

The Use of ILearn in Online Indirect Writing Assessment:

An investigation into students' perceptions

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Abstract—Increasingly globalized world which has enabled technology to be integrated in 21st century learning provides a main support for their use in education. This paper examines university students' perceptions on the use of ILearn; a web-based learning and assessment for indirect writing assessment in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Prior research regarding the use of some web-based learning and assessment especially in the area of language teaching are reviewed. The issues on writing assessment are noted. The study involved 30 participants consisting of university students from seven different majors in a university in West Sumatera, Indonesia. The data of this descriptive study were collected through open-ended questionnaires. The survey revealed most of students' positive perceptions on the use ILearn for indirect writing assessment. The analysis clarified the different merits students perceived from the use of ILearn. The variations provided by this web-based learning and assessment design served well in meeting challenges and were fun for them. Most of the participants agreed that writing assessment done through ILearn was much better than paper-based assessment.

Keywords—*indirect writing; online assessment; students' perceptions; web-based assessment; web-based learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

As technology has given some deniable benefits to both teachers and students, online assessment have been widely chosen to be a medium in assessing students' ability by many teachers. Gilbert, et al. explained that online assessment has enhanced the measurement of learners' outcome and made it possible for them to obtain immediate and direct feedback [1]. Of all important aspects as the results of learning, priority is given to students' achievement [2]. Although implementation varies across learning environments, to give the students a clear idea about their learning achievement record, Bakerson, et al. argued that a lecturer should answer the following questions in conducting online assessments [3]: what needs to be collected, or how should a given lesson be administered, to provide evidence that students have achieved the course learning objectives? How will feedback be communicated to provide information on a student's progress? Moreover, Robles and Brathen outlined three key components of assessment [4]; (1) measurement of the learning objectives, (2) self-assessments

for students to measure their own achievement, and (3) interaction and feedback between and among the instructor and students. There are many things to be taken into account once a teacher uses an online assessment for her students. Further, they said that although educators at all levels have embraced using online technology as a teaching tool, the issue of assessment of student learning in an online course has not been thoroughly addressed.

Talking about language skills, as important as other skills, writing in English as a second (or foreign) language (L2) has a significant place in academia. Some considerations need to be made properly when dealing with the types and the kinds of assessment. Between formative and summative assessment which both inform decisions regarding students' learning, formative embedded assessment is strongly encouraged as it has immediate effects on students' learning [5]. Unlike direct assessment that assesses students' real writing tasks such as paragraphs and essay writing, indirect assessment of writing does not assess the actual pieces of writing but more on grammar, dictions, and mechanics [6]. A common issue happened in most online assessments including writing is that the lack of opportunities for a real time conversation with back-and-forth exchanges and non-verbal cues, as face to face classroom settings [7]. Thus, students' voice and feedback must be well considered by the teacher because essentially, assessment of writing assignments aims at supporting and improving student learning [8].

Various studies reported the use of some online learning and assessments in some language learning contexts. Miyazoe and Anderson examined the effectiveness of three different online writing activities in formal university education [9]: forums, blogs, and wikis in an English as foreign language (EFL)-blended learning course in a university in Tokyo, Japan. The variations provided by the blended course design served well in meeting challenges and were fun for them. Al Jahrami conducted a study to investigate the effect of using online discussions facilitated on a university learning management system's (LMS) discussion board on L2 students' writing accuracy enrolled in an English writing course which was implemented during one academic semester at the University of Bahrain [10]. Sevcikova examined the potential of online,

open-source writing aide, grammar, spelling and writing style improvement tools available either for free or as paid versions [8]. The accessibility and ability to check language mistakes in academic writings such as college-level essays in real time motivates both, teachers and students. The findings of this empirical-based study indicate that despite some bias, computerized feedback facilitates language learning, assists in improving the quality of writing, and increases student confidence and motivation.

As fairly little research has been conducted on how students as the ones who will need to know their learning achievement writing record perceive an online assessment, the objective of this study is to investigate students perception on the use of Ilearn, a web-based learning and assessment in online indirect writing learning and assessment because this approach closely matches the reality for higher education students nowadays, in which web-based learning and assessments are popular methods of day-to-day.

