INCREASING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS BY UTILIZING BLOGS

Akhmad Fauzan
A Lecturer of University of Palangka Raya, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

There were four major problems related to writing instruction at English Education Study Program of Palangka Raya University, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The problems were related to limited sources of printed materials, mostly teacher-centered activities, readers of students' writings, and feedbacks for students' writings. The utilization of blogs was performed to solve the problems. Blog was used as media in this research because it is a potential source for language learning, student fit, authentic for learning, and practical to apply. The research design was Classroom Action Research (CAR). There were 2 cycles implemented during this research. In the first cycle, the students' writing improvement did not show significant progress and the criterion of success was not achieved. After the plan was revised on the basis of the findings during the implementation of first cycle, 80% students showed great improvements. Therefore, the criterion of success was achieved.

Key words: blog, writing skills, illustration essays.

Writing is the most difficult skill to master particularly by the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This skill requires knowledge in vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Besides, this skill also demands the ability in generating and organizing ideas. Most EFL students cannot deal with such complex skill. They may only capable at certain aspects but not all. It then becomes constraints for them to write in English, especially when dealing with academic essays.

In relation to problems in writing instruction, the writer learned that the teacher in writing class at English Education Study Program at University of Palangka Raya carried out the conventional teaching learning activities for writing classes. It was found out that the activities were mostly teacher-centered and students were rarely given chance to interact with their peers. They were not accustomed to sharing ideas because they did not work cooperatively during the learning activities. These activities made students bored and passive, so they did not have motivation in writing class.

The shortcomings were obvious in Writing 3 course. This course deals with essay writing. From students' writings, their essays can be categorized as *Insufficient* and *Uneven* based on the scoring guide from Behrman (2003). The essays were *Insufficient* because the content presented very few details, repetitive, and undeveloped. The ideas were disorganized and weakly connected. Word choices were incorrect and grammar contained errors. Spelling and punctuation were mostly correct. For some students, their essays were *Uneven* because the content presented a few clear details and undeveloped. The paragraph was disjointed and there were some incorrect word choices. Spelling and punctuation diminished clarity and errors in grammar still existed.

Based on the problems of students' performance in writing, the writer then tried to analyze it. The writer came to a conclusion that there were four major issues dealing with the writing instruction that caused students could not perform maximally in the writing class. The problems were as in the following:

1. Sources. In regular classroom, students encountered difficulties to transform their ideas into writing because they had limited sources to activate their schemata. There were no printed materials, such as magazines, newspapers, articles, or journals in classrooms. Whereas, the use of information sources is a central, vital aspect of academic writing (Moody, 2007). In fact, students needed to access media which can provide them with information, images, videos, or audios.

2. Activity. The process of writing instruction was mostly teacher-centered. Moreover, the teacher was less creative in designing activity for the lesson thus resulting in boredom for the students. In fact, teachers should provide more interesting materials and create an active atmosphere in writing class (Wenyu and Yang, 2008). Students needed activity beyond pencil and paper activity to make them interactive during the lesson.

3. Reader. When students wrote, they wrote for teacher. They did not write for other people outside the classroom context. Thus, the writings were for one specific reader and the style was inflexible. However, students should write not only academic texts with various genres, but also write materials for different purposes.

4. Feedback. As students finished their writings, they would submit it to teacher. At the next meeting, teacher would hand out the works with his notes on it. The feedbacks were only from the teacher's perspectives. In fact, teachers could incorporate peer feedback in writing classes to enhance students' motivation through personal responsibility and to increase students' confidence (Atay and Kurt, 2006).

From these four major problems in writing class, then there should be an action to solve the problems. The writer should propose learning strategies which can encourage students to be more active and motivated in writing class. Students should have the access to multimedia sources. They should work cooperatively during the learning activities. They should write and revise their writings based on the positive inputs from friends and teachers. From these requirements, the writer regarded that the activities can be effectively performed through blogs.

