

The Practice of Constructivist-Based Online Learning for English Argumentative Essay Writing: Learners' perceptions

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Abstract—A constructivist approach has been applied to increase learners' interaction with the learning environment through social and collaborative activities in a meaningful context. In order to embody the approach, English teachers need to focus more on the writing process as well as understanding the functions of the writing products. This paper is aimed at describing a model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing through an online collaborative writing technique (OCWT) and analyzing learners' perceptions towards the practice of the OCWT. The result shows that according to the learners' perceptions, the practice of the OCWT for English argumentative essay writing has given them a meaningful learning experience and has a strong contribution in enhancing their argumentative essay writing skills.

Keywords—*constructivist approach; online collaborative writing; writing skills; argumentative essay*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), writing is generally considered as a very difficult skill since it requires certain knowledge and experience to accomplish. During the process of writing, the learners need to consider some writing aspects such as content, grammar, coherence, as well as vocabulary or diction [1]. Currently, writing courses should apply writing-based classes that focus more on creating a paper aimed at the plurality of readers with a broader context rather than language-based classes that focus on writing test-oriented sentences [2]. In other words, with the current level of writing skills at college, teachers need to consider a more appropriate approach to improve their learners' writing skills.

From the sociocultural perspective, learning a foreign language is currently focusing on learners' participation in a joint activity [3]. Therefore, a constructivist approach as the development of a cognitive approach is offered to help learners experience a meaningful learning process in writing through learners' interactive activities. This approach also enables the learners to increase their interaction with the environment through social and collaborative activities in a meaningful context, and to make connections between their prior experiences and their new experiences [4].

Universitas Terbuka (UT) as a higher education institution applying a distance learning system has offered an online writing course at the advanced level, namely PBIS4313/Writing III. The Writing III Course discusses various kinds of essays, such as narrative essays, descriptive essays, and argumentative essays. Thus, learning essay writing cannot be separated from its classification known as "genre". The term has long been used and theorized on a range of perspectives including "literary studies, popular culture, linguistics, pedagogy and more recently, English/literacy education" [5].

The argumentative essay is categorized as a complex writing genre in which the issues that characterize research on argumentative and persuasive language use are examined. Foreign learners of English often have difficulties in writing this genre because of the cultural differences between English and their speaking countries [6]. It has become the teachers' concern to help their learners overcome their lack of knowledge of the argumentative essay structure and offer some meaningful learning activities as well as enrich the learners' cultural knowledge.

The result of this research is expected to 1) describe a model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing embodied through an online collaborative writing technique (OCWT) and 2) analyse learners' perceptions towards the practice of OCWT for English argumentative essay writing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Writing English Argumentative Essays for EFL Learners*

Skill in writing is a very important foundation for students to succeed in their education while facing the world of work. However, many students at the tertiary level still need to improve their writing and must struggle with the limitations of their knowledge and language skills [7]. Therefore, students need enough practice to write and this exercise should be done continuously.

Writing English is considered the most difficult skill for all language learners, including for English as a foreign language

(EFL) learners [8], that usually appears in the inappropriate use of their grammar [9] and lack of linguistic competence or necessary writing strategies during their writing processes [10]. Moreover, EFL learners may have knowledge about grammar and vocabulary, but still face problems in developing their writing [11].

The problems faced by EFL learners are not only in terms of language, but also in their learning attitudes towards the writing process. Raimes describes that the process-based approach deals with some meta-cognitive strategies like brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting and revising during the writing process [10]. Ideally, good writing needs well-developed ideas through a planning step and clear thinking as well as logical ordering at the beginning. On the contrary, Langan describes that the EFL learners often consider writing as “a natural gift rather than a learned skill” [11]. As a consequence, they tend to be impatient and want to be involved in their writing process as soon as possible, skipping the planning step.

In the context of EFL for undergraduate learners, writing argumentative essays has created some different problems. Academic writing for argumentation has tended to be located within cognitive or sociocultural paradigms and the ability to persuade others has become a key skill [12]. In Indonesia, the context of EFL for argumentative writing has caused the learners and the teachers to face greater challenges. First, the teachers need to consider the learners’ lack of knowledge of argumentative structure, the possibility of learners’ greater grammatical deficiencies as well as limitations in their vocabulary. Second, according to Arsyad, writing an argumentative text “involves a reasoning process in which is potentially bound to cultures” [13]. Indonesian EFL university students often avoid giving counter arguments because they think that it is impolite to criticize other people, especially those from higher social status. Based on those problems, the learners need to become familiar with presenting arguments acceptable in English to produce a good academic English essay.

