USING WEB FOLIO TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract: **Using Web Folio to Improve Students' Writing Skills.** This study was aimed at improving students' writing skills by using web folio. Since assessment was regarded as a part of teaching process, the web folio was treated as "an instrument" to assess and to improve the students' writing skills. Moreover, this study was focused on the process of the implementation of web folio and the students' writing product in terms of quantity (the number of the students' entries) and quality (the score of the students' entries based on the scoring guide) as the evidence of the improvement of the students' writing skills. The findings show that web folio improved the students' writing skills and the students were enthusiastic and motivated in their engagement with their web folio.

Abstrak: Penggunaan *Web-folio* untuk Meningkatkan Kemampuan Menulis Mahasiswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan menulis mahasiswa dengan menggunakan *web folio*. Karena asesmen dianggap sebagai bagian dari proses pengajaran maka *web folio* digunakan sebagai instrumen yang tidak hanya menilai tetapi juga meningkatkan kemampuan menulis siswa. Yang diteliti adalah proses implementasi strategi *web folio* dan produknya berupa tulisan siswa secara kuantitas (jumlah entri/tulisan siswa) dan kualitas (skor entri siswa yang didasarkan rubrik penilaian) sebagai bukti siswa mengalami peningkatan pada kemampuan menulisnya. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan *web folio* untuk meningkatkan kemampuan menulis berhasil dan mahasiswa sangat antusias serta termotivasi pada saat mengerjakan *web folio* mereka.

Keywords: web folio, writing skills

Recently the 'old fashioned' forms of assessment such as multiple choices, true-false, and matching have been considered less authentic. It is considered so because such types of assessments show one moment picture of what the students know and can do. A single measure is incapable of estimating the diversity of skills, knowledge, processes, and strategies that combine to determine student progress (Moya and O'Malley, 1994). Thus, paper-based portfolio is then utilized because it provides students with authenticity. O'Malley and Pierce (1996) define paper-based portfolio assessment as a systematic collection of student work that is analyzed to show progress over time with regard to instructional objectives. It is the involvement of students in selecting samples of their own work to show growth or learning overtime. It has been proven effective in assessing the students' writing skills, as shown by the findings of the study conducted by Suparto (2004). The subjects of the study were the students of one of the junior high schools in

Malang, and the result of the study revealed that using paper-based portfolio in assessing the students' writing skills was quite effective. The effectiveness of the assessment was indicated by the numerous samples of students' work in writing in the portfolio that could be used as the basis of examining the students' progress and identifying the students' knowledge and ability. It was also proven by the students' capability in assessing their own work through the use of self- and peer-assessment. Another finding of the above study revealed that the students also had positive response toward the use of paper-based portfolio assessment in assessing writing competence because it gave them chances to show what they knew and could do in a certain area of skill. It could enhance students' motivation because of the capability of the procedure to create a communicative and more enjoyable learning atmosphere for the students to learn.

Meanwhile, there has also been development in language teaching, precisely the integration of tech-

nology, i.e. the computer and the internet in the classroom. It is widely accepted that language learning is likely to be much more effective if it allows students to deal with a real and authentic language context. The computer is a means by which language learners can be exposed to authentic materials, discourse, and culture. Therefore, through the internet, language learners can reach others outside their physical setting, expanding their opportunities to interact with the target language (Egbert and Hanson-Smith, 1999:79). It also opens up opportunities for interaction among learners, between learners and the target language users, and between learners and the teacher (Benson, 2001). The internet may also create optimal conditions for language learners to learn how to write since it provides authentic audience for written communication. It means that other people, who happen to read what someone has written in the web, may give a direct feedback, i.e. by posting a comment on it. In addition, learning a language (i.e. English) by means of the internet is not only a matter of using the internet to learn English but also of learning English to be able to function well on the internet (Warschauer, 1997).

The recent development in the assessment strategy for language skills and the integration of teaching with the computer and the internet are the basis of the idea of the implementation of web-based folio for this study. Web-based portfolio (henceforth, web folio) is an internet-based electronic portfolio (Dollieslager, 2008), an electronic version of a portfolio. It is similar to a paper-based portfolio, only it allows the students to apply such formats as animation, digital audio/video, graphics, and texts, as well as virtual reality, and interactivity, and the product is going to be published in a web site. Moreover, Dollieslager (2008) describes that a web folio may also contain a variety of items (called artifacts): rough drafts, graded assignments, showcase pieces, critiques or summaries of reading, self reflection pieces, homework assignments, journal entries, peer responses, graphics, spreadsheets, and even online discussions, whereas, a paper-based portfolio displays conventional materials-sketches, drafting, printed materials, and photographs. Yet, unlike the paper-based portfolio which utilizes papers as the media, the web offers new ways of displaying the students' work.

