



Indonesian University Students' Perception on Instructor- Initiated Writing Activities

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Abstract

The recent literature of writing studies suggests that there is a possibility of different perception between instructor and university students on what causes students' writing reluctance which leads to ineffective writing teaching activities initiated by the instructor. Such ineffective teaching has, then, become the main cause of students' disengagement in writing classes at university. This paper is aimed at exploring the perception from students' side as the targeted individuals within the teaching process itself. In order to describe such perception, a critical literary review of previous studies from the relevant area is employed. It is argued that students' perception on instructor-initiated writing activities are influenced by pedagogical consequences, learner's linguistic competence, and their original perceptions of the English writing skill. This investigation has found that it is very crucial for instructors to design activities that engage students in three dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional. The study also finds that instructors' selection of teaching strategies influences students' motivation extrinsically in the form of reinforcement, or in contrast, degradation of their motivation. Finally, this study confirms it is possible for students to respond pedagogical activities differently from the expectation of the instructors.

Keywords: instructor-initiated writing activities, writing skill, students' perception

Introduction

Writing has been the core activity along with reading that shapes the academic engagement for university students including those in Indonesian universities, especially students majoring in English studies: English education, English literature, and business English study programs. Huskin (2016) suggests that in a course unit where writing activities are intensive, students are in demand for active reading and writing to achieve the highly demanding learning objectives set by the faculty. Regardless of its position as a foreign language (FL) in Indonesia, English department students are expected to deal with academic reading and writing activities very intensively.

However, the reality in Indonesia, despite students have been studying English from elementary school, many still struggle to write proper English essays. Hasan and Marzuki (2017) suggest that this is partly caused by the lack of practice along that learning period. They study that generally, English teachings in those level before university put more emphasis on reading and only give a small portion of attention in speaking and writing practice (productive skills). Indonesian students are also known to likely take extra English courses prior to and during university periods. This informal learning does not contribute much since commonly the teaching activities here focus more on speaking skill and grammar mastery. Consequently, when these students are at university, their writing skill has not improved significantly, and they continuously consider writing as a stressful activity.

The high cognitive demand of writing itself, to some student, affects motivation to write in the form of reluctance. This is an impact of the pedagogical approach applied by the teachers prior and during the university study level that fails to address the interrelation between these two domains. Students' writing reluctance is defined as "a consequence of the writing pedagogy which favours some students to engage and others to disengage" (Meiketo & Tessema, 2012, p,145). Hence, ineffective teaching approach to writing skill does not only contribute to students' low ability to write but also their psychological aspect of viewing writing such as motivation, anxiety and reluctance.

Students' engagement in writing activities is elaborated by Hawthorns (2008) into three dimensions namely behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement and he also finds that teacher is one of the causes of reluctant writers. Here, for students to be actively engaged in the learning process, they not only need to engage behaviourally but they also need to have a positive feeling about the learning while demonstrating and implementing their knowledge. Though, we cannot just focus our attention on students in this engagement because instructors are the initiators and the designers of learning activities in the classroom engaged by the students.

Instructor-initiated writing activities are methodically planned writing structure and assignments that take place in the classroom regarding the learning objectives (Huskin, 2016). In planning the teaching practice, generally, instructors consider and correlate the learning objectives and the material but not always they give the same amount of attention to students' cognitive ability and emotional condition. Practically, this is enough, but there are possibilities that students' needs and willingness to learn left unaddressed. Ideally, instructors must realise the engagement willingness factors of the students especially in a difficult learning activity such as writing. Though, instructors who conduct this step in their strategy planning may still encounter students' disengagement once the teaching process is ongoing. It can be stated here, that probably there is another blind spot that left unnoticed.

Most interestingly, Asadifard and Koosha (2013) find that learners and instructors may have different perceptions concerning the factors causing lack of engagement in writing activities initiated by the instructor. This perception difference is possible to become the main reason behind students' disengagement as well as the unnoticed blind spot when instructors design the pedagogical approach for the writing class. Based on his study, Meiketo and Tessema (2012) find that reluctance to write falls into two categories of complete and partial avoidance. Instructors believed that students' lack of requisite skills and preparedness to engage in writing are among the major causes of their reluctance. Students, on the other hand, blamed their instructors for being unable to engage them actively during the course. As a result, several strategies implemented to increase students' engagement in writing activities sometimes fail to contribute as significantly as expected by the instructor.

Studies about reluctant writers have attracted researchers (e.g. Pajares, 2003; Buis, 2007; Hawthorne, 2008) but none of these studies was conducted at a university level except for Meiketo and Tessema's (2012) study which explores this issue in an EFL university context. Regarding writing reluctance causing factors, Beattie (2010) suggests that students' reluctance is related to gender while Buis (2007) considers it as a pedagogical phenomenon and influenced by students' linguistic competence. On the other hand, Daly and Miller (1975) hypothesise writing reluctance as a psychological concept and specify it to "writing apprehension". However, to date, to the investigator's knowledge, no research has been done to investigate this issue in the field of EFL in Indonesian universities. Therefore, investigating this issue in that context, from students' perspective, mainly the reason behind their unwillingness and inability to engage actively in writing activities becomes very crucial.

