation the individual expects an extrinsic reward such as good grades or praise from others.

According to Noels, Vallerand and colleagues, the intrinsic motivation (IM) is divided into three categories: IM-Knowledge (the pleasure of knowing new things), IM-Accomplishment (the pleasure of accomplishing goals), and IM-Stimulation (the pleasure sensed when doing the task) (Keblawi, 2006). Whereas the External motivation refers to motivation to learn, which is

determined by sources that are external to the individual, such as tangible benefits and costs. If these benefits and costs, the incentive, is removed then the activity of learning will halt.

Autonomous Learner

Learner autonomy according defined as the way a learner take charge of his/her own learning, to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. The aspects involved in the learning are how a learner determine the objectives; define the contents and progressions; select methods and techniques to be used; monitor the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); and evaluating what has been acquired (Schuchlenz, Oct 2002 – Jan 2003). Dickinson in Conttia (2007) describes autonomous learners with the characteristics of those who have the capacity for being active and independent in the learning process; they can identify goals, formulate their own goals, and can change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests; they are able to use learning strategies, and to monitor their own learning (Conttia, 2007). The capacity to manage the learning is related to the cognitive skill which, on the other hand, influences learners abilities to plan the learning strategy, make all decisions concerning the learning, experience the learning process, decide on actions which are to maximize the learning and finally to focus on the goal.

Feedback

Feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. Feedback can be defined as input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision (Keh, 1990). In writing it is particularly important to a writer to receive the feedback from the readers since, as a result, the writer might understand which parts of his/her piece of writing confused the reader, lacked proper development of ideas or were simply erroneous. By receiving feedback form readers, writers learn where the writing can mislead the reader and

therefore receive support, allowing them to improve the piece of writing. Feedback can be given by student-writers' friends (peer feedback) and by teacher. Peer feedback is a critical feedback given by students' peer which can train writers to gain a greater sense of audience with several readers other than the teacher (Keh, 1990). Apart from the constructive feedback that might help the students to produce better writings, a student-reader actually learns more about writing through critically reading others' papers, as it allows him\her to detect the mistakes made by the peers and possibly avoid making them in his\her own paper.

Blog is a powerful tool for gaining feedback not only from other students and teacher but also from worldwide readers. The openness of blog eradicates borders of bloggers as writers and readers. Thus, the continuous process of writing supported by useful feedback happens constantly.

Rationale for Using Blog in Education

Blogging is applicable to be used in education because of its ability to create real environment for students to apply the knowledge. Blogs provide chances for students to project their ideas and make the idea tangible and shared with others. Dickinson in O'Donnel (2006) has related blogging to the stages of learning outlined in Bloom's taxonomy, which sees learning in a series of cumulative stages ranging from knowledge gathering through to synthesis and evaluation (O'Donnel, 2006). The constructivist point of view on blogging depicts the activity encouraging for higher order learning skills. The constructivist also places blogging within a vast progressive model of teaching a learning (O'Donnel, 2006).

Zhang believes that blogs provide opportunity for learners to experience learning in a deeper level rather than the surface level only (Zhang, 2009). The characteristic of surface learning is the learners complete only the minimum content to meet the requirement demand. On

the other hand the deep learning presents when learners reflect on experiences, find out connections between context, and contextualize meaning. Blogs are way of documenting learning and collecting information for self-analysis and reflection, they helps students adapt to the deep learning from the surface learning.

Methods

The research was a descriptive case study and it is qualitative in nature. Creswell in Duff describes a case study as an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (multiple case) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Duff, 2008). The research deals with blogging activities performed by students-bloggers. There were several stages that were performed by the researcher to effectively conduct the study. The initial stage consisted of the identification of the possible research problem. Once the problem has been established the research questions were formulated with the aim to provide possible concluding solutions to the aforementioned problem. During the next step the objective of the research was defined and the researcher started collecting the data using appropriate sources. Having been collected, the data was categorized and selected for further, deeper analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two student-bloggers were chosen for this study. The main reason behind choosing the two students is their great devotion, effort and active interest in maintaining the blog both students have exhibited. Furthermore, both participants have been actively involved in a reflective journal writing project conducted by the researcher before they were engaged in blog writing. Among the other students joined in the project, the two participants were the students that show the most positive attitude among others. Interviews were conducted for 3 times to

obtain the data from the subjects. Interview aimed at getting information on student-bloggers's blogging opinion on blogging activity, blogging experiences, and contributions that they got from blogging. To obtain additional information, observation was done to investigate the writing process. The data obtained was saturated and categorized described in detail.