A web page may also be considered as a useful medium to enhance students' writing skills. It may be in the form of integrating web publishing into language learning, i.e. English. Accordingly, the students will be able to "develop their electronic literacy skills while communicating with a global audience by authoring and publishing multimedia works on the web" (Warschauer, et al., 2000:66). Moreover, the work may also help the students become active users of technology while sharing authentic texts with real audiences.

Writing in a web can also help students develop their critical thinking skills as they reflect on other people's thoughts who have responded to their online writing. Besides, it may encourage them to write carefully. As described by Dowsen (2004), that a student of Institute St-Joseph in Quebec City, Canada paid more attention to her writing in the web, especially to spelling because anyone could intentionally read her posts. In addition, writing in the web encouraged her to write a lot more and a lot longer than before. Thus, it can be concluded that writing in the web may give a beneficial impact, i.e. to develop students' skills as communication, critical thinking, and writing skills. Moreover, Krajka (2000) mentioned in his article concluding the result of the study conducted by Belisle (1996) that through the increased electronic access to the world around them (by using the internet), students' social awareness and confidence increase. The psychological aspect has to be taken into consideration here as well, since networking frees students from the limitations of traditional writing tools that often inhibit and restrict writing processes. Thus, learning is transformed from a traditional passive-listening exercise into an experience of discovery, exploration, and excitement. The psychological factor is also relevant in this case as Brown (2001:59) states that "the most powerful rewards are those that are intrinsically motivated within the learners. Because the behavior stems from needs, wants, or desires within oneself, the behavior itself is self- rewarding".

Prior to the study, the preliminary study was done, i.e. by examining the students' writing. Using scoring rubric proposed by Berhman (2003), it was found that the students still had some problems/errors and that most of the students' compositions were categorized as '*uneven*'. Berhman analyzes a writing composition based on its content, its organization, its sentence structure, and its grammar, usage, and mechanic. When it is considered 'uneven', it means that in terms of *content*, most of the students present a few clear details, but it is list-like, undeveloped, or repetitive or offers no more than a well-written beginning. Moreover, in terms of *organization*, their writings are considered unevenly organized. One sentence to another are quite related in terms of ideas, but they have few or no transition. In terms of *sentence structure*, they do not have varieties in their sentence structure and still have some incorrect word choices; and the last, in *grammar, usage, and mechanics*, it is found that the students still make mistakes such as inconsistencies of tenses, lack of subject-verb agree-

ment, spelling, and punctuation which sometimes interfere with understanding.

Observations of the students' attitudes and feelings towards writing activities were also done, and it was implied that most of the students seemed bored and reluctant to do so. Despite their difficulty in mastering writing, the students' boredom and reluctance were probably due to the classroom's lack of "support" in doing a writing assignment in the sense that the classroom did not fully support the writing instruction (Fauzan, 2009). For instance, it did not provide them with adequate references needed to generate their ideas whereas they had to finish the task in a certain length of time. Moreover, the students felt that doing writing assignment was consuming both time and energy, especially if it came to them to revise the writing draft before submitting the final one. In other words, they had to re-write it manually over and over again. In spite of all the facts above, it was also found that the English teachers in the study program had not yet made the best of the situation, i.e. utilizing the available facilities and technology optimally to integrate with their teaching and learning activities, for example in developing students' writing skills and assessing them. The students were accustomed to doing paper-based writing assignment/assessment and did it in a regular classroom (an ordinary classroom consists of a whiteboard, a table, a group of desks, a PC, and an LCD projector). Therefore, it eventually led to students' boredom and lack of enthusiasm in doing the assessment/assignment.

Based on the background above, the literature study, and the preliminary study on the students' of Informatics Management Study Program at State Polytechnic of Malang, then web folio was regarded best implemented to improve the students' writing skills. In this study, assessment was regarded as a part of teaching process; therefore, the web folio was treated as "an instrument" to assess and give feedback as well as to improve the students' writing skills. Since there had not yet been found any resources about applying web folio to improve the students' writing skills, this study adapted the study conducted by Suparto in 2004 entitled *The Use of Portfolio Assessment in Writing*.

