USING A FACEBOOK CLOSED GROUP TO IMPROVE EFL STUDENTS' WRITING

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Abstract: This study investigates how social media, in this case Facebook, can be incorporated in ELT through e-dialogue journal writing shared in a Facebook closed group. Fifteen EFL students participated in this case study. They were second, third, and fourth year students of English Education Department of a university in Bandung, who voluntarily joined a Facebook closed group for about four months and contributed their journal entries. The content of the students' journals and responses in this closed group were analyzed to identify the nature of the students' journals, the patterns of interaction, and their responses to e-journaling through Facebook. The findings indicate that the students responded positively to this activity and perceived improvement in their writing especially in vocabulary and grammar. The power of learning and sharing from others is also emphasized.

Social media includes social networks, wikis, blogs, podcasts, forums, content communities, and microblogging. Among this media, social networks seem to be the most widely accessed and used and they have been the new trend of today's communication. Facebook, as the most widely used social media due to its continually increasing active members (Noyes, 2015), can be a promising educational tool to be used in today's information era. Similar to other social

media, Facebook shares these following characteristics: participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness (Mayfield, 2008). This social networking site has gained popularity among teenagers; almost all teenagers have a Facebook account and spend hours in there (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

With its large number of users worldwide, Facebook has a great potential as an educational tool that teachers cannot ignore. The ubiquity of smartphones makes access to Facebook and other internet-based application easier than ever. Teachers can take advantage of this convenience to facilitate a mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) by setting up a Facebook closed group which allows beneficial engagement and interaction among members yet keeps the privacy maintained.

Previous studies on the use of Facebook as an education tool show that students see some benefits in using Facebook for certain aspects of peer communication, which often focused around group work (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009) and assessment (Selwyn, 2009). VanDoorn and Eklund (2013) report that the students in their study felt comfortable contacting lecturers through Facebook and found that the teachers' unapproachability was reduced. This implies that a better atmosphere for learning has been established. VanDoorn and Eklund (2013) investigate how students perceived the use of Facebook chat with their teachers, and the study suggests that this social media chat was perceived positively by students because of the immediacy of response and irrelevance of distance. In addition, using social media fosters long-term retention of information and develops a deeper understanding of content that has been discussed in a class (Chen & Bryer, 2012).

Besides the benefits, Facebook as social media also pose challenges for teachers as Bugeja (2006) warned that it can be both a tool and a distraction in the classroom. Similarly, Hurt et al. (2012) mentioned that social media may provide too much stimulation and therefore can distract students from completing their coursework. As Arnold and Paulus (2010) stated, even when social media is used for an educational purpose, students incorporate the technology into their lives in a way that may differ from the intentions of the course instructor. Instructor cannot take a full charge of what their students do with social media beyond their supervision. Besides, off-topic or non-academic discussions occur on social media due to its primary design as a social networking tool (Lin, Hou, Wang, & Chang, 2013).

In order to address the issues, Bugeja (2006) maintains that the solution is not to block content, but to foster students' ability to discern when and where technology may be appropriate or inappropriate. Encouraging students to use social media wisely can maximize the benefits of technology for learning. For this purpose, teachers' technology literacy is necessary in order to effectively incorporate it in their teaching and learning processes and facilitate students' learning.

The present study explores the possibility of using social media to improve EFL students' writing by employing electronic dialogue journal writing (EDJW) through Facebook. It is a type of dialogue journals, defined as "a written conversation between a teacher and an individual student, which is quite confidential and is an on-going writing throughout a whole semester or school year" (Peyton, 2000, p. 3). In this study, however, the dialogue journal is conducted through a Facebook closed group rather than through traditional paper and pen media. Another difference is that the 'dialogue' is not limited to teacher-students but it involves all students in the group.