Blog, shortened from weblog, is an internet application that allows its users to perform writing skills maximally. Blog is the simple version of a website with graphics, videos, animations, and links to other pages of blogs or websites. Blog allows the owner to type-in any kinds of information based on their interests. It also has a comment and response textbox, so the readers of the blog can give comments to the content of the blog and bloggers can respond to the comments from readers.

Blogging, the activity of maintaining blog, requires the creativity in writing, particularly in telling stories, describing things, and explaining occurrence. Various topics can be discussed since blog is widely opened and interactive for discussion. As the textbox allows readers to comment on the post, then bloggers can edit and rewrite the content of the blog to give additional information. It is expected that the more readers give comments, the better writing

skill the blogger will have. Moreover, the comments from friends, teachers, and people around the world can give motivation to bloggers (Bruce, 2008).

The choice of blog as the strategy in improving students' writing skills in this research was also based on the six criteria of computer assisted language learning proposed by Chapelle (2001). The criteria are:

1. Language learning potential. Through blogs, students not only learn how to write, but they also learn how to read. The exposure to these two skills is caused by the content of blog which is mainly text. Moreover, students can practice listening as some blogs may contain video and audio files.
2. Learner fit. The content of blogs is familiar to students' life. Most bloggers are teenagers and adults, so it will be easy for them to interact in this medium because many bloggers are in their age and the content of blog fits to their interests.
3. Meaning focus. In posting writings to blogs, students should be aware that their writings will be read by many people, not limited to the classroom context. They have to make meaningful writings because people around the world can access their blogs and comment on it.
4. Authenticity. Blogging deals with everyday activities. Students certainly face the fact that they will get involved in high-technological environment. It is no denial that blogs help students to be critical in thinking and fairly responsive to any positive and negative comments.
5. Positive impact. To be able to write in blogs, students should be able to operate computer. This internet application is always developed to meet users' needs. Students indirectly learn new things with blogging, such as understanding new commands and concepts of technology.
6. Practicality. Internet access is available everywhere. Students can access internet from schools, on the road, at homes, and even through their cellular phones. There is no hindrance for them to be online.

Seeing the reality that most students perform low in developing essays and how blogs can give many benefits to students, particularly to enhance students' performance in writing, then the writer is raising the problem for this research as "How can blog be used to improve students' writing skills in developing illustration essays?"

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research design was Classroom Action Research (CAR). It is a process in which teachers examine their own practice systematically and carefully using the techniques of research. Carr and Kemmis (1986) defined action research as a form of self-reflection enquiry undertaken by participants in a social setting [including educational settings such as schools] in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own practice, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situation in which the practices are carried out. This research was conducted in form of a cycle through some steps: 1) planning the action, 2) implementing the action, 3) observing the action, and 4) reflecting the action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982).

The setting of this research was English Education Study Program at University of Palangka Raya in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The subjects of this research were the fourth-semester students of Writing 3 course in the academic year 2011/2012. There were twenty students involved as the subject. The students were regarded able to work online with blogs because they enrolled in Computer Literacy course at that semester.

For the purpose of this research, the writer utilized Blogger.com as the blog host. Before the cycle was started, the writer and students prepared the blogs that they would use in writing class. Each student was responsible in administering one blog. The writer also owned a blog to monitor students' activity in blogging. The writer acted as the teacher-researcher in this research and gave the treatment in the Writing 3 class. The following tables are the summary of activities and meetings in Writing 3 class. The meeting was done once a week in April – May 2012.

