

# ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO WRITE NARRATIVE ESSAY THROUGH DIGITAL WRITING

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## Abstract

*The development of technology gives English teachers a great deal of opportunities to provide their learners with a lot of help in writing in a form of internet-based resources. The media to publish students' writing have also broadened to digital world, or also known as digital writing. The growing popularity of social network services among adolescents can be utilized to promote digital writing as an effective medium to encourage students in writing as well as enhancing their writing skill then to offer them chances to produce writing in real-life situated contexts to cyber societies. Through social network, such as facebook, the students can get immediate comments and feedback from their friends and enjoy writing as much as socializing with their cyber friends. In this research, the researchers investigate the efficacy of digital writing to encourage students to write narrative essay. The students' response and enthusiasm to the approach are also analyzed to support the findings.*

**Key words:** narrative essay, digital writing, students' response

## INTRODUCTION

Writing essay is a kind of skill that requires not only rich ideas but also good organization, not to mention the language structures that should be noted by every writer to produce a good quality writing. This kind of presumption often times haunt English learners during writing. They also feel anxious knowing that their writing will be formally graded by the teacher. All these conditions and lack of information about certain topic that is being assigned can eventually result in writer's block and discouragement in writing essay.

To encourage students to write essay, English teachers need to create certain atmosphere and perception that writing is easy and fun, and that writing is all about telling or communicating what we think, we feel, we believe, and we experience in life. In fact, that is what everybody does every day; they communicate with their acquaintance, friends, and relatives, and exchanging perceptions about life, people, and the like. Writing has the same kind of conception, only that it is in written form. Once a piece of writing is in the readers' hand, it becomes the medium of communication.

Nowadays in digital era, we are connected by technology, which makes communication among people easier. People communicate via SMS, line, Facebook, WhatsApp and all social media without even knowing well the people they communicate. In social media, people do not need proper introduction just to get close to their 'cyber friends' and get involve in discussion. Once they go online and log into social media, they

become part of it and everything they write on it is published to the ‘world’ and everyone has the right to read it and comment on it.

Believe it or not, everything we do on social media is called ‘writing’. None of ideas can be published to digital world without typing, and the closest generation to digital world today are teenagers. Teenagers today, or also known as ‘digital natives’, chat with their friends and acquaintances through their smartphone screen almost every hour (Prensky, 2001). In other words, they are writing every day; they do digital writing without even realizing it. The best part of this phenomenon is that these teenagers never really run out of ideas to tell what is in their mind to their cyber friends.

If we connect what teenagers do on the internet with essay writing, we can say that digital writing is the best medium to encourage students to write. This is the part where teacher can introduce essay writing as something challenging yet fun and make writing gradually part of their life. English teachers can start with narrative writing, which seem to be one of the lightest challenges in writing since it consists of stories that can be related to everybody’s daily or past experiences. Through digital writing, students can do immediate publication and get fast response or feedback from their cyber readers without feeling that they are formally graded by their teachers.

In brief, digital literacy nowadays possesses important part in the success of second language learning. This is not only because digital media especially internet has become secondary—if not the primary—sources of information, but also popular medium of learning and communication.

### **NARRATIVE ESSAY THROUGH DIGITAL WRITING**

Writing is a complex process to a composition of words resulting from the exploration of thoughts and idea, drafted into written text, and subsequently revised to ensure that the writing product can clearly be understood by readers (Nunan, 2003:88, Brown, 2007:391). It indicates that writing refers to the way a writer composes a text as written communication between writers and readers. Some consideration in producing writing proposed by experts are as follows: content (ideas), organization, language use (grammar), mechanics, and word choice or vocabulary (Brown, 2007:39, Peha, 2002, and Heaton, 1988:135).