B. Collaborative Writing as the Embodiment of a Constructivist Approach for English Argumentative Essay

The constructivist approach focuses on developing the learners’ abilities to construct or build their own new knowledge through the process of thinking by synthesizing old as well as new knowledge and experience [14]. Duffy and Jonnasen claim that constructivists are convinced that knowledge and truth are constructed by learners themselves, and not gained from outside his mind [15]. They construct their own knowledge by actively participating in the learning process. Thus, the initiators of constructivist instruction emphasize the principles of collaboration, learner autonomy, generativist, reflection, and active engagement.

This is in line with the opinion of Neo, Neo and Xiao-Lian that learners become more active and take more responsibility for their own learning, and in the process, learn to construct knowledge on their own as well as determine their own learning outcomes [16]. Moreover, the mastery of the skills in writing can be difficult for any ESL/EFL learners if undertaken

alone [17]. These skills can be learned by engaging collaboratively in tasks that would be too difficult for the individual to undertake alone. Therefore, collaboration is an important and integral component to be considered in the learning process, whereby the learner seeks out more experienced people to help solve the task and in doing so, acquires knowledge and experience he or she would not otherwise have had if acting individually [16].

Although writing is an individual act, it is also a social and interactive process during which a writer expresses purpose or responds to other people via texts [18]. From this opinion, the constructivist approach has been reviewed from a sociocultural perspective. Barkley, Cross, and Major state that constructivist-based learning that is offered to higher level learners or adult learners can be implemented through an online collaborative learning technique (OCWT) [19]. Besides, it has given an opportunity to integrate the online writing, such as e-portfolios, into foreign language teaching curricula [20]. Related to the application of OCWT, one of the skills that the learners need to develop is how they practice their critical thinking. This is in line with the principles of the 21st century education in which critical thinking is one of the skills the learners must possess [21]. Therefore, even though online learning is not a new thing in the world of education, education observers continue to make efforts to improve these skills to achieve student academic goals.

Moodle as a learning management system (LMS) has provided many online applications that can be used to facilitate students to improve their writing skills, including discussion forums, quizzes, and wikis [22]. Wiki as a content management system (CMS) is flexibly used as OCWT since it allows instructors or learners to create their own files or pages to be linked internally or externally [23]. There are some advantages of using wiki to facilitate learners with OCWT. Aydin explains that wiki encourages language acquisition through collaborative learning, allows teachers to act as facilitator for learners’ creation of knowledge, enables autonomous learning through collaboration, and increases motivation in terms of the self-determination theory because they provide social interaction and collaboration [24].

III. METHOD

A. Research Context

This article reports on a practice of the constructivist-based online tutorial for writing at advanced level at Universitas Terbuka. The writer applied an online collaborative writing technique in order to embody the constructivist approach. This paper is a part of a dissertation research entitled “A Model of Online-based Collaborative Writing for English Argumentative Essay: A Research and Development at Universitas Terbuka”. This research used a qualitative research approach applying a research and development (R&D) method [25]. The discussion in this paper focuses on the field trial as part of the formative evaluation involving twenty-nine learners in the online tutorial of PBIS4313/Writing III Course discussing English argumentative essay writing.

B. Research Design and Procedure

A model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing was also developed based on the results of the need assessments and an observation towards the current online tutorial. The current study focuses on describing the final model and the process of practicing the model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing. Furthermore, to address the second focus of study, i.e. analysing learners' perception towards the practice of the constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing, an online survey was conducted.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through observation and an online questionnaire survey. The observation was conducted to describe the model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing as well as its practice in the online tutorial for PBIS4313/Writing III course. A purposive sampling was conducted to select the participants of the field trial with the requirements of completing the Writing I and Writing II courses and had never taken the Writing III course. After the field trial, the participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire about their perceptions towards the process of practicing the model which was sent through their email. There were forty statements and these were divided into three foci of discussion in the questionnaire, i.e. learning materials, the material delivery, and the learning activities. The data obtained from the observation and the survey were analysed by using a qualitative descriptive analysis.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Model of Constructivist-Based Online Learning for English Argumentative Essay Writing

The model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing consists of five stages of the learning process, namely construction (pre-test and quiz), internalization, discussion, collaboration, and expansion. The five stages are abbreviated as CIDCE and become a learning system that embodies the principles of constructivist approaches, such as the ability to construct knowledge/concepts, critical thinking skills, interaction and collaboration, and the independent learning process. The five stages cannot be separated from each other because it is a series of activities that provide meaningful learning experiences for learners to improve their writing skills, particularly writing argumentative essays. The following is the model.