Table 1. Meeting Schedule in Cycle 1

Meeting	Activities
1	Assigning students to develop illustration essays on the blogs
2	Asking students to read their peers' illustration essays and give comments, corrections, and suggestions
3	Asking students to revise their illustration essays on the blogs based on comments, corrections, and suggestions from their peers

Table 2. Meeting Schedule in Cycle 2

Meeting	Activities
1	Assigning students to develop illustration essays on the blogs
2	Asking students to read their peers' illustration essays and give comments, corrections, and suggestions

The data were collected by using three instruments. The first is observation checklist. It is a guideline to obtain information concerning the implementation of blog in the teaching of writing. The second is field notes. It is an instrument to record data beyond observation checklist. This instrument provides information on the strengths and weaknesses of the implemented strategy. The third is the blog. It is the students' writing products. In order to see the students' progress after the implementation of blogging strategy, the writer scored students' illustration essays based on the scoring rubric. The elaboration of what to be assessed and the scores are in Appendix 1.

This scoring rubric was developed by the writer based on the need in analyzing illustration essay. The scoring rubric assessed each paragraph of illustration essays. The criteria represent the paragraphs in an illustration essay, and in each criterion there are sub-criteria representing the aspects of writing. Each aspect is weighted 1 to 3 points, meaning Point 1 is *Poor*, Point 2 is *Sufficient*, and Point 3 is *Good*. The strategy was regarded successful if more than 75% students' illustration essays scored 2 or 3 points for each sub-criterion in the scoring rubric.

RESEARCH FINDINGS
Cycle 1

In the first meeting of Cycle 1, the writer assigned the students to develop illustrations essays on their blogs. When students were developing their essays on their blogs, the writer noticed that there were some students spending too much time in finding their ideas for their essays. As the time was nearly over, some students finished their essays hastily. The writer then asked students to log out their blogs to end the class. From the first meeting, the writer gave scores to students' illustration essay. Their essays were considered as the first essays in Cycle 1. From the first illustration essays of Cycle 1, the result shows that students' illustration essays were scored 1 point at certain sub-criteria in the scoring rubric. Therefore, in the first illustration essays, there were no students who could get score 2 or 3 in all sub-criteria of the scoring rubric.
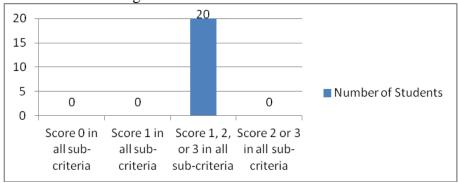

Figure 1. Students' scores in first illustration essays in cycle 1

In the second meeting of Cycle 1, the writer assigned students to give comments, corrections, or suggestions to at least five peers' illustration essays on the blogs. The students' blog address had been linked to each other during the first set-up of the blogs. The writer saw students worked enthusiastically. Seldom they discussed with their friends, but they focused on reading their peers blogs. The students also used some dictionary websites (Merriam-Webster and Oxford) to aid them in correcting their peers' illustration essays. The use of dictionary websites was based on students' initiative. When the time was nearly over, all students finished reading and commenting on their peers' illustration essays. The teacher then asked students to log out their blogs. Before the class was ended, the writer reminded students to keep reading on their peers' blogs after the class period, just in case they had some useful points that they forgot to share during the class. After the class period, the writer also gave comments, corrections, or suggestions to all students' illustration essays. This was done to help some students who got minimal comments from their peers. Thus, all students received constructive feedbacks on their writings.

During the third meeting of first cycle, the writer assigned the students to revise their illustration essays based on comments, corrections, or suggestions in the textbox. The comments were mostly positive and it became inputs for students to revise their writings. Most students worked silently during the revision of their essays. They did not discuss with

their friends, but kept focusing on their computer screens. Before the time was over, all students finished revising their illustration essays and published them. The writer then asked them to log out their blog. From this meeting, the writer gave scores to students' revised illustration essay. The result shows that there were 16 students who still got score 1 in certain sub-criteria, 3 students who got score 2 or 3 at all sub-criteria, however there was 1 student who got score 0 as he did not revise his illustration essay.
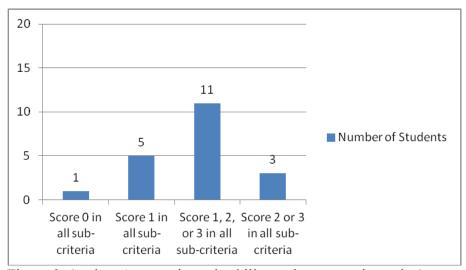