Findings

Opinions on EFL Writing Through Blogging

Preliminary interview with student-bloggers has found interesting fact that blogging is easy to do. Compare to writing and managing a website which requires special skill and knowledge, running a blog is easy to do and can be done by everybody. For the first subject, F, sheonly learned from her friends, although she also learned from her teacher, to manage the blogging well. And for the second subject, M, although sometimes blogging was difficult for her, in terms of making a good post with specific topic, but M think she enjoys blogging.

F found out that blogging is a good and interesting activity. Her blogging habit has developed as a result of the class blog's blogging activity. The habitual blogging activity became intense when she started to write on the class blog. In addition, M realized that blogging may indeed have a positive influence for her writing. The power of blogging in publication attracts student-bloggers to keep writing. Student-bloggers answers to the question indicate that publication is important for them. Student-bloggers want their personal stories to be acknowledged by the worldwide readers although at first the student-bloggers published their postings in Indonesian, and only later did they start to write in English. The acknowledgement of one's writing is important as it will boost the motivation of the writers.

In terms of readers' feedback, the student-bloggers think that blogging is very interesting since it opens big possibility for readers from all over the world to read and leave comment on

their post.The student-bloggers realize that getting comment is important and they think it will be better if they got more critic for their better writing not from the teacher and classmates only but also from people all over the world who come and visit their blog.Both student-bloggers agreed that getting comment from the readers is the most expressive experience. For F, the comments that she received are more like a suggestion on the display of her blog. For M, the comments of her post in her personal blog and some grammatical correction given by her class blog's readers make her more enthusiastic in doing blogging.

The Student-bloggers' Blogging Experience

The interview started by asking student-bloggers' general opinion about writing in English. The student-bloggers' genuine feeling and thought about writing in English in general could be revealed from the interview. The student-bloggers mentioned that writing in English is not easy to be done, as the language often becomes a barrier. English is not the student-bloggers' first language and thus making an essay in English is difficult. The fact that student-bloggers are active bloggers and they write in English in spite of their difficulties led the researcher to get more information especially on their English writing habit.

In terms of composing process both F and M experienced almost the same kind of activities. For F before joining the class blog she relied a lot on her dictionary. But after she joined the class blog, she tried to write as much as she could and then she would check her writing in the process of editing. M, learned that in creating a good writing she needs to make an outline before she make her postings. She learned the steps of composing from generating idea, outlining, drafting, and editing from her Bahasa Indonesia teacher at school, instead of her English teacher. From the interview, the researcher found out that the student-bloggers mostly

gained their writing skill by their own effort, either by self experience or with the help of other people which could not happen during the English class.

The student-bloggers mentioned in the interview that writing in a blog gives more chance to publish for public. Unlike the conventional writing assignment when the readers are only the teacher and the classmates, blog enables comments from readers all over the world. For the student-bloggers this is very beneficial for their writing quality because the comments that they receive become a feedback for their writing. Knowing that their posts are read by wider public, the student-bloggers explained that they changed their writing procedure, from free writing into a planned writing where they carefully make an outline before they write to develop their idea and also doing some editing before they publish it online.

The ability to think and be aware of their writings is also influenced by the comments that they received from the readers at the class blog. Although the teacher gave them guidance on how to write on a blog and share and discuss how English writing should be, the student-bloggers tried to learn how to create good postings by themselves. The student-bloggers have learned continuously about blogging from their posting and managing activity. The student-bloggers are also more aware of their writing since their postings are published publicly and might be read by anyone.

The Process of EFL Writing Through Blogging

The process of writing stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models (Holmes, 2012). Despite focusing on the product of writing, the process in creating a piece of writing is important as in this process the student-bloggers go through several stages which resulted on their writing product. During the process of writing student-bloggers might have

developed their writing skill or even facing some writing problems. Thus, the process is important to be investigated as it gave clear description on how the process of writing especially through blogging takes place. There are five stages in the writing process namely prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. These stages generally involve different forms of brainstorming, selecting and ordering ideas, planning, drafting, redrafting and revising and editing. The process itself is seen by Raimes as recursive rather than linear(Holmes, 2012).