Dialogue journal is believed to be beneficial for students (Peyton, 2000; Langan, 2000; Harmer, 2001). They have distinctive features, namely, interactivity, periodicity and privacy (Jones, 1991, pp. 28-29). These features allow meaningful communication between the teacher and the students. The most common type of electronic dialogue journal writing used was journal writing using e-mail. Wang's (1996) study on the use of email dialogue journaling indicates that students had positive attitude to using email for journaling and produced more language functions than those who used paper and pen dialogue journaling. EDJW is also reported to affect the quantity of students' writing. For example, the conversational and informal style of email communication has made students write more (Wang, 1996, p. 776). Meanwhile, Staton, Shuy, Peyton, and Reed (2005) show the potential value of teachers' e-mail correspondence with their students since it allows teachers and students to get to know each other in new ways, to develop greater rapport and mutual understanding and to expand and deepen their communication.

Other studies (Shang, 2007; Naba'h, 2013; Abdelrahman, 2013; Foroutan, Noordin, & Gani, 2013a) indicate that the use of electronic dialogue journal writing has significantly improved students' writing performance. Students were able to improve syntactic complexity (Shang, 2007) and grammatical accuracy (Shang, 2007; Abdelrahman, 2013). Meanwhile, Thevasigamoney and

Yunus (2014) investigate the use of EDJW as a tool to alleviate writing anxiety and promote writing skills among gifted learners.

While the previous studies investigated the use of dialogue journals through email, this article explores how dialogue journals can also be conducted using the widely used social media, Facebook. Facebook is used because of its popularity among students. They are already familiar with Facebook's features, which is expected to minimize the possibility of technical difficulties.

The previous studies reveal that dialogue journal writing has positive impacts on students' learning in general and students' development of writing skill in particular. This study investigates the use of electronic dialogue journal writing through a Facebook closed group, in which all members can share, comment, and interact freely. Thus, the nature of 'dialogue' in this type of journal is different, because it is more interactive and promotes interaction among all members, not only between teacher and students.

Using Facebook to support learning is in accordance with the social constructivism paradigm, which emphasizes social interaction and learning from others in the group. It enables synchronous and asynchronous interactions and information sharing (statuses), such as links, videos, surveys, files, texts, and photos. Any Facebook member can create a group and invite other Facebook users to join. The privacy setting can also be managed to determine whether the group is open to all Facebook users or closed (accessible only to members approved by the group creator).

Facebook closed group is chosen because it gives more privacy to the members. Only group members can read and comment on the posts. Anything posted in the closed group does not appear in the members' logs as do their other Facebook activities. It is visible only to other group members (Meishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012). Another convenience is that a Facebook user can join and be approved as a member without having to be friends with the creator, so teachers and students do not have to share their profile and statuses with each other.

As mentioned earlier, this study explores the possibility of incorporating e-dialogue journal through Facebook closed group to improve students' writing. There are three main questions formulated as the problems of the study: (1) What is the nature of students' journal entries?; (2) What is the pattern of interaction and language functions that appear in students' journals?; and (3) What are their responses to journaling through a Facebook closed group?

METHOD

This is a preliminary case study on the use of dialogue journals through a Facebook closed group. I created a Facebook closed group named 'Journal Community' and invited students who were interested to participate in this group. The membership was voluntary.

There were 16 members of this group including me as the facilitator. The participating students were second, third, and fourth year students of English Education Department of a university in Bandung. At first I only invited a few students interested in journal writing, (especially those who were active Facebook users); then, they added some more students from different classes. I invited the members to post their journal entries in this group's wall. I did not specify what topic to write, how often, and how long; they were given full autonomy. I did not score their writing nor their involvement because I considered this an informal learning channel where students could express their ideas more freely than in the classroom.

The data in the form of students' journal entries were collected for about four months, from February to May 2015. However, there were not many entries posted by the students because only five members were active and the rest chose to be silent readers or only commented on other journals occasionally. There were a total of 40 entries or about 10 entries per month. The length of each entry varied, from 20 to 500 words. The content of the journals were analyzed by identifying and categorizing the emerging themes in their journals. Samples of the students' entries included here were presented verbatim.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Nature of Students' Journals

It is found that students write different types of texts in their Facebook journals and they can be categorized in the following list, from the most to the least frequent.
a. Personal account of one's own feeling and experience
    This seems to be the most common types of posts identified. Students tend to write about what they feel/experience during the day/week. One student, for

example, told about her dad being sick and hospitalized. Another reported about his recent conflict with a classmate. Still another wrote about his intention to move from his current boarding house. There was also one who shared his feeling discouraged to continue pursuing a career as a teacher, etc.