Figure 2. Students' scores in revised illustration essays in cycle 1

At the end of the first cycle, the writer did the reflection on the implementation of the strategy. It was found out that students lacked time, students found it difficult to express ideas, students were not sure with their grammar and vocabulary use. The criterion of success had not been achieved at the first cycle. Therefore, the writer decided to revise the plan in order to continue to the next cycle. In the second cycle, the writer doubled time allotment into 2x100 minutes, allowed students to utilize search engine to browse websites or blogs to support their writing topics, and suggested students to browse the English grammar and English dictionary websites.

Cycle 2

The first meeting in this cycle was writing new illustration essays on the blog. The writer asked the students to develop illustration essays in the new post section; meaning that students would not delete or edit their previous essays. During this activity, the writer instructed students to use search engine to browse information that can support them in elaborating their ideas. At this occasion, the search engine used was Google™. The writer also allowed students to use English grammar and English dictionary websites to help them check correct grammar and appropriate vocabulary for their illustration essays. In this meeting, students were working silently and they were not working hastily. The use of search engine, English grammar websites, and English dictionary websites gave beneficial to students when working in online atmosphere. The plan in this meeting was working well. When the class was nearly ended, the writer asked students to publish their illustration essays and log out form their blogs. Students' writings in the first meeting of Cycle 2 were then

scored. The result showed that there were 4 students who got score 1 for some sub-criteria in the scoring rubric; while there were 16 students who got score 2 or 3 in all sub-criteria.

The activity in the second meeting was giving comments, corrections, or suggestions to peers' illustration essays on blogs. The writer asked students to click on their peers' blogs based on the links they have on their blog pages. Students were working enthusiastically in giving comments, correction, or suggestions to their peers' illustration essays. During this activity, the writer asked students to use English dictionary websites to help them in correcting their peers' vocabulary. At this meeting, seldom students discussed with their peers, yet most of them focused on working on the blogs. When the time was nearly over, the writer asked students to log out from their blog. The writer also reminded students to read their peers' blogs after the class period, in case they had useful points that they forgot to share in the class.

After the second meeting of Cycle 2, the writer realized that there were 16 students got score 2 or 3 points for *all* sub-criteria in the scoring rubric. It meant 80% of students had improved their writing skills in developing illustration essays. So, students' illustration essays had fulfilled the criterion of success. Moreover, from Observation Checklists, it was found out that all activities listed in the form had been performed very well by the writer and students. From Field Notes, the writer did not found any shortcomings that might influence students' performance in developing illustration essays. Therefore, the writer decided to stop the cycle after the second meeting in Cycle 2.
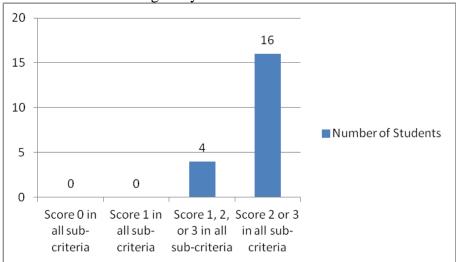

Figure 3. Students' scores in first illustration essays of cycle 2

DISCUSSION

The first discussion is related to students' blog posts or students' essays. In this case, the writer noticed students' vocabulary use in each illustration essay. In the first illustration essays of Cycle 1, most students had simple vocabulary use. However, in the illustration essays in Cycle 2, more students had rich and effective language use. Furthermore, the number of paragraphs that students developed at the first illustration essays of Cycle 1 was about 4 to 5 paragraphs. In illustration essays of Cycle 2, students could develop 5 to 7 paragraphs. The writer believes that students gained vocabularies by reading their peers'

blogs. The fact that students can acquire more vocabularies during blogging activity is also supported by Fellner and Apple (2006). The result of their project shows an overall increase in the number of words produced by learners from the beginning to the end of the program. Fellner and Apple (2006) believe that using blog as part of an intensive English CALL program would promote writing fluency because students can recycle vocabulary and notice their language use.