This study in correspondence with such phenomena in writing skill teachings, tries to address two questions: 1) What are the factors causing students' writing reluctance? 2) As they are perceived by students, among those factors, which of them are influenced by instructor-initiated writing activities?

To contextualise the issue and to provide deeper insight of the issue being investigated, the first step is collecting necessary academic literature that explores writing skill, writing reluctance and motivation, and samples of teacher-designed writing activities in EFL context. Then, generating links between literature and critically analysing them in framing this issue and constructing the arguments as the reflection to research questions are conducted. As discussed above and implied from the research questions, the focus of this investigation is to elaborate factors that cause students to become reluctant writers. From the literature review, some factors emerge as the cause of reluctance: pedagogical consequence (e.g., ineffective teaching strategy selection and poor teaching ability), different level of language elements mastery (e.g., grammar and vocabulary mastery) and psychological issues (e.g., gender difference, motivation and anxiety). From those factors, this study argues that instructor-initiated writing activities influence the psychological aspect of students for the most and to some extent, may also influence the development of learners' linguistic competence.

This study provides insight of understanding students' response to instructor-initiated writing activities. Additionally, the instructors will be given a new perspective of constructing teaching approach that meets learners' needs and avoids learners' disengagement from learning at the same time. Besides, the faculty, especially English department, will be able to take students' difficulties to engage in their learning activities into consideration while setting the syllabus as well as the learning objectives. Finally, educational researchers, regarding the lack of research in this context as discussed, can also be benefited by this new perspective of observing teaching engagement.

Results

Students Perception: Factors Causing Writing Reluctance and Instructor-Initiated Writing Activities

1. Factors Causing Writing Reluctance

1.1. Pedagogical Consequence

In this section, this essay discusses the first factor that contributes to writing reluctance followed by some examples of pedagogical approach and how effective or ineffective they are in engaging the students actively. These activities are the standard practices by writing instructors in EFL teaching context which have been gathered from the literature. Regarding of different responses of students toward these practices, it can be stated that the implications can be positive as well as negative which is called pedagogical consequence. A pedagogical consequence, in writing learning, is defined by Buis (2007) as resulting impact of ineffective pedagogical approach that causes reluctance to write among learners of EFL in engaging themselves with writing

tasks. The practice examples of writing activities in EFL classroom that have been investigated in previous researches on writing engagement are writing engagement strategies (Huskin, 2016), Task-Based Language Teaching or TLBT (Murad, 2009; Sabet, Tahriri, & Haghi, 2014), social media writing (Rodliyah, 2016), and effect of rubric in writing assessment (Diab & Bala, 2011).

In his study, Huskin (2016) investigates with a literary review, several strategies regarding how effective the strategies can be in engaging students and how the instructors should execute them. Standard practices and teaching elements such as careful course design, peer review, writing assignments, class norms, high engagement strategies, backwards mapping, minute papers, Know-Want-Learned (KWL), mapping and organisers, philosophical chairs, brainstorming, pair-shares, and group presentation are being explored. From this study, it is concluded that designing writing course is not simple and it requires many considerations, and there should be clear and precise scaffolding activities that assist students in developing their writing quality from low to good. Several teaching delivery strategies and learning methods explored in this study have been proven to give tremendous effect on students. However, when it comes to these practices over EFL students, some issues left unaddressed.

The first issue is the course design by the instructors which commonly takes place before the first encounter with the students and merely rely on the learning objectives set by the faculty. This issue leaves more works for the instructor to address when the course is ongoing as they will need to adapt to students' needs. Secondly, several strategies mentioned above are not common in Indonesian universities writing teachings such as the philosophical chair, minute papers, and backwards mapping. Minute papers, for example, requires the student to master a certain level of knowledge about the course material and become motivated reader first before they can engage. For some EFL students, especially the critical ones with sufficient linguistic competence, this is meaningful yet enjoyable activity, but for the rest, they are likely to struggle. This issue also applies to philosophical chair strategy. To engage in backwards mapping activity, students must first be aware of expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) in academic learning to assist them in planning their target and how to achieve it. These difficulties become the obstacles of engaging students in a cognitive way.