The process of the student-bloggers' writing were explained by conducting observation. The observation was aimed at strengthening the researcher argument on the EFL writing of the student-bloggers which was done through blogging activity and confirmed that blogging gave benefit for the students' EFL writing especially from the writing process. The observation mainly observed the stages in writing; the prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

The observation which was done three times depicted these stages. Starting with the first one until third observation the student-bloggers' brainstormed for writing ideas and then they planned their writing by making simple outlines. The outlines which consisted of sentences as main ideas were then added by some supporting sentences and developed into writings. Although the outlines were made in simple form, this has become evidence for the researcher on how student-bloggers' developed their ideas in writing.Other following stages in the writing process such as revising and editing were done recursively by the student-bloggers.

Detail observation noted by the researcher using a field note described how each subject M and F had their own strategy in the writing process.M made simple outline before she made her writing. She typed down the outline on a new MS.Word document. The outline consisted of main ideas being listed. Under each sentences she typed either 2 or 3 supporting sentences. She sometimes checked on the dictionary installed on her mobile phone. This process took almost 20

minutes. She spent time thinking and consulting the dictionary. This same process also happened at the second and third observation.Although in the interview M mentioned that the feedjit, chatbox, and readers' comments are very important and motivate her to blog, she did not check them initially. Instead, she spent a few minutes checking after she has posted her writing. However, this might have happened because of the presence of the researcher. Knowing that she had to make a post and publish it, she might have felt less relaxed and a bit nervous being observed by the researcher.

On the contrary, F never browsed or read any online sources during the observations. She preferred to write what she had on her mind and typed it on an MS.Word new page document. She said by writing on the MS.Word it would automatically detect misspelled words and erroneous sentences. Unlike M who relied mostly on her mobile phone installed dictionary, F used the Google translate more. She typed some words to find the English translation but not once did the researcher find her typed a complete sentence for translation. M followed the exact same procedure, she just checked for some words translation only on her mobile phone and just few times on Google Translate.

For F, making and developing an outline was important and needed to be done first on MS.Word page before being cut and pasted to the blog page. Compared to M, F took less time in composing a posting and between composing and publishing she checked on the blog dashboard and checked her previous writings. Reading the previous post helped her to check again for some grammatical error and she reflects on what she has written and learned to her new post. This activity shows that blogging makes student-bloggers perform independent learning and they become aware of what they write since it is published for wider public.

For the last part of composing process, M checked her draft and browsed for pictures on Google search engine. While checking the researcher could see that she omitted some words and sometimes changed a few words. After having finished with the draft she inserted the picture that she had downloaded, typed her name at the end of the draft and then published her post. For F, all the drafting and correcting was done on MS.Words document page. The final draft was then copied and pasted to the blog page and the last stage was the page publication.

The writing process done by the student-bloggers depicted all the stages that they had undergone independently without assistance of their teacher. Although sometimes activities mentioned in the observation guide such as discuss about the subject did not happen but it did not omit the essence of prewriting activity done by the student-bloggers. Other activity such improve style and clarity could not clearly seen by the observer because the student-bloggers' revised and edited their writing recursively with other activities, so the observer might had missed this stage. However the observation had shown the whole writing process which was done by the student-bloggers.

Blogging Contributions on Student-bloggers' EFL Writing

Blogging provides opportunity for student-bloggers to enrich their learning experience by shifting from surface levels of learning to deeper levels of learning. The characteristic of a surface learning is creating the postings to meet the assessment requirements, as in completing the assignment or a test. Meanwhile the deep learning is characterized by student-bloggers' blogging experience and perceiving the connections between concept and the contextual meaning. Student bloggers in this study were experienced the deep learning in their blogging activity. They develop the blog, posted, and they communicated with the readers and acquired

the input to be implemented in their postings. The process of learning resulted in the better writing.