This is a sample of students' journal of this type:

My dad is being taken to hospital now. He just recovered from light stroke a few months ago. My mom said he kept showing some signs that the same illness might come again. We're both so afraid. Doctors say the second one will be fatal..

b. Personal reaction to a phenomenon

Sometimes students did not write about their feelings or experience but were critically commenting on a recent phenomenon. For example, one student commented on the government' policy to raise the fuel's price, which was then commented by other students about how their life was affected by the rise. Here, the student's entry was in the form of a comment on the policy. He did not write introductory sentences (e.g. the government has just increased the fuel price...) but directly expressed his opinion, which was probably because he thought that everybody had known about the newly announced policy.

This is crazy! How can the government increases the fuel's price when the world's oil price drops? This increase will lead to the increase of other prices, which means more people will suffer.

c. Discussion on certain issues

One student wrote about a serious issue regarding ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and how they as students should respond to it. The threat, challenges, as well as promises were discussed. This is the introductory of his quite long entry:

Facing ASEAN Economic Community 2015 is an inevitable phase. As a last grade students (and this also may represent other fresh graduate), this phase is somehow either threatening or promising. We are threatened by the competitive labours that come from Asean country, and optimist because the task and demand of the presence of English teacher will soon increase as the needs is increasing. Indonesian people are urgently required to acquire English skill otherwise they can't compete with other workers.

Another member admitted that she just heard about that issue and that she was grateful to have been informed through his post. She also found the information useful when she had a conversation about it with her teachers. This is what she wrote in her comment:

> I'm so lucky that I read your post before visiting my school today. My teachers there talked about this MEA thing (which I had never heard before), and since I had read this, I could share (or "copy"?) your opinions and blended in well with them. They think I've improved a lot, lol. Thanks for sharing this n_n"

d. Reflection on an event/thing

One student wrote a reflection after reading others' posts, revealing how grateful she was to be a part of the community because it helped open up her horizon and she appreciated the value of sharing with others, which allows her to learn many things from others' writing.

> I'm so fortunate to be in this group because reading my freinds' (*sic*) posts has opened up my horizon. Sharing in this group makes me learn a lot from others' writing.

The Degree of Formality in Students' Journals

Unlike other in-class writing assignments, which require students to use formal style, journaling through Facebook is not restricted to certain genre, topic, length, and style. The lecturer's presence in the group does not really affect the students' choice of language used. They mostly used informal style in their writing. This is indicated by the use of abbreviations (*lol*, *asap*, *OOT*), informal language (*'coz*, *wanna*), slang (*dude*, *buddy*), idioms (*kinda punching me in the head*), also the heavy use of emoticons (e.g. smiley or frowny faces). In addition, their writing is more like a written speech, with some exclamation (This is crazy!) and conversation-like chats.

> I'm sorry…☹ (*A student wrote this after a 'debate' on an issue*)
> I don't see why you need to say sorry though, ha ha (*The reply*)

This informality is something quite common in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and it in fact promotes genuine communication.

The Patterns of Interaction and Language Functions

The interaction/exchange in this dialogue journal can be from teacher-students, student- teacher or students-students. In this study, I give students the autonomy to write about topics of their own choice. By doing so, I expect that they will be autonomous writers who take charge of their on writing, similar to an autonomous learner who is responsible for their own learning (Little, 1991). The interaction with other members can also lead to autonomy, as suggested by Foroutan, Noordin, and Gani (2013b, p. 996) that "Online interaction in CMC along with the constructivist principles, which emphasize the role of communi-cation and social contacts, are important factors in developing autonomy among language learners".

Sometimes I prompted questions for them to respond when they were not active for a long time. Once there was no post for about two weeks, I wrote a topic for them to reply, and they responded in two days. I assumed that some-times they just did not know what to write or were busy with some assign-ments. However, they mostly wrote as they like and others commented when they thought they had something to say about the issue. Otherwise, they would show their presence or attention to their friends' post by pressing the 'like' but-ton.