METHODS

The study applied a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design since it was projected to the classroom setting and aimed at applying web folio as a solution to the problem in the teaching of writing. Moreover, the results could be applied in the classroom later. In this study, the researcher acted as the

teacher too and was assisted by another English teacher whose tasks were to observe and record all the processes of the study.

The subjects of this study were the third semester students of Informatics Management Study Program of State Polytechnic of Malang in the academic year of 2009/2010. There were five classes available, but only one class was chosen, (i.e. Class 2C). The reason for selecting this particular class was the fact that among all the available classes, this class was considered the poorest, i.e., 75% of the students 'writing was considered *insufficient* or *uneven* (Behrman, 2003). There were 22 students in this class, so there were only six students whose writing was considered *sufficient*. Moreover, the setting of this study was one of the multimedia laboratories available at the Informatics Management Study Program of State Polytechnic of Malang.

The procedures comprised two cycles and each of them consisted of four stages: *planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting*. The planning was elaborated into three stages: planning web folio implementation, preparing criteria of success, and developing the research instruments. The plan was this study focused on the process of the implementation of web folio strategy and the student's writing product in terms of quantity (the number of the students' entries) and quality (the score of the students' entries based on the scoring guide) as the evidence of the improvement of the students' writing skills.

The outlined plan of web folio implementation included identifying teaching objectives, specifying the content of the web folio, preparing the web folio application, preparing the scoring guide, and notifying other interested parties: the head of the study program, the web administrator, and the fellow teachers. The main objectives of the teaching were in accordance with the objectives of the study, i.e. implementing web folio to improve the students' writing ability, and with the teaching syllabus, i.e. students were able to write a good paragraph and an essay. Moreover, the contents of the web folio covered both required and optional entries. The students were required to submit at least 3 entries, in the form of a paragraph and an essay about Informatics subject matters. Accordingly, the type of both paragraph and essay was informative/explanatory. In addition, prior to the study, a web application was designed principally adapted from a well-known social networking site, http://www.friendster.com founded by Abrams and Emmanuel in 2002. Similarly, this application contained menus enabling other users to view all of the students' profiles and entries and gave comments to them. Hence, it was developed in such a way that

it suited the purpose of the study which enabled the teacher-researcher to conduct "online writing conference" where some comments and necessary revision about the students' entries were given before they were published. Besides, the conference also allowed the students to do both self- and peer editing/assessment. Furthermore, the scoring guide proposed by Berhman (2003) was applied. Since there were two kinds of writing to evaluate, i.e. a paragraph and an essay, two different kinds of scoring guide were used; one is for paragraph and the other is for essay. The final stage of planning was notifying other interested parties. In this case, since the web application needed to be attached to the official web site of the Informatics Management Study Program, then, the teacher-researcher asked for permission of the head of the study program and the web administrator to give the link. In fact, the web application could be accessed at http://www.psmi.poltek-malang.ac.id/atiqah/, therefore, other public users might sign up, browse the contents, and give comments.

The next planning was preparing criteria of success. The criteria were based on the data taken from the preliminary study that 75% of the students 'writing was considered *insufficient* or *uneven*. Thus, the study was regarded successful if (a) 80% of the students could publish 3 entries in their web folio in the form of paragraph and essay about Informatics subject matter; (b) 60% of the average of the students' writing score (on the basis of the scoring rubrics developed by Berhman, 2003) was *sufficient*.

The last planning was developing research instruments: field notes, observation check lists, and student's web folio. The supporting instruments (i.e. interview guidelines and questionnaire) were prepared to know the students' attitude and behavior towards the implemented strategy.

The planning stage was followed by the implementation stage where all the plans were implemented and observed. The study applied *2 cycles* in which first cycle consisted of *four* meetings. The description of the implementation is elaborated in Table 1.