In terms of authority, blogging allows blogger to control and manage the site. Bloggers are able to personalized the page in easy way. Bloggers can change the setting on the page. This feature might also be found in other online writing, but blogging positively give student-bloggers authority to manage and learn about how to create good English post. Blogs publication also motivates the student-bloggers because they can make an impact on the readers with topics that were important for them. The emotionally connected feeling, happiness, and eagerness to get readers' responses were resulted from the postings that they have made. Publishing especially empowers them because they felt in control of their writing, and as such they were "intellectual explorers" (Zhang, 2009)

The findings about student-bloggers knowledge on using blog's features revealed another important fact about student-blogger's literacy. Literacy is not merely an ability to write and read, it is an ability to read and write and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. Not only do blogs encourage students to write more, they also promote the development of reading skills. By blogging student-bloggers have more chance to read materials which are needed as the references in creating writings. Student-bloggers can also choose a variety of blogs on the Internet based on their interest which contains genuine materials. Ward in Bendriss (Bendriss, 2012) mentioned that blogs also promote active reading, because through writing, the writer becomes more aware of the notion of audience; and through blogging, s/he becomes more familiar with the corresponding idea of purpose.

Another blogging contribution is that the student-bloggers can communicate with the readers directly, though not done face to face. Publishing postings in a blog is comfortable for

students and increases self confidence. The features of a blog where bloggers can communicate intensely with the readers without meeting face to face created a comfortable communication way. Although the posting is published worldwide and can be read by public, surprisingly the student-bloggers did not lack of self confidence in publishing their writings despite of the quality of their writings. The contributions of blogging in the process of writing directly help student-bloggers to write easier and better. The positive and fun writing situations during blogging creates a good writing ambience which in the end resulted in student-blogger's better writing quality and quantity.

The Student-Bloggers' Writing Quality

An additional data for the research was taken from assessing student-bloggers' writing quality. By employing this technique the positive contributions of blogging can be clearly seen. The writing or the blog post are the product of the student-bloggers' writing. The writing product of the student-bloggers is analyzed using the rubric based on the ESL Composition (Holy L. Jacobs, 1981). According to Brookhart in Moskal (Moskal, 2000) a rubric is a descriptive scoring schemes that are developed by teachers or other evaluators to guide the analysis of the products or process of students' efforts. The scoring guides used in this research comprise the components of the ESL composition profile. The components are content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics.

The student-bloggers' writing quality is good although it is not perfect. It is satisfying considering the fact that the student-bloggers created the writing by themselves without any help from a language teacher. The content of the postings are substantive, as they presented good argument to support their explanation. The arguments were arranged in effective sequencing and the organizational structure was well formed. Although misused words may occasionally appear

in the writings but the meaning is understandable. Some occasional errors in spelling are occurred. Further editing is needed to polish the essay to be perfect however the effort given by the student-bloggers in creating the posts is outstanding.

Conclusion

Blogging positively contributes to student-bloggers EFL Writing skill. Firstly, the user-friendly blog enables student-bloggers to master blogging without help from teachers. In addition, the plethora of optional gadget applications in a blog make blog writing a fun activity, therefore increasing its attractiveness and making it more interesting to students.Secondly, blogging develop student-bloggers' writing and reading skill as by blogging student-bloggers read and browse for reference moreactively and therefore unconsciously increase their literacy. Thirdly, the motivation and direct feedback from blog readers significantly help the student-bloggers tobe autonomous learner. The appreciation is an extrinsic motivation which influences student-bloggers' self determination in writing. The intrinsic motivation exists in student-bloggers happiness and satisfaction when they can share their writings to public.

The class blog is perhaps more challenging and yet undeniably more interesting than conventional writing. Unlike the conventional writing assignment in which the readers are only the teacher and the classmates, blog enables comments from readers all over the world. Fourthly, feedback is a fundamental element in writingand it is abundant in blogging. The input from readers to writers provides information to the writers for revision(Keh, 1990). Blogging promotes direct feedback from readers and gives input for student-bloggers. The student-bloggers explained that after getting the input they changed their writing procedure, from free writing into a planned writing where they carefully make an outline before they write to develop

their idea and also doing some editing before they publish it online. Blogging has raised student-bloggers' language awareness and positively promote learners development.

Next, the freedom student-bloggers mentioned in the interview that they have their freedom in writing in terms of expressing idea helps the student-bloggers to write better. Student-bloggers also seems to be aware of the reader and of how to communicate the message though perhaps the overall writing is not consistently well-brought for the readers.

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