The language functions the students perform in their writing can be cate-gorized into:

a. Showing agreement and disagreement

When one student wrote about the bad effect of the increase of the fuel's price, for example, others showed agreement by writing about similar problems resulting from the increased price, complaining how it had also affected their life, and criticizing the government for the policy. However, they can also show disagreement on things written by their friends.

> Indeed, the increase of fuel price has killed me softly... ☹ (*Response to a journal entry*)

b. Asking questions

Student asked questions to their friends or sometimes to their teacher, and in other occasions, the teacher asked a question to the students related to the topics they raised. An example of student-initiated question is the one raised by G: "Mom, could you tell me what personal account is?"

Another example is when one student wrote about a certain issue and others responded by giving their own opinion regarding the issue. In the following journal entry, a student responded to his friend who wrote about being successful, which was indicated by a perfect GPA.

> Anyway, besides all definition of "being the best" that people have, I personally define success as not only as "high GPA" or "doing assignment without mistakes" but also as "to be effective person". *(Response to a journal entry)*

c. Offering suggestions

When one student wrote about her problem, others give opinion about how she could solve the problem.

> All you need to do is just prove it, because saying out loud is not enough! *(Response to a journal entry)*

d. Showing empathy

Students showed empathy when one student wrote about a bad thing that happened to his/her family.

> I'm sorry to hear that, we're on the same boat. (*Response to a journal entry*)

Students' Responses on EDJW through Facebook Closed Group

In general, the participating students consider journaling through Facebook beneficial for improving their writing and increasing their knowledge. Some of the benefits expressed by the students are:

a. Enlarging their vocabulary

One student said that writing journals regularly helped them enlarge their vocabulary because when they wanted to express something and they did not know the word, they would be forced to search the word in a dictionary. Writing in Facebook can help students remember the vocabulary better because they can refer to the word anytime they reread their writing. Therefore, it is good to retain the long-term memory. As written by one student:

> Writing journals will help to develop our vocabulary. While we write a word that we do not know the meaning, we just keep the word and we look for in a dictionary what the meaning of that word.

b. Improving their grammar and spelling

The student also reported that she improved her grammar knowledge because she sometimes used the spelling and grammar check before posting her entries. She also learned from others how to write good sentences. This is because some students were considered 'better writers' than others. They wrote longer, more frequently and more grammatically accurate. Their writing can therefore serve as models for others to learn from.

> The tools in microsoft word helps me check the grammatical accuracy and spelling when writing. The more I write the more often I check it. Besides, I also learn from other smarter students about how they write good sentences.

c. Providing a fun and interesting practice

One student wrote that he found journal writing through Facebook a fun and interesting practice because he could share with others. He experienced the excitement of using social media (sharing with others, giving and receiving comments and feedback from others) as well as a fun practice to use English.

> I find writing journals on FB like this fun and interesting, in a way that I don't usually get a chance to share anything or interact with people with so much use of English. So I just like it. It feels 'cool'.

d. Widening their knowledge

The freedom to write on any topic has given students extra knowledge in addition to what they acquire in the classroom. For example, one student seemed to know much about manga, while others talked about more serious topics such as economy (e.g. increasing fuel price), culture (e.g. a wedding ceremony), or politics (e.g. government's policy). The variation of topics in journal entries can enrich their knowledge and open up their horizon.

> After reading other posts, I somehow feel like my mind gets bigger.
> I learn a lot of new things from this group.

e. Learning from others' writing

One student reported that although he was not very active in posting his journals on Facebook, he felt excited to read others' posts and he learned a lot from their ways of expressing their ideas in writing. In his opinion, his friends'

English was amazing that sometimes made him ashamed to write. He learned some expressions that he did not get from his textbook, and he felt very good about it.

> To be honest, the presence of this community is quite helpful generally for us to share everyhing, and for me as an english learner in particular. I seldom put my words here; however, it doesn't mean that i am not following this group and discussion. I always feel excited when someone posts something and others put their comments on it. From that, i can learn many expression snd (*sic*) utterances that i rarely find it in books.

f. Building rapport

Undoubtedly, sharing with others helps them know each other better, and this can build a good rapport among group members. This group consists of students from different classes so they did not really know each other well before. Being involved in this group by sharing and commenting on each other's writing helps create a bond between them.