The second discussion is the ideas in students' illustration essays. In this research, the writer noticed that students' topic for the illustration essays was monotonous at the first cycle. Most students had topics related to their experiences in junior high schools, senior high schools, and the English Education Study Program of Palangka Raya University. When they developed illustration essays in the second cycle, the topic of their writing became various and none of the students had topics about their schools. The writer regards that students did not want to develop such monotonous topic like they had in the first cycle, so they tried to show more interesting topics in the second cycle. The result is satisfying. The chance of learning from peers' works is a good start for students to write. They can see what topic is already developed by their peers, so they can have another different topic which is more interesting to create. The writer agrees with Guthrie and Schutt (2006) that say blogs give students an opportunity to see how other students employ writing and editing strategies in their work.

The third discussion is the comments on the blogs. In this research, the writer found out the comments that students gave to their peers were positive and constructive; none of the comments were negative or humiliating their friends. The writer agrees that the comments helped students revise their illustration essays. Moreover, there were some students responded back to comments they got and they were thankful to their peers' corrections and suggestions. The writer believes that students were fond of getting attention from other peers. It is in line with Pinkman (2005) that says students like to receive comments from friends or teacher. On her project, she gave questionnaires to learners in which one of the items is asking about learners' reactions to comments on their blogs from other learners. The learners responded that they were happy, enjoyed, and motivated with the comments.

The fourth discussion is the exposure to multimedia. Learning in online atmosphere gives beneficial to students. They can access the internet to find sources or references to support them in learning. There are many websites presenting journals, research articles, and current news. In this research, the writer included website browsing activity through search engine use. The writer allowed students to browse websites or blogs to seek information that can help them develop their illustration essays. Students took this chance as the advantage because they could access the internet to find relevant sources for their writings. They also browsed the English grammar and English dictionary (Merriam-Webster and Oxford) websites whenever they were not sure with the grammar or diction. This activity worked well as it is reflected in students' illustration essays. In the illustration essays in Cycle 2, most students showed significant improvements in terms of grammar, language use, exemplification and explanation. The writer finds it useful of exposing students to websites which can aid them in finding ideas and using correct grammar or vocabulary for their writings. However, in this research the writer did not expose students to class blogs which contain learning materials. The writer did not provide class blogs to be accessed by students

in order to enable them to find references for their writings. It is on the contrary to the project conducted by Jati (2005). He proposed the idea of class and students blogging to maximize student access to class materials and exposure to teacher feedback. Though the writer in this research did not create class blogs, the use of search engine and English grammar and English dictionary websites became alternatives during the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

The blogging strategy has proven that it can help students improve writing skills. First, students are exposed to media which are mainly containing English language. Second, students are aware that their writings can be read by people worldwide. Thus, students shall develop meaningful writings. Third, students have fast and direct access to digital library and online resources in order to aid them in the process of learning. Fourth, students can take advantage from reading peers' blogs. And the last, students can experience another way of learning writing instead of pencil-and-paper activities. However, this blogging activity requires commitment from the teacher and students to actively manage their blogs. All students' writings from the other tasks could also be published in students' blogs thus it becomes their online portfolios.

REFERENCES

Atay, D. & Kurt, G. (2006). Prospective Teachers and L2 Writing Anxiety. *Asian EFL Journal*, (Online), Vol. 8, Issue 4, Article 5, (http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/December_2006_EBook.pdf, Accessed on February 25, 2012).

Behrman, C. H. 2003. *Ready to Use: Writing Proficiency Lessons & Activities, 8th Grade Level*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass A Willy Imprint.

