Chapter One
Introduction

1.1   Background of the Study

In this global era, writing plays an important role in human life, either individually or collectively. Through writing, an individual can express his or her ideas about a phenomenon he or she feels. Writing, therefore, has been considered as a gateway for success in many aspects of life: academia, new workplace, global economy, and participatory democracy (The National Writing Project of America, 2006: 2). In this concern, Weigle points out:

> Writing, which was once considered the domain of the elite and well-educated, has become an essential tool for people of all walks of life in today's global community. Whether used in reporting analyses of current events for newspapers or web pages, composing academic essays, business reports, letters, or e-mail messages, the ability to write effectively allows individuals from different cultures and backgrounds to communicate. Furthermore, it is now widely recognized that writing plays a vital role not only in conveying information, but also in transforming knowledge to create new knowledge (2002: x).

Hence, today writing is not the dominance of well-educated people anymore in the sense that it needed a high level of education for writing skills and activities, but everybody now is involved in writing in their daily life, for example, sending a short message service (SMS) or an e-mail to communicate across ethnics and cultures. More importantly, in the context of scientific and technological development, writing has been crucial in building a new civilization through the transformation and creation of new knowledge.

In the academic atmosphere, the ability to write, whatever the disciplines, is a must for every individual to master (Creme & Lea, 1997; Weigle, 2002; Ulfiati, 2011). Thus, writing must be learned because it will contribute to students' academic success, especially for university students. Students with well-developed writing skills will provide a wider opportunity to develop either in their academic achievement or future career (Taselin, 2011: 103). The importance of writing to be learned in the academic atmosphere is also stated by Creme & Lea as follows:

> Academic disciplines have their own ways of organizing knowledge, and the ways in which people in different subject areas write about their subjects are actually part of the subject itself and something that has to be learnt (1997: 1).

Thus, although writing has not been the domain of the elite and well-educated people, in the academic context, in order to write effectively, writing must be learned. This is because the subject areas are various so that the objective of writing should be adjusted with the content of the knowledge itself. In this relation, the document of the National Writing Project of America states:

> Effective writing skills are important in all stages of life from early education to future employment. In the business world, as well as in school, students must convey complex ideas and information in a clear, succinct manner. Inadequate writing skills, therefore, could inhibit achievement across the curriculum and in future careers, while proficient writing skills helps students convey ideas, deliver instructions, analyze information, and motivate others (2006: 3)

Nevertheless, despite the significance of writing for students' academic success, writing, either in native or foreign language, has been often neglected in the language classrooms (Alwasilah, 2001; Williams, 2005; Aydin, 2010). Writing is among the most important skills that students need to develop (Hyland, 2003: xv). In addition, according to Alwasilah (2001), it is the language skill often reported as most wanted by students from elementary to graduate schools. With regard to language education, according to Hyland (2003: xv), the ability to teach writing is central to the expertise of a well-trained language teacher. Nonetheless, compared to other skills—reading, listening, and speaking—writing has been considered most difficult, either for students to acquire or for teachers to teach (Alwasilah, 2001: 24; see also Ariyanti, 2010: 91; Nurjanah, 2011: 81). The fact that writing is a difficult subject for most students is also confirmed by Emilia:

> … it was evident that most students found writing a difficult subject. In the journals made at the end of every semester by students whom the researcher taught, the majority of students mentioned writing was one of the most difficult subjects. This has been confirmed by the fact that the number of students who complete their bachelor's degree by writing a thesis is always far lower than that of those who take several courses as substitutes for the thesis (2005: 15-16).

The description above shows the urgency to help students improve their writing skills as writing can lead students to empowerment. According to Jordan (2003), through writing students will come to two kinds of empowerment: practical and political empowerment. Practical empowerment is associated with improving writing skills, whereas political empowerment with increasing critical awareness. Regarding this, Kohonen et.al (2000) distinguishes two types of empowerment in writing: lingual and personal empowerment. Lingual empowerment concerns students' ownership of their language knowledge and skills for a variety of communicative purposes, whereas personal empowerment is concerned with students' active role in controlling the process of writing that involves psychological factors, such as self confidence, motivation, and soon. In view of that empowerment is a broad concept employed by many areas of subject (see van Lier, 1996; Page & Czuba, 1999; Jordan, 2003; Hur, 2006) and its relevance with the purposes of the study, the present study was only focused on lingual and personal empowerment in writing.

Based on the researcher's pilot study in the research site, it was found that most students were not satisfied with the writing instruction. The dissatisfaction was to do with several reasons, among others, less time to complete the writing task, lower motivation to join the class, and lack of creativity due to topic limitations by the lecturer.

In the research site the writing instruction seemed to still follow the traditional approach where students produced "a single piece of timed writing with no choice of topic and no opportunities for revision" (Hyland, 2003: 233). In other words, the writing instruction was not much concerned with the process of writing including prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Tompkins, 2008: 7) as implemented in the present study. Thus, a teaching program which gives students an opportunity to go through a process of writing is really important.