Table 1 The Implementation of Web Folio

Strategies	Activities	
	Teacher-Researcher	**Students**
Introducing the whole idea of web folio	▪ Explaining the whole idea and the objectives of the web folio by showing the example of the web folio and distributing the written guidelines for the web folio presentation and its evaluation.	▪ Listening to the teacher's explanation and giving response.
	▪ Reviewing the students' knowledge of what netiquette is in order to avoid plagiarism.	▪ Answering the questions related to netiquette.
Introducing the students with the designed web application	▪ Asking the students to sign up for the web application at http://www.psmi.poltek-malang.ac.id/atiqah/ and familiarize themselves with the application.	▪ Going to the web site address, sign up for the web application, and familiarizing themselves with the application.
Explaining the teaching materials and uploading them at the web site	▪ Explaining how to write a paragraph and an essay (see the Lesson Plan, Appendix 2) and publish them on the web site.	▪ Paying attention to the teacher's explanation
Conducting the assessment and giving feedback	▪ Asking the students to begin working on their web folio and encourages them to use the features provided by the computer and the Internet to help them write.	▪ Beginning working the tasks and write their composition on the pad or with the use of the word processor, i.e. Microsoft Word, and browse for any references in the Internet while writing their composition.
	▪ Asking the students to do self-peer assessment/editing before posting their entries	▪ Asking one of their classmates sitting next to him/her to conduct a peer-editing
	▪ Doing online writing conference, make any necessary correction and revision and give comments.	▪ Posting their composition for the teacher – researcher to be reviewed and edited before it is published.
	▪ Doing online writing conference and make any necessary correction and revision and give comments.	▪ Revising their entries based on the teacher's comments and repost it afterwards.
Publishing the students' writing	▪ Publishing the revised students' entries. ▪ Helping the students to choose which entries to display	▪ Reading other's works and give comments or feedback. ▪ Deciding which entries they would like to be displayed on their page.
Giving score	▪ Giving score based on the prepared scoring guide	▪ Getting the score

The assistant as the observer obtained the data by filling in the observation checklist while the web folio was implemented. Thus, the data was from the process of the teaching-learning and the implementation of the web folio. Besides, the data was also taken from the products of the web folio. The entries were posted in the web to evaluate on the basis of the designed scoring rubrics.

In the reflection stage, there were two procedures, namely data analysis and reflection. In the data analysis, the data collected was classified in accordance with their properties. For instance, the data obtained from observation checklist was classified into the same property, i.e. observation, and the data obtained from the questionnaire and interview guide were put in the questionnaire and the interview. After that, the data was elaborated in narrative statements and then analyzed. Furthermore, reflection was aimed at evaluating whether the process meets the proposed criteria of the success or not.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study ended in Cycle 2. From the students' products, i.e. web folio, it could be concluded that the first and the second criteria of success were achieved. 90% of the students' entries were published, covering 3 entries in their web folio, in the form of paragraphs and essays about Informatics subject matter; and 90% the students' writing scores for their paragraphs and essays (on the basis of the scoring rubrics developed by Berhman, 2003) were *sufficient* or more (their average score was 3). This means that in terms of the content, the students' paragraph and essay were developed with some details. In terms of the organization, the students' paragraph and essay were organized with ideas that were generally related but had few or no transition. In terms of sentence structure, they showed control over sentence boundaries and sentence structure, but sentences and word choices tended to be simple and unvaried. And the last, many errors in grammar or usage, such as tense inconsistency, lack of subject-verb agreement, incorrect spelling and punctuation were found, but they did not interfere with understanding. In addition, from the questionnaire and the interview, it could be inferred that the students were motivated and enthusiastic during the implementation of the web folio.

There were some problems faced while implementing the web folio. The first common problem was electricity black out. Since the study was conducted in the multimedia laboratory where it relied on the electricity, the problem caused the delay in students' writing process. The second was the slow internet connection which made it longer for the students to upload their writing on the web. Thus, the teacher-researcher had to extend the teaching hour. The third was the problem with the web application itself. Since the study used the web application attached to the official web site of the study program, it needed to be carefully administered by the web administrator to avoid the problems such as difficulties in accessing the provided features such as to display the students' writing on the home, to write on the provided writing pad, and to upload music files and pictures. The fourth was the student's plagiarism. It happened because the students were allowed to browse the particular sites to get the information for their writings. They sometimes just blindly copied and pasted it without editing or giving the site address from which they took the source.