II. METHOD

This research was a descriptive research which described students' perception on the use of ILearn, a web-based learning and assessment in online indirect writing assessment in a university in West Sumatera, Indonesia. According to Airasian and Gay, descriptive research is concerned with the assessment of attitudes, opinions, preferences, demographics, practices, and procedures [11]. 30 non English major students enrolling in an English class (7 males and 23 females) in the first semester agreed to participate in this study (of 35 students altogether). The sample is considered adequate for the chosen purposive sampling method as the possible pool of participants is already restricted [12]. Questionnaire was used to collect data in the research. We develop our own questionnaire in bahasa Indonesia validated by the lecturer teaching in the sample class. Bahasa Indonesia was used in the questionnaire because the participants were non-English major so that that each items will be clear for them. The questionnaire consists of 5 open-ended items so that students are given more freedom to elaborate their ideas. The questionnaires were distributed directly in the form of printed questionnaire to the students in the class. The printed form of the questionnaire was selected since most of the students preferred to answer the printed one rather than the online questionnaire. During dealing with the questions in the questionnaire, the students were given chances to ask questions which doubt them. After given time for about 60 minutes, the students gave the questionnaires back to be analyzed. This research did not use any critical clearance yet. Moreover, pseudo names of the participants are used in later session of this paper.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The open-ended questionnaire contains 5 general items to be elaborated by the participants. The items require them to generate their opinions about how important writing assessment for them, advantages of the use of ILearn in assessing their indirect writing, disadvantageous of the use of ILearn in assessing their indirect writing, more explanations on

how ILearn facilitates their writing assessments. The items also ask them to give suggestions for improved future implementation of ILearn in writing assessment.

Based on the questionnaire, the participants agreed that a good writing assessment which is properly done with them would help them to perform better in the next writing tasks and tests. They also said that they would do their best to have good results because later they would have to write papers and research in English for international publications so they needed to know their own writing ability from the teacher's assessment.

Then, all of the participants said that it is important to get a quick writing assessment since it will be useful to measure the development of their' writing skill. Besides that, through a good writing assessment, students said that could see how well they are in doing a written communication by taking a look into the writing aspects such as form, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, and dictions before they start to write paragraphs by their own. They also said that indirect online writing assessment was better since their scores per each of the item was saved by the system so that it is easy to evaluate their achievement. All of them agreed that their writing ability was better assessed through indirect writing because of their English level which both the teacher and they considered intermediate especially for writing skill. Thus, most of the participants have a positive perception.

It is very important since assessment defines what next to be done in writing tasks and tests. I really want to get a good grade in this writing class. (Marsya)

I need to understand the quality of my own writing, my scores, and my mistakes, and most important is my result. I really intend to publish my papers later in the International journals. So, I need my teacher's help to assess my writing properly and quick starts from the smaller aspects of writing. I feel satisfied because I know it all after having my tests in ILearn (Ardi)

I like this assessment method. It truly assesses my English as intermediate level. The lecturer put grammar, dictions, vocabulary, fill in the blank tests for us in ILearn. She perhaps did not asks us to write yet because we are still not able to write well. Then, the results are just immediately given. (Susan)

What I like the most is that my score can be immediately seen after the test. I don't have to wait for my score. It tells my ability. I can predict my grade. It helps me to evaluate my ability. (Nia)

It is very important for us to get quick results but it is even more useful for the teacher, I guess. She can record the scores per each of us immediately and the system saves it for her. I like this assessment method than a paper-based one. (Vera)

From the questionnaire, it can be seen that there are a number of advantages of using ILearn in online indirect writing assessment according to the participants' opinions. They wrote

that it is a practical assessment in the form of number/score. It is also a useful way to receive later lecturer's individualized feedback as the scores are kept by the system. Then, they said that they preferred online writing assessment than paper-based exams because the assessment result is quicker, more valid, and more reliable.

Practical because it is quick. I don't have to come to the class to know my score form the teacher. ILearn tells me. (Lolly)

The length of time in the exams is shorter than the usual paper-based writing exams and the scores are known quicker. (Tasya)

The assessment in ILearn are very useful for me. The assessment let me measure my own ability through scores that I get after the test. The assessment is quick. (Ricki)

It is challenging to get my score after answering all questions in the allocated time. it tells your real work result. (Doni)

The assessment is valid and reliable. I cannot cheat during my tests because the time is defined. I don't have time for that, only focus on my tests. It tells my real own work. (Rika)

The next item asked the participants to give their ideas about disadvantageous using ILearn for indirect writing assessment. They said that ILearn merely gives them score in the forms of number, not description, and they said that it is not enough for them to evaluate and measure their overall ability. They also noted that they would like to know the feedback from the teacher toward the results of their writing tests. Further, all of the participants said that they did not discuss the writing the have made and also the score they have got after the assessment was done both with their teacher and also with their classmates. So, the students said that they had no idea on their mistakes, and comments on how should they write better in the next tasks or tests.

