

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

This study is concerned with investigating the implementation of blended learning in EFL writing class in an email exchange through ePals.com among high school students in West Bandung, Indonesia and Middle School in Attica, Ohio USA.

Writing is the most important academic skill because writing is central to success in and out of school (Nagin, 2006, p. 5). It is not surprising that it has been paid attention to by the researchers particularly in Indonesian context, where writing has been emphasized to be taught as it can be seen from Indonesian Curriculum, 2004. The curriculum stated that students should be able to differentiate different text types; one of them is email (Appendix 1).

Email is one of the text types that has been taught using ICT. With the advance of teaching writing, currently teachers have reached the extent to teach writing through ICT (Warschauer, 2000). Writing is no longer putting pen to paper because the ICT has influenced the teaching of writing (Nagin, 2006, p.5). By the emergence of the ICT, the teaching of writing will help the students write for communicative purposes such in emails, web-based bulletin boards [social media] (Warschauer, 2007, p. 907). In addition, ICT also support the planning and revising even for struggling writers (McArthur, 2006) who can be benefitted from the technology on mechanics and hypermedia for its content and computer-mediated communication (CMC) for its context to reach the interactive writing [such as in email writing] (Warschauer, 2001, McArthur, 2006; Hung, 2007).

Research on teaching of writing though technology alone does not satisfy some researchers because technology without the help of teachers does not suffice the teaching of writing (Egbert 2005; Leloup, Ponterio & Courtland, 2003, Ware & Warschauer, 2005). The students cannot merely stand alone without the help of the teachers either virtually at all time or barely face-to-face. Teaching writing using email, blog, and other social media needs guidance from the teacher

in a traditional way (face-to-face) to guide the students on their writing because Egbert (2005) has suggested four limitations on writing through ICT; a new literacy, computer has limited technology context, cultural matters and legal issues.

This situation then was followed by the emergence of blended learning to be the bridge between the ICT and traditional ways of teaching and learning. Blended learning has clearly been defined in the book entitled *'The Blended learning Book; Best Practice, Proven Methodology and Lesson Learned'*: "Blended learning is the combination of different training "media" (technologies, activities, and types of events) to create an optimum training program for a specific audience." The term "blended" means that traditional instructor-led training is being supplemented with other electronic formats. Blended learning programs use many different forms of e-learning, perhaps complemented with instructor-led training and other live formats." (Josh Bersin, 2004, p. xv).

A number of studies have been carried out upon blended learning. One of the issue being discussed in the study on blended learning is its achievement and satisfaction (Melton & Graff, 2009). Another research also discussed blended learning as a teaching model (Hadjerrouit, 2008; Banados, 2006). From the students' perspective, the research on blended learning also analysed EFL students' perception on blended learning (Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008; Liang & Bonk, 2009; Kobayashi & Little, 2011.) Blended learning through email exchange has been carried out for L2 improvement (Greenfiled, 2003; Korycinski, 2005; Mahfouz, 2010; Son and O'neill, 1999).

Kobayashi & Little (2011) found out that blended learning with its interactions enables the learners to use the target language. The application of blended learning for interaction in the EFL classroom makes the class more ALIVE (Authenticity, Literacy, Interaction, Vitality and Empowerment) both virtually and traditionally (Warschauer, 2000). The interactions among students-students take place in written form through email exchange which is facilitated by ePals.com.

However, the theory of blended learning is still developing and more and more research is underway (Crystal, 2006, p.10; Huang, Ma, Zhang, 2008; Stacy & Gerbic, 2009, p. 36). The

research on blended learning which involves students-students email exchange and teacher-students classroom interaction has not been done in EFL writing class in Indonesian context. In addition, the new form of writing from hypermedia and new social context has not been widely researched (Dornyei, 2007; Leloup & Ponterio, 2003). Therefore this study investigates the implementation of blended learning through email exchange with English native speaker students in the USA to improve students' writing ability in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study also explores the students' and teacher's responses to the blended learning activities.

1.2 Research Questions

This study attempts to address the following questions:

1. Can email exchange as part of blended learning improve students' writing ability?
2. What are teacher's and students' responses on the blended learning activities?

1.3 The Purpose of the Study

In line with the research questions, this study aims:

1. To find out the students' writing improvements through email exchange as part of blended learning activities qualitatively.
2. To identify teachers' and students' responses on the Blended learning activities.

1.4 The Scope of the study

This study is a case study focusing on writing improvement in the 10th grade students in Bandung who had an email exchange though ePals.com with American students. In the process of Blended learning, the email interactions between the L2 learners with Native Speakers were analysed by systemic functional linguistic to see how the learners can improve their writing. The analysis focuses on how they use the language and how the meanings are made in everyday linguistic interaction (Egins, 1994). The analysis focuses on three aspects in SFL which represent the strands of meaning; experiential and interpersonal. This study also investigates the

response of the students and teachers towards experience of email exchange as part of Blended learning.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three perspectives; theoretical, practical and policy.

1. Theoretically, the results of the study are expected to contribute to the theory of blended learning in teaching writing in EFL classroom since the theory in blended learning is in its development (Crystal, 2006, p.10; Huang, et.al, 2008; Stacy & Gerbic, 2009, p. 36).
2. Practically, this study will contribute to the development L2 teaching and ICT. Wu (2011) supported the argument that innovative educators will explore the use of technology such as getting an exposure to English native speakers and resulted guidelines. Implementation on this teaching practice using ICT will equip language learners and teachers in a more collaborative ways. When the problem and the solution are explored in the study, the ideas will give more anticipation for teachers who will apply this project activity so they are ever-ready at all times. The documentation of the benefit of the study will also give more insight for future development of teaching ESL applying blended learning.
3. In terms of policy, the results of this study are expected to lead to the policy related to the use of blended learning in the classroom, especially in the EFL classroom especially in the research site

1.6 Definition of the Main terms

For the sake of clarity, the key terms of the study were defined in the operational definition as follows:

Blended Learning is a term referring to the way in which training is delivered. Both face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are involved, combined in a

pedagogically and didactically meaningful way. The training is continuously supervised by a teacher. (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5)

CMC is Computer Mediated Communication which was introduced by Waschauer (2000) to facilitate language learning through internet.

Email exchange is exchange of emails between partners (student-students) within a group of students in different classrooms (across countries) to do a project for virtual discussion.

Project activities is the activities conducted by students and teachers based on the ePals project

Epals.com is a website that provide classroom connection to do online learning collaboration around the world

1.7 Organisation of the Paper

This study has been organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 covers general description of the introduction including background, research questions, purpose of study, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 explores relevant theories related to blended learning and CMC, writing theory and SFL. Chapter 3 provides the design and methodology of the study that covers research design, research site, participants, data collection and data analysis. Chapter 4 elaborates data presentation and discussion of each finding. And finally chapter 5 is the conclusion and recommendation based on the study.