Teaching essay writing will be most effective when teachers choose student-centered activities because they can spend more time diagnosing and correcting students’ problems and consult with individual students. Technology and media also help to efficiently save the time. It will spend much time if English teachers deny the extent of the instructional role assigned to technology and media during teaching writing (Smaldino, Lowther, and Russell, 2007:13). It is generally accepted that computers now are not merely tools for writing but have changed the processes, products, and contexts for writing. It is also generally accepted that teaching writing in technological environments, both physical and virtual, is quite different from teaching in environments mediated by more traditional technologies. Therefore, the term of ‘digital writing’ refer to a changed writing environment which is produced by the computer and distributed via networks (Grabill and Hicks, 2005).

Digital writing addresses the question of how writing and communication work in digital spaces. Digital writing can be anything. It can be a blog post, an e-mail, a text message, a tweet, a Facebook update, or a conversation on Tumblr. It can be comments on blog posts, responses to news articles, book reviews shared on GoodReads, or fan fiction. It can also look a lot more traditional: poems posted on the web, self-published novels on Amazon and eBooks, or short stories uploaded to an online magazine (<http://www.digitalwritingmonth.com/what-is-digital-writing/>).

Digital writing can have a lot of forms, it can be on regular websites and blog or on social media. Talking about the most popular social media in a decade, Facebook possess the top position among today's generation since it was first launched in February 2004. As the most popular networking sites, Facebook is equipped with rich applications that can be utilized for digital writing, either for the purpose of publication or feedback and response. Facebook also has wide range of users. Each Facebook user can have maximum 5000 friends, who can read and comment on one's writing.

To post a writing on Facebook, there are at least four media that can be used: note, status, picture description, and video description. To give response to a certain writing, there are three things Facebook users can do: like it, comment on it, and share it. English teachers can group their students into a Facebook group to limit the readers and digital writing class participants. Facebook group can function as efficient as personal timeline in publishing and responding to a writing, plus additional application to upload a document. For a more personal discussion, teacher can use Facebook message to communicate to a student such as to evaluate their writing privately. In brief, as long as teachers know how to manipulate Facebook well to support their essay writing class, the students can enjoy digital writing just like they enjoy chatting with friends in daily natural cyber communication.

To encourage students to write narrative essay through digital writing, Facebook constitutes the most effective medium. Without being engaged in writing class, many Facebook users have been posting stories every day through any application available on Facebook. In other words, they have been actually doing narrative writing whether they realize it or not. They have just not been guided systematically through process writing within formal narrative writing class.

Narrative writing relies on a story about a sequence of events or actions about something happened. The story can be a kind of fiction which is not based on facts or it can be nonfiction which tells on real-life experiences. It has many different focuses. The one that might be most familiar with is writing narratives about personal experiences, family, a past trip, or even a personal letter to a friend recounting what has happened since the last letter (Brillinger, P., Jackson, K., Shaw, C., 1995:122).

Narration has three important qualities: (1) it tells a story, (2) it generally describes events in chronological order, and (3) it makes a point. The events are usually told in chronological order. This order is related to time. It means that the story begins with what happened first and then explains the rest of the events in order, finishing with the one that happened last. The words are commonly used when expressing thoughts in chronological order, such as: in the beginning, at first, at the start, next, after that, then, following,

subsequently, afterwards, meanwhile, eventually, at last, in conclusion, to sum up and finally. Afterwards, to illustrate time relationships (how one event relates to another in terms of time) the words used are: at the same time, during, when, while, as, as soon as, before, until, after, afterwards, and the words which usually used in subordinate clauses. Explaining events chronologically makes a story seem logical and easy to understand (Coffey,1987:19).

The components of a narrative consist of character(s), setting, kick-off event, character emotions and plans, sequence of event(s) and a resolution (Bing, 2011). Through narrative writing, students are required to compose their real-life experience and they are evaluated on their ability to express themselves using precise vocabulary and grammatically appropriate sentences in this genre.