Another common teaching approach found effective and motivating by some teachers, and educational researchers are Task-Based Language Teaching or simply known as TBLT (Sabet, Tahriri, & Haghi, 2014). TBLT is known to be an approach that enhances students' performance in abstract writing and to a certain level, enhances students' motivation. There are several types of TLBT tasks listed in Murad (2009): listing tasks, ordering (sorting) tasks, comparing tasks, problem-solving tasks, sharing experience tasks, and creative tasks. Canilao (2009) suggests that when TBLT is in use, "writing becomes a more essential learning experience and a fulfilling pedagogical

undertaking through activities designed on TBLT principles" (p.2). This implies that through TBLT students are exposed to critical and reflective thinking activities which may equip them with those meaningful and valuable skills once succeeded.

On the other hand, some scholars also criticise this task-based approach. Swan (2009), for example, argues that when the writing learning time is so limited, and the exposure of writing out of the classroom context is not intense, TBLT is not that effective. In Indonesian universities context, students in English department are enrolled in 90 minutes writing class per week, and the only out-of-class exposure they get is only doing assignments whether individually or as a group. Hence, this is arguably not enough for them to engage actively in meaningful interaction with teachers in that insufficient duration inside the classroom. In addition, Adam and Newton (2009) suggest that teachers in Asian contexts may encounter challenges in implementing TBLT especially regarding course designing that matches TBLT types of tasks and students' linguistic competence that determines the quality of their writing. Failure to realise these timing, course design, and students' competence factors can lead to mediocre writing teaching practice that contributes to students' reluctance.

More recently, benefiting from the introduction and the development of social media platforms, Rodliyah (2016) investigates the pattern of interaction and students' response on e-journal by using closed group through Facebook in Indonesian universities context. It is found that the e-journaling activities on Facebook attract definite interest and response from students and there is an indication of improvement in grammar and vocabulary mastery as well. Though, this study does not explore the statistical improvement of those language elements. There is an emphasis on the power of learning and sharing among students when this strategy is in use. From this finding, it can be stated that implementation of a new but familiar ICT-based pedagogical approach is helpful in engaging students with writing activities. E-journaling on Facebook, for example, provides students chance to surround and engage themselves with writing activities even in out-of-class context – a context that is failed to address efficiently with TBLT approach. This kind of activity, as found in the study by Rodliyah (2016), is proven to be motivating for university students in Indonesia.

From these three studies, it can be concluded that from different pedagogical approaches there are different consequences, especially in different learning contexts. These consequences can affect students positively, negatively, or even both positively and negatively at the same time. It can also be learned that implementation of approaches that cover the application of modern and familiar ICT media is so compelling and engaging yet motivating for students in Indonesian universities context.

1.2. Learners' Linguistic Competence

Grammar and vocabulary are two basics yet most important variables of learning English as a foreign language, including writing skill (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014). The mastery of these two language elements becomes very crucial in English classroom context. To engage in writing activities, students need to be cognitively ready. Buis (2007) emphasises the influence of students' linguistic competence in students' willingness to participate actively in the activities designed by the instructors. In a complex learning context, students' ability generates their willingness to learn it regardless how difficult the material being taught. On the other hand, when students feel that their knowledge of sentence structure and vocabulary are insufficient, even motivated students can start losing their interest.

One of the engagement dimensions categorised by Hawthorns (2008) is cognitive engagement. However, as elaborated above, cognitive ability affects motivation and emotion toward learning. Then, it can be stated that behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement are interconnected. Students with limited linguistic competence tend to struggle to write a good paragraph, and once this issue is not addressed, this struggle may result in reluctance among these students and turn them into reluctant writers. Hence, it is essential for instructors to be aware of this cognitive factor in designing writing activities for students' high engagement to be achieved.

1.3. Students' Psychology toward Writing Learning

The last, but not least, reluctance causing factor comes from the students' individually different intrinsic elements, as has been elaborated in their part as teaching subjects, namely psychological factor. This inner nature of students includes motivation, anxiety, and reluctance which all of them, as explained previously, have been proven to be contributing to the learning process, and most crucially the outcome. Psychological factors shape students' characters, and since these factors influence students differently, the characters that exist in the classroom become vary. Practically, this difference contributes to different ways of seeing learning as an activity.

As educational psychologists have found it, each student learns in a different way, and type of personality has a significant role to play in determining the best way for one individual to learn (Borg & Shapiro, 1996). This is perhaps the cause of why when any strategies are implemented inside the classroom, generally, some students cannot actively engage and respond to the given activities. Moody (1988) suggest that there is a possible effect from personality characteristics on the way students obtain or perceive given information. For example, a male student who tends to feel not confident to work with opposite gender may find it a bit more challenging to do peer-sharing with one female friend. Even a simple issue such this has a crucial impact on the learning outcome.