One of the approaches to teaching writing which can help empower students linguistically and personally is a portfolio-based instruction (see Kohonen et.al, 2000: 52). In the present study, portfolios were understood as

students' writing collection that demonstrated the process of their writing in producing a particular piece of text. The process of student writing was represented through writing drafts from the first to final drafts. In this context, Chamot et.al (1999) claim that one advantage of involving portfolios in learning is that they can provide evidence of growth in many different dimensions of learning, one of which is through the recognition of writing drafts produced by students. In this way, students can identify the strengths and weaknesses of their writing that will finally empower them in writing. This potential advantage of portfolios had made the researcher conduct the present study.

1.2   Purposes of the Study

Based on the above background, the purposes of the present study were:

(1) To find out how a portfolio-based instruction can empower EFL students in writing at the tertiary level in terms of lingual and personal aspects,

(2) To address the problems encountered by EFL students and the lecturer in implementing a portfolio-based instruction in an EFL context.

1.3   Research Questions

Based on the purposes of the study, this study addressed the following questions:

(1) How can a portfolio-based instruction empower EFL students in writing at the tertiary level in terms of lingual and personal aspects?

(2) What problems may EFL students and the lecturer encounter in implementing a portfolio-based instruction in an EFL context?

1.4   EFL Writing Instruction in the Research Site

The present study was undertaken in the English department of a university in Indonesia. In the department, writing instruction is divided into three levels: Writing I, II, and III with three credits for each course in every semester. In document about the general descriptions of the language skill subjects in the research site, it is recognized:

Writing I provides basic writing skills at the levels of sentences and paragraphs in many texts and functional texts by paying attention to social functions, elements and structures of meaning, and linguistic features of related texts. This subject also teaches subskills of writing, such as topic sentence, supporting sentences, paragraph development or organization, and writing mechanism. The text types to be taught are descriptive texts, anecdotes, procedures, and recounts, whereas the functional texts include form-fillings, messages, letters, memos, comic strips, advertisements, and recipes. All of the text types are presented on the themes of people, things, college life, places, past experience, and food.

Writing II provides intermediate writing skills at the levels of sentences, paragraphs, and short texts at the variety of text types by paying attention on social functions, elements and structures of meaning, and linguistic features of related texts. This subject also teaches writing subskills, like topic sentence, supporting sentences, paragraph development or organization, and writing mechanism. The text types to be taught are descriptive texts, spoofs, procedures, narratives, and reports. The functional texts consist of short stories, notices, tables, and manuals. These all are presented on the themes of weather, sports, entertainments, flora, and fauna.

Writing III provides advanced writing skills at the variety of texts, namely explanation, discussion, exposition, and review. The functional texts to be taught involve news items, articles, essays, and reviews with regard to social functions, elements and structures of meaning, and linguistic features of related texts. The themes include cultures, global warming, education, and media.

From the descriptions about writing instruction above, it can be seen that the writing instruction in the research site emphasizes more types of texts. In this case, the types of texts have already been determined in advance. Thus, students are not given an opportunity to freely choose the topic that they want to write. Besides, it was not yet found whether the production of a particular text type in the research site was conducted through a process-based approach including prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Tompkins, 2008) as implemented in the present study. This is because the syllabi that described in details about the general descriptions of the writing subjects were not found. Paying into account about such a condition of the writing instruction in the research site, the researcher proposed to conduct the present study.

1.5   Significance of the Study

The significance of the present study can be twofold: theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, this study will contribute to the development of portfolio theories in relation to empowering EFL students in writing, especially in Indonesian context. Due to the fact that portfolio discussions have been more conceptual or theoretical rather than research-based (Barrett, 2003), this study can

provide new insights with empirical evidence useful for the development of portfolio-based instruction. In this case, the research findings can become a reference when portfolios will be made as the policy in the practice of education, especially in an EFL context.

At the practical level, the present study will serve several stakeholders. *First*, the institution where the present study was undertaken will benefit from it. Since there have been very few studies on portfolios in the institution, the present study can be of great importance in providing teachers with implementation of a portfolio-based instruction in EFL classrooms, especially in writing instruction. *Second*, English lecturers, teachers, or practitioners will also take advantage of the present study. They will have insights on how to empower EFL students in writing through the implementation of portfolio-based instruction. Here, EFL students are supposed to be able to improve their capability in writing. The knowledge of portfolio-based instruction can be taken into account when the English lecturers, teachers, or practitioners are engaging with their professional activities. *Last*, the English curriculum developers and textbook writers will be assisted with the present study. The results of the study can be great insights and knowledge for designing English textbooks where portfolio-based instruction is employed, especially in writing instruction.

1.6   Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 is a general introduction. In this chapter, the background, purpose, problem, and significance of the study are discussed. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the present study. It includes the discussions of three major theories in relation to the present study, namely portfolios, empowerment, and writing. It also presents the relationships of each of these three concerns. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology used in the present study. It discusses the pilot study, research design, setting, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. Chapter 4 emphasizes a detailed description of the teaching program conducted in the present study. It presents the stages of teaching activities and materials

included into the teaching program as well as analyses of some parts of data gained, especially from students' reflective notes or journals and observations. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of students' text analyses in reference to holistic scoring rubric to observe students' empowerment, particularly lingual empowerment of their writing. Chapter 6 offers a discussion of student questionnaire and interview data to portray students' empowerment, peculiarly personal empowerment of the students as writers. Finally, the dissertation will be ended with Chapter 7 providing conclusions drawn from Chapters 4, 5, and 6, as well as suggestions for further studies.