We never discuss about our writing after the assessment was done. We need it to measure our own writing, to know our level, and to evaluate our writing to be better next time. (Rangga)

I think the assessment doesn't really contribute much for us since it is only in the form of numbers, not description. We don't discuss our writings after the assessment is done. We had little idea on how to do better in the next writing tasks. (Beni)

The fourth item in the questionnaire ask the participants' more explanations on how ILearn facilitates their writing assessments. They mentioned several things.

The time allocation in ILearn is so strict. We really have to focus. It is challenging (Ardi)

After the tests, the score is immediately shown in the form of number. And there is a marked sign that the teacher has already saw the result. I really hope she can further describe what my score means, my mistakes, and the writing aspects that I need to take care for the next time. (Rangga)

I think we all need to have a follow-up discussions about our assessment in ILearn. (Susan)

I personally need more meaningful comments about my assessment. I need to know what to do after my result is known (Rahmi)

The last item demands the participants to give suggestions for improved future implementation of ILearn in writing assessment. Most of them suggested to use other types of writing tests such as paragraph writing and essay writing with the results and assessments described though ILearn. They said that need to get some reflection and information about their writing.

I hope my teacher will use ILearn again in the next level of writing tasks such as paragraph writing. I like online assessment than paper-based assessment. It is an old-fashioned. (Desi)

Personally, I do the tests myself. Once I get the result, it shows my real work ability. I think

The teacher needs to ensure that all students enrolling in this class use ILearn properly. I think the teacher need to know that the students work themselves without cheating. (Marsya)

It is almost impossible for the students to cheat because the time allocation is really strict. We think a discussion about the test we have just done need to be conducted in the class together with the classmates and obviously with the teacher. (Bobi)

B. Discussion

The students said that assessment on their writing was important. Good writing assessment would give them ideas and starting points about the quality of their own writing ability later, their mistakes, and suggestions how to do better in the next writing task and tests. Actually, the students' positive perception toward the writing assessment in ILearn can lead to good achievements of the students. Based on the students' opinion, writing skill was one of the important skills that can help the students in their education and work later on. It is in line with the statement from Hosseini, et et al. that say that writing skills can be said as the main indication of the better academic position and greater educational success [13]. Another important thing that should be taken into account to support this positive perspective from the students was the main objective of the assessment. This objective should be clear for the teachers and also for the students. Based on Klimova, a good perspective and assessment objective from

teachers should be followed by good assessment methods that are varied and challenging [14].

Then, the participants also outlined a number of advantages of using ILearn in online indirect writing assessment that it is quicker, more valid, and more reliable than paper-based assessment. It is quicker because the length of time in the exams is shorter than the usual paper-based writing exams and the scores are known quicker. They said that it is more valid and more reliable because it is almost impossible for the students to cheat in the particular allocated time.

The participants also gave their ideas about disadvantageous using ILearn for indirect writing assessment. They said that ILearn merely gives them score in the forms of number, not description, and they said that it is not enough for them to evaluate and measure their overall ability. They wished to have discussions in the class to get the feedback about their writing from their classmates and also from the teacher. Further, they said that assessment in ILearn is challenging as they have to really focus on the tests in the allocated time. The participants also gave suggestions for improved future implementation of ILearn in writing assessment. Most of them suggested to use other types of writing tests such as paragraph writing and essay writing with the results and assessments described through ILearn. They said that need to get some reflection and information about their writing.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the students have a positive perception toward the quality of the assessment that the teacher gives through ILearn. All of the participants said that it is important to get a quick writing assessment since it will be useful to measure the development of their writing skill. All of them agreed that their writing ability was better assessed through indirect writing because of their English level which both the teacher and they considered intermediate especially for writing skill, they said that they preferred online writing assessment than paper-based exams because the assessment result is quicker, more valid, and more reliable. They said that ILearn merely gives them score in the forms of number, not description, and they said that it is not enough for them to evaluate and measure their overall ability. They also noted that they would like to know the feedback from the teacher toward the results of their writing tests. The last item demands the participants to give suggestions for improved future implementation of ILearn in writing assessment. Further, they said that assessment in ILearn is challenging as they have to really focus on the tests in the allocated time. Most of them suggested to use other types of writing tests such as paragraph writing and essay writing with the results and assessments described through ILearn.

It is suggested to the teachers to consider about all of the criteria of a good assessment specifically when they use online assessment where they cannot give any remarks and

corrections on the students' writing. One important thing to take into account is to make sure that students get benefit from the assessment itself. It is also suggested to the teachers to conduct an assessment which has washback effect for the students so that they have ideas about their writing and they can perform better in the next writing projects. In higher education context, it might be considered important because university students are encouraged to conduct and report their research to be accepted in international journals. In this manner, qualified writing ability is one an important skill to master. For further research, it is good to find out a better method in doing assessment since a good assessment can show the students about the development of the students' skill in learning English.

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