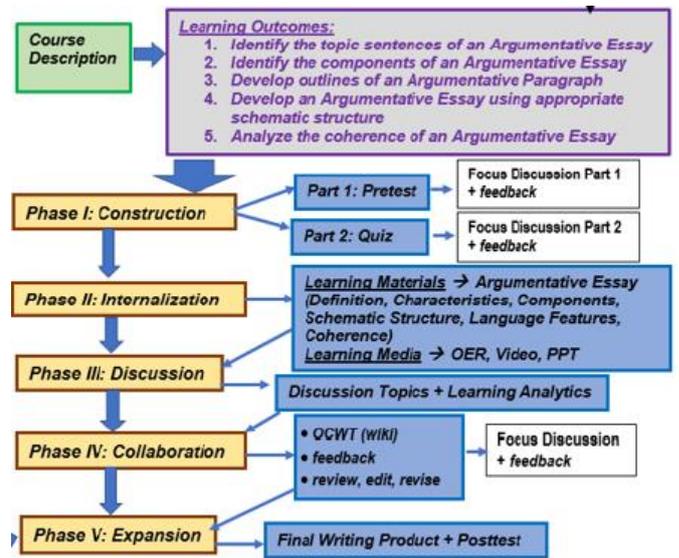


Fig. 1. Model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing.

The researcher developed the pre-test and post-test questions to measure the learners' competency before participating in the learning process and afterwards. In the final stage, the researcher developed a self-assessment guide for the learners and an essay assessment rubric for tutors. A self-assessment guide is provided so that learners can conduct self-evaluation of their own writing. Besides, they can revise it to produce better writing for the final product.

A constructivist approach is an appropriate approach for learners to enhance their writing skills. This approach enables the learners to use more critical thinking skills and construct their own sentences in their writing. One method derived from this approach is the collaborative learning method in which the learners can collaborate with each other by reviewing the results of other students' writing and exchanging opinions.

Based on these reasons, the researchers used applications that were integrated in Moodle to facilitate the learners in practicing writing skills with a collaborative technique, namely Wiki. The researcher labelled the Wiki program as Online Collaborative Writing Technique (OCWT), a technique developed to direct the learners to effective collaborative learning activities, with a purpose of achieving optimal results in their writing process. This program allows the learners to edit other's writing products as well as revise their own along with a history of changes made. Some components of Wiki allow the learners to communicate more intensively with one another and edit each other's writings. There are seven menus that can be used by tutors to facilitate the learners in their writing process through review and revision activities, namely views, edits, comments, history, maps, files, and administration.

At the end of the study, the researchers gave the learners an assignment which functioned as the post-test in this study. The results of the assessment of this stage are compared with the results of the pre-test assessment which can then be used to assess the difference or the influence of the model on the

learners' writing products. The assessment process is equipped with an assessment rubric as the guide for tutors to follow during this process. When conducting the assessment, the tutors are expected to provide feedback as inputs for the learners to improve their English argumentative essay writing skills.

B. Learners' Perceptions

The results of the survey on the learners' perceptions were gained through an online questionnaire. In the first part, there are forty statements related to the materials and the material delivery, the learning tools, and the learning process in the field trial. The results show that most students, 94% choose between options strongly agree and agree to the statements given, including, the instructions given by the tutor at the beginning are clear, systematic, easy to understand, and easy to follow. There were 6% of learners expressing disapproval of some statements related to the ease of the learners' understanding the instructions at the beginning of the online tutorial and of the syllabus. One learner argued that the lesson plan had not been arranged systematically, the tutor guide was not necessary for the learners. Regarding the materials, one learner stated that the material provided was not relevant to the syllabus and the material discussed in the printed teaching material. Furthermore, regarding the materials delivery, only one person did not approve the statement that the presentation of the online material was coherent, systematic, and logical. The illustrations given are also considered unclear and did not help learners understand the concept. Regarding OCWT, 11% stated that the OCWT process had not been carried out optimally.

In the open questions section, 13% of the learners stated that they had participated in writing activities with the collaborative method in the online tutorial, while 87% stated they never participated. Related to the obstacles experienced during the field trial, 30% of the learners stated that they experienced problems, such as the unavailability of a stable internet connection and the difficulties in working online because the time was too short. In the collaborative writing session, the interaction among the learners was not optimum (R9), and one person stated that he was not proficient in ICT (R14), and the network is less supportive (R8).

The questionnaire was ended with some open questions and the following are the comments or opinions from some learners who did not experience problems in the OCWT.

TABLE I. LEARNERS' COMMENTS TOWARDS THE OPEN QUESTIONS

Respondents	Comments
R17	Beside getting input from tutors, I can also get input from friends for my writing improvement.
R24	There are no obstacles in following the Writing III course, but I have not been able to follow the learning process optimally.
R10	No, because during the online tutorial of the PBIS4313/Writing III course through the OCWT, I was able to follow it well supported by a very good response from tutors and other learners.
R12	Because, the guidance is readable.
R28	The things obtained are: 1. Increasing understanding of argumentative essays, 2. Adding experience in socializing with friends.
R13	I like being able to learn to write essays, so I understand the rules of writing essays, especially argumentative essays.