The implementation of web folio indeed is found capable to improve students' writing skills. Unlike the previous way of teaching writing, which was conducted in the regular classroom and using paper as the media of writing, asking the students to write a piece of writing on the computer, could make the students become more aware of their mistakes in terms of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It is so because while they were writing, they were suggested to activate spelling and grammar checker feature available on word processor available on the web application to enable them to correct such mistakes easily. Consequently, such mistakes would be lessened. Besides, as stated by Hyland (2003: 145), word processors "provide composing environments which facilitate writing by making drafting, revising, and editing much easier and quicker". Thus, it helped the students to revise and edit their writing much easier, compared to paper-based writing. In addition, since the students' works were intended to be displayed in the web, it could encourage them to write carefully. As it was described by Dowsen (2004) that a student of Institute St-Joseph in Quebec City, Canada paid more attention to her writing in the web because anyone could read her posts.

Moreover, the students were also permitted to make use of other features available such as dictionary and thesaurus to help them find words and their meanings. In addition, using computer connected to the Internet also enabled them to get references for their writing because they might browse any relevant sites to develop their paragraph or essay, especially if they got stuck in the middle of writing. Based on the questionnaire and the interview, by doing so, it is evident that most students found it effective and they felt their vocabulary also improved.

Doing a writing assignment which is later published in the web also makes the students much more motivated. It is so because they have chances to display their writings on the web where it allows not only teacher but also their peers, parents, and other users who happen to access it to read and give comments on the provided pad found in the web application. This is in line with what Warschauer & Healey (1998) argued that the impact of the web-based work rests on the social and cultural relevance of the writing assignments. It is caused by the fact that when students see they are contributing something of value to the public, they will likely put in a great deal of efforts in the process and attention to the product, producing positive results in their learning to write in a second language. Besides, as stated by Dollieslager (2008), web folio encourages students to take more pride in their work by writing for a mass audience and not just for the instructor to read and grade. The students tend to have a kind of inner drive to do a classroom activity whenever it is fun, interesting, useful, and challenging. In addition, Brown (2001:59) states that "the most powerful rewards are those that are intrinsically motivated within the learners. Because the behavior stems from needs, wants, or desires within oneself, the behavior itself is self- rewarding."

Furthermore, the process of the assessment itself was quite different from that they used to have. The writing assignments were used to be done in the regular classroom and only once as they wrote a composition in a testing situation and submitted it to be graded by the teacher. Buy using the web folio, they could do the writing assignments every time (within the required time) as long as they were connected to the Internet, and the example of a good writing could also be accessed on the web application so they could read and study it by themselves. They could choose any topics they wanted as long as it was related to their major, namely Informatics Management. Furthermore, they had a chance to revise a composition with the help of their peers through peer-assessment and the teacher through teacher's conference before it was evaluated. They were encouraged to do self- assessment too. With the help of the teacher, they also had the right to choose which entries they thought best to be published on the web. Thus, they did a writing assignment not only for their teacher to evaluate and grade but also for others to read and comment.

In this study, by applying web folio, the students were provided with four aspects that a teacher should know to help students write well, as mentioned by Rief (2006). First, time; the best writing is usually resulted when students are given adequate time to consider their topics, draft and revise their ideas, and receive feedback while engaged in the process of writing. Providing students with longer time to develop their ideas more fully may produce meaningful writings. Then, choice; students have to be interested in the topic of their writing to produce a good writing. When students are fond of the topic, they may write with passion and voice. Next is models; students should be given models of writing, either professional or peer-written texts, for them to draw their understandings of writing. Finally, response; during the process of writing, students need constructive response to increase the quality of their writings. For a large classroom, teachers can respond through conference for the whole class or provide students with peer-response activity.

The study has shown that the integration of new technology in the classroom (the use of computer and the internet, i.e. web folio) can indeed be used as a means of enlivening instruction, improving students' writing skills, and facilitating collaboration and interaction both within and beyond the classroom, just as those pointed out by Hyland (2003).

CONCLUSIONS

Web folio can be used not only to assess the student's writing but also to improve the writing ability of the students. It is also evident that students get highly motivated in doing the web folio and develop positive attitudes towards it. The impact of the implementation of the strategy is that students become more aware of the use of grammar and spelling checker whenever they have to write a composition to minimize errors on grammar and spelling. They also make the best use of the web browser to get references for their writing and are careful in using them. Accordingly, they may gain more confidence on their work because what is published in the web is the final draft of their writing after being revised over and over again. The comments and suggestions from others (classmates, teacher, and other users) are effective to make them give their best efforts in doing the assignment.

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