When it comes to discussing the psychological state of students in a learning process, motivation is interconnected with reluctance. When one is at a high level, the other is at a low level. Cohen and Dornyei (2002) view motivation as the most critical variables in succeeding pedagogical strategies. There are two types of motivation: intrinsic (IM) and extrinsic motivation (EM). IM is considered as the energy that comes from one's intrinsic nature (Deci & Ryan, 1985) while EM is the energy generated by reinforcement of goals beyond one's self to achieve specific separable goals or for specific motives, such as earning reward and avoiding punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory validates the opinion that, despite students' self-willingness, there are some elements in their psychological states that can be reinforced by extrinsic factors, including teachers' personality and teachers' teaching approaches. As this study investigates instructor-initiated writing activities, a closer look is given toward extrinsic motivation.

An extrinsically motivated student tends to be aware of what they expect by learning and what value they can obtain from it. Hence, this type of students engages better in an activity that has clear goals. Teachers should not fail to motivate their students first to make sure that they will engage will in the learning process. Failure in doing this pre-learning stage of writing teaching may result in the reluctance for some students. Meiketo and Tessema (2012) have found that pedagogical approaches may favour some students to engage while leaving others to disengage. Therefore, a rigorous activity design that meets the need of students to be motivated and engaged, plus an effective way of administering the activity in the classroom are incredibly crucial. This statement is backed by previous studies which have also confirmed that different teaching approaches influence students' motivation differently (e.g., Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984; McClintic, 1989; Lam & Law 2007). All of these studies attempt to document and to investigate the different impact of several teaching strategies on learners' motivation and all agree that the influences are significant.

2. Students' Writing Reluctance and Instructor-Initiated Writing Activities: Generating the links

In this section, this study will elaborate more on how those previously discussed writing teaching strategies (in the first factor) influence students' motivation and how they possibly contribute to writing reluctance. In addition, since the first factor which relates to the pedagogical approach that causes reluctance, to some extent, refers to the instructor-initiated activities themselves, the influence can only be overviewed in terms of how they can affect students' necessary linguistic competence in writing skill and their reluctance to write. Though, as discussed earlier, this influence is explored from students' perspective toward those activities they are told to engage in the

writing classroom.

To highlight it once again, scholars who researched on writing reluctance (e.g., Asadifard & Koosha, 2013; Meiketo & Tessema, 2012) have agreed that there is a strong indication where instructors and students perceive factors which cause disengagement differently. Instructors tend to believe that the cause of disengagement merely is because students are not well prepared to engage and they lack the prerequisite skills that could enable them to engage. Students, on the other hand, blame their teacher or instructor for not being able to engage them actively with a poor choice of teaching strategy. Presumably, this is where the barriers between students and teachers' expectancies of learning occur.

Viewing this from students' point of view is indeed interesting yet urgent. It has been found that some instructor-initiated writing activities may not match their needs. The need for a certain level of linguistic competence, especially the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, is the basic that need to be met for students to engage cognitively. The instructor can influence this factor by designing activities that enable students to bolster their mastery of these language elements. Giving attention to explaining language features of texts they are told to write may favour students to engage and write confidently in this academic English context. Introducing key academic words for them to practice using in every meeting for every essay is also beneficial yet enriching for students. These activities are the scaffolds teachers can apply to provide students with an easy route to follow and boosts to start their writings.

Instructors can also engage students behaviourally and emotionally with effective teaching activities. Since the three dimensions of engagement are interconnected, students who can engage cognitively tend to engage actively and to feel encouraged. Though, there are also issues that instructors must be aware of that may contribute to disengagements, such as introvert and extrovert students as in Moody (1998) and students who feel uncomfortable pairing and sharing with opposite gender as in Beattie (2010). These students' perception for some instructors are not considered as concerns in their teaching, but this investigation has proven that these issues cannot simply be neglected.

Conclusion

English for academic writing is one of the core activities for students to engage, especially as English department students in Indonesian universities. While students are expected to engage, instructors are expected to engage them by designing activities that help them for not becoming reluctant writers. As shown in this investigation, reluctance in writing, a complex language skill, is typical in EFL area. To summarise, this investigation has found that it is very crucial for instructors to design activities that engage students in three dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional. A successful engagement at

these levels is found to be the determinant factor of the learning outcome. The study also finds that instructors' selection of teaching strategies influence students' motivation extrinsically in the form of reinforcement, or in contrast, degradation of their motivation. Finally, this study confirms that students are very possible to respond pedagogical activities differently from the expectation of the instructors. It can be concluded that instructor-initiated writing activities in different contexts may produce both motivated and reluctant writers depending on how these activities are designed.

Consequently, it is recommended for writing instructors to carefully design activities that meet learners' needs and match them with the learning objectives set by the faculty. The faculty is also suggested to consider students' perception of the practised activities throughout the semester and evaluate their writing course syllabus if necessary, to reflect on this issue. Future investigations of writing motivation, anxiety, and reluctance in Indonesian universities contexts are also recommended since literary resources upon this issue are found to be very limited compared to these psychological aspects in other English skills.

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