Comments or inputs from the survey results show that the learning model with the CIDCE stages has a positive impact on the development of writing skills for the field trial learners. The positive impact was seen from the increase in learning outcomes, in this case seen from the quality of the learners' writing, high motivation and enthusiasm in participating in learning activities as well as good interaction with other learners.

Regarding the stages of constructivist-based online learning developed and applied to the field trial, some learners showed very positive responses. Those can be seen from their comments and opinions that they got a lot of information and learning experiences with attached collaborative writing techniques. All learners stated that the constructivist-based online tutorial has strongly supported their professions. Some of their opinions showed that this model's pilot activities provide knowledge about the application of collaborative writing techniques, give new experiences in applying learning technology through online activities, enable them apply their knowledge to the students where they teach, and several other reasons, both academic and administrative.

V. DISCUSSION

A constructivist approach as the pedagogical approach has been widely used in supporting the process of online learning. The model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing was developed in order to provide the learners with process-based activities in learning writing skills. The activity of training learners in their writing skills has not been done optimally. As a consequence, the learners do not get the opportunity to revise their writing which means that the writing process cannot be monitored. This is in contrary to Al-Shaer's opinion which emphasizes the argumentative essay writing process starting from the development of concept mapping as a pre-writing strategy to help students generalize the English argumentative essays of students [26]. Therefore, the researchers need to reconsider online learning activities that provide a process experience of argumentative essay writing to learners by utilizing online facilities available on Moodle.

The constructivist approach focuses on the ability of learners to construct their knowledge based on the knowledge

they already have, their learning experiences, and the knowledge they obtain from the learning process. This was reaffirmed by Bargate and Maistry which stated that a constructivist approach, especially social constructivism, has enabled learners to construct their knowledge from the process of interaction with other learners (peer learning) [27]. The instructor provides learning activities by considering the actual needs of learners through a collaborative learning process between learners.

The important things previously discussed were in line with the opinions of Koohang, Riley, and Smith who raised a model based on the theory of the constructivist approach in situations of e-learning [28]. There are three categories of constructivism elements included in this model, namely (1) the design of learning activities, (2) assessment of learning, and (3) the role of instructors. Therefore, the researcher captured the situation of the online tutorial that has been conducted and analyse it based on the three aspects discussed by Koohang et al [28].

In learning argumentative essay writing skills, especially through online learning, this approach is considered appropriate because it accommodates the needs of learners, to increase the learners' ability in constructing ideas in a writing product, to train their creativity in work, and to sharpen their critical thinking skills in expressing their arguments. In addition, peer-reviewed activities or writing processes through the process of interaction with other learners further optimize the process of finalizing their writing. The collaborative learning method is a form of reflection on the constructivist approach, especially social construction. Bargate and Maistry explained that collaboration and social negotiation of a meaning are the main principles of social constructivist that support a small group to interact in sharing knowledge [27]. From this opinion, researchers consider an appropriate approach or technique is to embody the constructivist approach in helping students improve their argumentative essay writing skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

Constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing skills is developed based on relevant theories and supports the optimization of constructivist approach in order to provide learners with some opportunities to construct knowledge based on initial abilities or prior knowledge, experiences, and knowledge gained during the learning process. In addition, optimization of participants' critical thinking skills is also very possible. A collaborative writing technique was developed in this study called online collaborative writing technique (OCWT) as the embodiment of applying the constructivist approach. This online learning was developed in the Moodle application with some supporting products, such as guidebooks for tutors and learners to practice the model, self-assessment guidelines for writing argumentative essays, and marking schemes to assess English argumentative essay writing.

The results of the process of obtaining learners' perceptions towards the model of constructivist-based online learning for English argumentative essay writing show that the learners gave positive responses. Moreover, they were enthusiastic with

the model since the constructivist-based online learning has proved significant in enhancing learners' skills in writing argumentative essay writing. However, there are some aspects of this learning model that need to be improved, such as the material delivery and the process of OCWT, in order to give learners more meaningful learning experiences.

As the implications of this research show, this model can also be applied in other areas or contexts. First, Moodle applications are increasingly sophisticated with the availability of facilities that make it easier for teachers or learners to use it for the online learning process. The use of the Wiki that is integrated with Moodle is very effective for the process of collaborative learning, including writing skills. Second, in distance learning practice, the model of online learning based on constructivist approach is very appropriate to hone learners' learning independence. Learners can collaborate while developing their own skills using the available guides. For example, a self-assessment guide can be used by learners to measure the extent of their writing skills. Finally, the principles of process-based writing, namely review, editing, and revision can be accommodated with an online learning model based on a constructivist approach. Learners gain more meaningful learning experiences through the writing process, starting from the pre-writing stage to the writing of the final draft.

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