Bruce, A. (2008). *Why Blog with Elementary Students?*, (Online), (http://www.myeducationstuff.com/blogging/why_blog/why_blog_with_students.htm, Accessed on January 16, 2012).

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research.* London: Falmer Press.

Chapelle, C. A. (2001). *Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition: Foundations for Teaching, Testing, and Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fellner, T. & Apple, M. (2006). Developing Writing Fluency and Lexical Complexity with Blogs. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 2(1): 15-26.

Guthrie, P. & Schutt, M. (2006). Integrating Blogging in Writing Courses: Examples and Opportunities for Action. *IEEE Computer Society*, 8(4).

Jati, A. G. 2005. *Creating a Writing Course Utilizing Class and Student Blogs*, (Online), (http://elt-gumawang.blogspot.com/2005/05/creating-writing-course-utilizing.html, Accessed on February 20, 2012).

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1982). *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Moody, J. 2007. Plagiarism or Intertextuality?: Approaches to Teaching EFL Academic Writing. *Asian EFL Journal*, (Online), Vol. 9, Issue 2, Article 10, (http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/June_2007_EBook_editions.pdf, Accessed on February 25, 2012).

Pinkman, K.(2005). Using Blogs in the Foreign Language Classroom: Encouraging Learner Independence. *The JALT CALL Journal,* 1(1): 12-24.

Wenyu, L & Yang, L. (2008). Research on EFL Writing Strategy Using SRP: An Empirical Study in DUT. *Asian EFL Journal*, (Online), Vol. 10, Issue 2, Article 3, (http://asian-efl-journal.com/quarterly-journal/2008/06/26/research-on-efl-writing-strategy-using-srp-an-empirical-study-in-dut/, Accessed on February 25, 2012).

APPENDIX 1

ILLUSTRATION ESSAY SCORING RUBRIC

CRITERIA	SUB-CRITERIA AND POINTS		
Introductory Paragraph	(3) Provides all essential background information	(2) Provides some essential background information	(1) Provides minimal background information
	(3) Introduction creates interest and shows engagement with topic	(2) Introduction creates some interest and shows some engagement with topic	(1) Introduction creates little interest and shows little engagement with topic
	(3) Thesis statement is clear and insightful	(2) Thesis statement is clear and logical	(1) Thesis statement is somewhat unclear or lacking in logic
	(3) Rich, effective vocabulary and language use	(2) Effective vocabulary and language use	(1) Simple vocabulary and language use
	(3) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization enhance clarity	(2) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization are mostly correct	(1) Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, diminish clarity
Body Paragraphs	(3) Topic sentence is clear and insightful	(2) Topic sentence is clear and logical	(1) Topic sentence is somewhat unclear or lacking in logic
	(3) Transitions between paragraphs or sentences are logical and enhance meaning	(2) Transitions between paragraphs or sentences are logical but do not enhance meaning	(1) Transitions between paragraphs or sentences are insufficient
	(3) Example, explanation, or evidence are comprehensive	(2) Example, explanation, or evidence are fairly enough	(1) Example, explanation, or evidence are minimal

CRITERIA	SUB-CRITERIA AND POINTS		
	(3) Rich, effective vocabulary and language use	(2) Effective vocabulary and language use	(1) Simple vocabulary and language use
	(3) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization enhance clarity	(2) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization are mostly correct	(1) Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, diminish clarity
Concluding Paragraph	(3) Conclusion thoughtfully and effectively ends the essay and goes beyond mere summary	(2) Conclusion effectively ends the essay and includes some observation beyond mere summary	(1) Conclusion ends the essay with summary and repetition only
	(3) Conclusion shows engagement with topic	(2) Conclusion shows some engagement with topic	(1) Conclusion shows little engagement with topic
	(3) Rich, effective vocabulary and language use	(2) Effective vocabulary and language use	(1) Simple vocabulary and language use
	(3) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization enhance clarity	(2) Spelling, punctuation, capitalization are mostly correct	(1) Some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, diminish clarity