> This is an interesting way of knowing each other better.

g. Expressing feelings

Some students wrote about their personal problems in their entries; for example, a female student wrote about her having argument with her mom, a male student wrote about his conflict with his peer during a teaching practice at school, etc. Having a place to express one's feeling can help release the stress, and this is admitted by one of the students.

> I feel so releaved (*sic*) after writing here. I can't talk nor argue with my parents so expressing my feeling here helps me release my stress. Reading your comments and encouragement makes me feel even better. Thanks, guys. Lucky to have you.

Discussion

Regarding the first research questions, it is revealed that students write on various topics for different purposes in their journals. This is in line with Wang's (1996) study on email journaling that students produce more language functions than those who use paper and pen in dialogue journaling. Just like updating status on Facebook, students have the autonomy to write whatever they want, from a personal complaint to a serious topic for other members to respond to. This practice gives students exposure to different types of writing

such as description, recount, narration, argumentation, with different styles and tones, from informal to formal style, and personal to impersonal. This also supports the view that journaling is a method that can help students develop their voice (Rohman, 1965).

The students' writing style, which is mostly informal, is the common characteristics of language used in computer-mediated communication (CMC) context, in which the use of special abbreviations and acronyms and informal language as well as features of speaking are common (Warschauer, 2007). This should be seen as an indicator that the students really communicate using authentic language as they usually use in social media.

Unlike the traditional dialogue journals, in which the pattern of interaction is mainly between teacher and students, in this study, the interaction is not only between teacher-students but also among students. All members can contribute and comment on each other. The value of sharing is dominant here, in which the role of the teacher is more like a 'friend' rather than an instructor or a teacher. Teachers and peers have equal chance to comment and share with other members of the group. This suits the theory of constructivism, which places social interactions as an essential part of human cognitive development (Kurtz, 2014). It is believed that this social interaction can better foster students' learning.

The findings also indicate that students have positive attitude toward having interactive journals in a Facebook closed group. A Facebook group is considered a good media to promote learning. As also found in Kurtz (2014), a Facebook group is perceived as a protected environment that fosters social learning processes while emphasizing learner involvement and active contribution as well as frequent interaction with peers and instructor.

Incorporating electronic dialogue journal writing is believed to give several benefits to students. In the following sections, some values of journal writing will be discussed and compared to previous research findings.

a. Improving students' writing skill

One of the students said that this activity helped enrich her vocabulary. Similarly, Rezaei and Manzari (2011) who conducted a study on the effect of EDJW on the quality and quantity of students' writing found that participants' vocabulary gradually developed as they wrote more complicated and advanced topics.

In addition, the same student wrote that writing journals regularly helped her improve her grammar. This is in line with previous studies which reported that journal writing improves students' grammatical accuracy (Shang, 2007; Abdelrahman, 2013). This is because the availability of grammar checker in the computer allows students to check for their writing's grammatical accuracy before posting it on Facebook, especially when they access Facebook using their laptop/PC. Being exposed to the writing of other students who have better grammar skill also helps them to get familiar with the correct grammar use.

Besides grammar, the students' spelling also improves because they can also check the spelling in their writing using the spelling check feature. Those features (grammar and spelling checkers) can facilitate students to be autonomous learners. As Abdelrahman (2013) maintains, EDJW provides a chance for self-learning, which helps students to be more independent.

It is found that students' writing fluency has improved from the first to the last entries recorded. Even though some of them might not realize it, based on my observation, the students were likely to write longer and more fluent than before. This is in line with Holmes and Moulton (1997) who maintains that dialogue journal writing can develop writing fluency.

Most importantly, EDJW allows students to learn from others. They learn how others express their ideas, arrange sentences, and choose appropriate words. This conforms to Yancey's (2009) opinion stating that the 21st century will be known as a new era in writing where people who compose are not necessarily taught through formal instruction, but rather they will use a process called co-apprenticeship in which the students write authentic texts and are evaluated by peers rather than instructors.

b. Promoting students' motivation

Another advantage of journaling through a Facebook closed group is that it can promote students' motivation to write. This is because journaling though Facebook is a fun and non-threatening writing activity for them. As one student said, this practice could raise her motivation to write more, and that she was especially excited to know that her peers positively commented on her writing. Similarly, Liao and Wong (2010) found in their study that EDJW can increase students' motivation. EDJW through Facebook is even more motivating because it suits the current trend in communication media.