### **Narrative Essay Writing Process**

Teaching narrative essay requires teachers to go through writing process that empowers students to write with better results through several steps. Teo (2006) proposes five steps below to follow: (1)prewriting for the narrative essay, (2) drafting a narrative essay, (3) revising a narrative essay, (4) editing a narrative essay, and (5) publishing a narrative essay.

In the *prewriting phase*, the students need to figure out what they are going to write about. Students think about their life experiences in the context of the assignment's theme. After choosing a topic, students should spend time sorting through their memories, and recalling details, including the year, season, setting, people, and objects involved. In making sequence of events, inserting details is preferred. Creating an outline of the story's narrative flow is also very helpful, which is why teachers need to introduce this phase when the students are beginning writers.

In the *drafting phase*, to create the initial draft of a narrative essay, the students need to follow the outline, but they have to be guided to focus on making the story come alive, using the following techniques:

- Personal narrative essays are most naturally written in the first person's view; using "I" will engage readers more in the story.
- In telling the story, students need to be reminded not to skip over the details. Readers have no prior knowledge of the story, and many times a skipped detail will screw their understanding.
- To illustrate the story, vivid descriptions and words are required. In narrative writing, the writer's job is to involve the reader, rather than simply inform.
- While narrative essays are non-fiction, elements of fiction should not be ignored. True stories also benefit from the writer's ability to use plot-building techniques.

In the *revision phase*, students review, modify, and reorganize their work with the goal of making it the best it can be. In revising a narrative essay, students should reread their work with these considerations in mind:

- Does the essay unfold in an easy-to-understand progression of events? Do the transitions make sense or confuse the reader?
- Does the essay involve the reader in the experience? Could there be more detail, or is there extraneous detail that distracts the reader's attention?

- Is the word choice descriptive, or merely informative?
- Has the larger message of the essay been conveyed effectively? Has a connection been made between the experience and its meaning to the writer? Will the reader be able to identify with the conclusion made?

In the *editing phase*, writers proofread and correct errors in grammar and mechanics and edit to improve style and clarity. Having a friend read the essay is a good idea at this point because allows the writer to see their work from a fresh perspective. Therefore, teachers can ask the students to have peer editing or peer comments before submitting their works or publishing them.

In the *publishing phase*, there are things the teacher need to realize. Due to its personal nature, sharing a narrative essay with the rest of the class can be both exciting and a bit scary. Naturally, there is not a writer on earth who is not sensitive about his or her own work. The teacher needs to make the students feel secured that their works will not be laughed at or frowned upon. Furthermore, teachers need to change the students' paradigm that what matters in writing essay is to learn from the experience and use the feedback to make the next essay even better.

### **Responding and Correcting Students' Works**

Evaluating and assessing students' work do not only depend on the kind of task but also on the objective of the study that the teachers want students to achieve. In this case, responding and correcting are the ways to give feedback to students' work. When responding to students' work, it should be focused more on the content and design of their writing rather than the accuracy of their performance. The teacher might respond by asking about the reason why choosing that current topic, how much the teacher enjoyed reading their work, then, the teacher recommend the students to look at the book or website which has more information about the same topic. In other words, responding to students' work is about reacting to their ideas and to how they put them across (Harmer, 2004: 108). Meanwhile, responding is often more appropriate than correcting. Teacher task is not to judge what is extremely right or wrong, but to ask questions, make suggestions, and indicate where improvements might be made to both the content of the writing and the manner in which it is expressed (p. 109).

The teacher is not always the person who can give feedback by responding and correcting. The students can be encouraged to look at each other's work and give advice and make suggestions about how it could be improved. It is a kind of valuable elements in writing activities. Doing peer review give the advantage of encouraging students to work collaboratively and gets round the problem of students reacting too passively to teacher responses. This reduces their self-reliance in the editing process (p. 115).