This is also supported by Remiasova's (2009) study which shows that dialogue journal writing is motivating as it contributes toward establishing a closer

relationship and a mutual trust environment. Indeed, students feel secure and motivated to post their entries because there is trust among them, so they can freely express their ideas and feelings.

c. Boosting students' confidence

Another response from a student to journaling through Facebook is how it can boost his confidence to write. He used to be shy and unconfident to write because of fear of making grammatical mistakes. I emphasized that the main goal of writing a journal is to foster a writing habit and that grammatical accuracy is not the main priority. Later on, he discovered that writing a journal can increase his confidence to write. This is in accordance with the results of other research on EDJW which indicate its potential to increase students' writing confidence and control over written language (Jones & East, 2010).

d. Building rapport

Interactive journal writing through Facebook allows sharing and genuine communication between teacher-students and among students. Research done by Staton, et al. (2005) on dialogue journals shows the positive impact it has on teacher-students' communication and rapport. When journal writing is conducted interactively through a Facebook closed group, this can increase students' engagement and interaction and establish rapport among them as well, as it has been proven that using social media as an educational tool can lead to an increased student engagement (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010).

Compared to the results of previous studies on the benefits of using social media for learning, this study reveals that despite the participants' perceived benefits of writing journals on Facebook, they did not share the same level of confidence when it comes to writing. Therefore, some had low or even non existent participation due to the EDJW's voluntary nature. Some participants preferred reading entries from other students whom they considered better-skilled at writing rather than writing their own entries. Freedom to write was not always good for them either. Some were confused about what to write. This suggests that if EDJW is to be integrated in writing class, teachers need to occasionally provide topics for them to write about and consider their participation in the evaluation in order to encourage their active participation.

This study has some limitations due to its short time and limited members participating in the Facebook closed group. As mentioned earlier, there were only five members who actively posted their journal entries. From an interview

with the students, some reasons were revealed. Those who chose to be silent readers mentioned that they did not have enough confidence to write because, in their opinion, their friends' writing was mostly very good and they thought their writing was not that good, so they felt ashamed of it. Others said that they did not feel comfortable sharing many things publicly.

Meanwhile, those active contributors shared the same reasons: perceived values and benefits of sharing. They posted their entries because they like to share and believe in the benefits of writing and reading others' comment. Another reason is because of hobby, as stated by one most active member, a second year student, whose hobby was writing diaries. Writing journal entries is therefore not a problem for her. She loved writing down many things both in her diary and on Facebook. Those factors led to uneven participation, and this should be better handled in future research.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study implies that teachers should adapt to the changes in technology and consider how the changes affect the teaching learning process. Social media as the new trend in today's society can be potentially used for teaching and learning purposes. Teacher's role as a facilitator is essential to ensure that the use of social media is in accordance with the previously set purpose. Dialogue journals through a Facebook closed group can be adopted not only to improve students' writing skill but also to help students express themselves better, interact with their peers and teachers in a more meaningful way, build a good rapport among them, and learn from each other.

In this study, e-dialogue journal writing was not integrated with any writing course; rather, it was an informal learning channel provided for students interested in sharing their journal entries. This had some limitations, in that students' participation was sometimes low, especially when they were busy with school assignments. During this period, nobody posted in the group, or if one did, there was no response from other members. Another problem was that some students chose to be 'silent readers', who only read and 'liked' others' writing without commenting on it, let alone posting any journal entries. This happened because of low confidence in writing, or because there was no such obligation to do so. Therefore, it is suggested that this e-journaling activity be integrated into a writing course, so as to increase students' motivation and to

have ample data to measure students' writing progress. Teachers can then set a kind of rules at the beginning, whether students are expected to post entries every week or any other specified time. Teachers can also set a rubric for a good journal entry, and can then use it for assessment.

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