### **METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH**

The participants of the research were the fifth semester students of English Education Department at IAIN Antasari Banjarmasin who followed Short Essay Writing class. Eighty students participated in this research. This research was a qualitative research, which is used to discover the implementation of EFL narrative writing skills through digital writing and students' respond toward digital writing. Schultz (2006: 369) considers

qualitative methods to be an appropriate approach to capture the new directions to which literacy, technology and learning are moving in our new digital age. Moreover, qualitative research methods have developed to serve the view that phenomenon, particularly when humans are involved, includes complex interactions.

Merriam (1999: 35) characterizes qualitative research as understanding the meaning people have constructed in which the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. She identifies several different types of qualitative research methods, as follow: case study, ethnography, phenomenology, historical, action research, content analysis, grounded theory, generic qualitative method. From all the types, case study is chosen for this research. Case study research represents a much broader view which is empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources evidence (Yin, 2003). Case studies allow for researchers to work within real context, to explore and observe the human aspects of a situation, and focus more on ideas than statistics (Cohen et. al., 2007).

Regarding the research design described, the data in this research were mainly descriptive data gathered from the documents which is taken from facebook notes and the result of interview. In collecting the data, the writer used three data collection techniques, namely: observation, interview, and document analysis. The researchers observe the process of writing activity happened both in class and social media. Then, the researchers adopted semi-structured interview, which is used because it gave freedom to the interviewee while the researchers could also get in-depth information on the practice of narrative writing and the response of students toward Facebook digital writing.

The data analysis in qualitative research involves three things namely data reduction, data presentation/display and conclusion drawing/verification (Sugiyono, 2012: 91). In this phase, the researchers conducted the process of taking and selecting the right data based on needed criteria, then, focusing, simplifying and abstracting the data selected. After that, the data was presented in the narrative form then interpreted.

In the data interpretation, the researchers quoted students' statements to support the conclusion about the research data. The grammar errors in the students' statements were not corrected to maintain the originality of the statement. The students whom the statements quoted were given names with numbers (such as Student 1, Student 2, and so on) without mentioning their real names to keep their privacy. At last, the researchers summarized the result of the study after interpreting the data taken.

## **IMPLEMENTING DIGITAL WRITING IN NARRATIVE WRITING CLASS**

The process below is the writing process that the students were through in this research to produce narrative essay in digital writing form under the teacher's guidance.

### **1. Prewriting**

In the beginning of writing process, the teacher asks to students to write their personal experiences. The teacher chose the theme in which most of students were interested in order to encourage them to be more enthusiastic in writing narrative essay: First Love. Students were asked to think about their memories of their first love. Then, they created an outline which include: time, setting, people who are involved in the story, and plot of the story. The students were also asked to consider three main issues as follows:

the purpose of their writing, the audience they are writing for, and the content structure of the piece. In this case, the purposes of their writing were sharing their personal experience and taking positive value from the story. The audience are digital readers, and the content structure consisted of the fact, ideas, and argument which they have decided to include in their writing.

## 2. Drafting a Narrative Essay

Writing narrative essay based on true stories required the students to pay attention to plot-building techniques involving introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Introduction is known as the beginning of the story where characters and setting are established. The students write the introduction based on four basic types of introductory paragraph; they are: funnel, dramatic introductory, quotation, and turnabout. Funnel begins with the information from general to specific, as written by one of the students (Student 1):

*"Love is a sacred thing that's grown unconditionally in everybody's heart. Its color can be yellow, blue, or grey, for it depends on the story that will be written. Love story can be full of joy or it can be full of tears. No matter how it is going to be, first love is a wonderful thing that can be had. This is how my first love has come and gone."*

Meanwhile, dramatic introductory unrolls as an eye-witness account. Below is a dramatic opening paragraph written by another student (Student 2):

*The story of my first love came when I was a student in kindergarten. At that time I did not know what love is. But, when I saw her for the first time, I felt something else in myself and I could understand it after I was old enough. I understood that it might be love.*

Introductory paragraph in a form of quotation allows the writer quote relevant to help him to introduce the topic as it is done by Student 3:

*"How on earth are you ever going to explain in terms of chemistry and physics so important a biological phenomenon as first love?"*

*-Albert Einstein-*

Then, for turnabout, some students started with the opposite idea of what they were going to write and then moved to the focus as it was written by Student 4:

*"Everybody sure, ever feel first love in their life. But, there are also some people who never feel first love in their life. What about me? Am I still remember the feelings that I felt when I fall in love for the first time?"*

To create the conflict of their story, such as jealous, afraid to express their feeling, lost contact, even Long Distance Relationship (LDR), every student had their own way, such as what was done by Student 5:

*"I must come back to Banjarmasin. I was very sad, but he make me calm and make me believe our relationship will be fine although LDR. When I arrived in Banjarmasin, sometimes we still had a conversation, but unfortunately my phone was broken and I lost his contact."*

Arriving at the end of the story, students do not always come up with happy ending. Some of them close their stories by stating farewell statement about their relationship, as follows:

*"I`ve never met him again since he graduated from the school. I don `t know where he is now, and I also don't try to know where he is now. I just let him as my nice memorize to remember."*

*"I was confuse how can I told him that I love him? It was so painful. But, in other side, I was happy to be with him although just a friend. Let me keep my first love in my silence. In short, whatever what will happen, he will always be my beautiful dream."*

### 3. Revising and Editing Narrative Essay

After writing the complete story, students were asked to read their writings to re-check if their story had acquired good narrative essay criterion such as: the essay was in an easy-to-understand progression of events; the essay involved the reader in the experience the writer told them; there was no extraneous detail that distracted the reader's attention; and the reader can easily identify with the conclusion made. Then, the students exchanged their works with their friends and asked their friend to read their work to make sure that there was no ambiguous or confusing sentences, the paragraph was in unity and coherence, and the information was clearly understood.

### 4. Publishing Narrative Essay

Once students have edited their drafts, made necessary changes in their writings, they were supposed to publish them in their Facebook note column. They tagged their teacher and also their friends to read their story and to give comments as well as to do peer correction.

## STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO DIGITAL WRITING

Today digital writing is more accurately defined by the impact of connectivity. The connectivity afforded by the internet means that messages can be spread far and wide through digital technologies. Students response to digital writing varied; however, mostly agreed that Facebook digital writing is interesting. With the portability of Facebook devices, the students can publish, distribute, collaborate, interact using image, sound, video, and motion easily, as it was mentioned by Student 8:

*"I like facebook as the media of writing, because I can write anytime just like writing status and share my writing easily then get feedback or comment from the reader directly."*

Today's writing classrooms need to see writing more than just a solitary act, with a student sitting at a desk and writing on a piece of paper. We need to extend our focus beyond traditional forms of English writing instruction. Approximately 80 % of the students agree that writing through digital media is more effective than traditional media, as it was stated by Student 9:

*"I prefer writing through digital media than traditional media because my writing can read not only by my self and my teacher but also it can be read by many"*

people. Even, when I published my writing in Facebook I've got more than a hundred like from the facebook user."

Approximately 20% of students enjoyed writing on paper. This feeling was described by Student 10:

"I enjoy writing in a paper than posting it in the Facebook. I'm not confident enough if my writing read by many people and It is easier for me to submit without connecting the network."

It is important to be noted that the difficulty of writing is influenced by the topic given by the teacher. If the topic is about their personal experience, they will feel enjoyment in writing, just like student 11:

"It is interesting when the topics are interesting topics and most of the students like it."

Therefore, it is wise to choose topics that suit their interest and close to their experiences, such as love story.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, digital writing is an effective medium to encourage students to write essay and make writing as part of their daily cyber routine. Starting from narrative essay writing, the writer can choose Facebook as the most convenient social media to publish students works, give feedback and response to their writing products, and evaluate the process. This research has given proof that students are mostly interested in the digital writing and they show enthusiasm during the process especially when the topic given is relevant with their experiences and interests.

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