

Teaching Essay Writing to EFL Students Using WTL (*WriteToLearn*) Digital Tool

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ABSTRACT

Myriad research has demonstrated the use of the digital tool as an approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), but mini research on this topic of interest has been undertaken in the Indonesian higher education context. Particularly, the use of the digital tool as practicing and examining students' writing remains under-explored in this educational setting. With these in mind, this research presents an empirical study that looks into to what extent the deployment of a digital tool mediates multimodal learning tasks in the EFL classroom. The study specifically examines the challenges and benefits of using the digital tool called *WriteToLearn* (WTL) to develop students' writing and reading competences. The study also observes the roles of teachers and students in the entire learning process. A total of 20 polytechnic students volunteered to participate in the study. Individually, they were assigned to perform a series of tasks, including (1) connecting to "write to learn" website, (2) reading articles and instruction in, and (3) writing essays. This study has three major skills: (1) drafting and negotiating strategies for writing essay creation, (2) framing the use of language in composing, and (3) discussing the result essay creation and improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

In facing the era of 4.0, English has become a very important tool to communicate with other people from other countries to do business, education, promote and many things. In this matter, educational goals must match the needs that the world wants. In this case, teachers of English must prepare the graduates to be ready to work in the industry whereas there are so many competitors from other ASEAN countries coming to Indonesia. In order to compete, Indonesian students should perform well at both the national and international levels. At the academic level, Indonesian students must be able to represent themselves in international articles or journals.

The teaching of English at higher educational institutions has many significant changes and development. It means that traditional teaching methods have been improved by new technology recently. The use of the computer has become part of modern people's lives on Earth. Especially in facing digital era 4.0, the development of technology has influenced the learning-teaching Process. One of the influences is that the teachers of EFL (English as Foreign Language) will decrease their burden in preparing the teaching aids by using the computer. Teachers are assisted to teach four areas of competences (reading, writing, listening and speaking) more easily by using a computer.

As Dudley-Evans (1989) says that by mastering all competencies as mentioned above learners of EFL are able to communicate in English well. According to them, one of the language issues is writing skills. This happens because this competency needs some aspects, such as structures, grammar, vocabularies, and writing styles. Furthermore, they add that writing is considered the most difficult skill because EFL learners need some knowledge and practices to be perfect. Besides structures and grammar, it also needs the proper choice of words or diction, cohesion, and coherence. This will take time for learners of EFL to master the writing skill.

In a higher educational institution, like polytechnics, English subject is just allocated only 3 (three) or 4 (four) hours per week. The teacher of English must work very hard to achieve the goal of the subject every semester. This will not be very easy for them. So, they must be tactful to teach 4 (four) competencies every semester. By using multimedia, teachers have been helped. It means that the teaching-learning process is going more smoothly, and teachers will accomplish their duties faster.

Based on those problems mentioned above, there is a digital tool which can help EFL students improve their writing skill. This tool aims to guide students step by step to make essays. Teachers are given guidance on how they can help their students. Teachers may choose their own topics and then they make rubrics which students may follow. This digital tool called **WriteToLearn** (WTL) is from the United States of America. **WriteToLearn** is a web-based tool for building writing skills and reading comprehension for adult students. The language issue is specifically for helping EFL students improve their writing skills. This tool has been used by many high schools and a polytechnic in Jakarta and Bandung.

In Politeknik Negeri Jakarta, writing skill is one of the skills which is sometimes ignored by teachers of EFL because it is considered to waste time and teachers are also lack of time. In fact, this skill represents the ability of EFL learners to combine all skills studied. Therefore, the teaching of this skill must be interesting. So, the students will be encouraged to learn writing more often. The teaching of writing must be matched and appropriate with the students' ability by considering some components, such as the duration of learning this language, vocabularies, language styles (Hoch, 2002).

Besides those things above-mentioned, nowadays, students are encouraged to learn independently. They should learn something by themselves. Because studying time at the campus is not enough to learn. They need additional time to enrich their knowledge. To overcome this problem, they must learn by themselves and they should have some strategies. Mostly EFL students are not aware of the strategies that may guide them towards adequate proficiency in

writing skills (Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017). They are afraid to make mistakes. Consequently, they become doubtful. This affects their performance in writing work.

This study appeared when teachers wanted to synergize between technology and lessons that students get in the classroom. According to Turner (2000), the use of the internet may make the lessons easy to understand. It can make the learning process focus on students. This can be called the part of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach. Therefore, the use of a digital tool can be called as one of the modern-teaching-methods that may make students feel fun in learning English, especially writing. By combining some aspects, a digital tool help student to learn writing more effectively (Nasir, et al, 2014). This digital tool is a kind of software that is accessible through the internet. This will overcome students' problems in writing. In this case, teachers of English just act as the facilitators. But they are also acting as a role model (Miarso, 2004, p. 8). For a specific experiment, like the WTL tool, there is no such experiment conducted in higher education level. So it can be said that this experiment is a new one.

The study has 4 (four) objectives to mention. Firstly, students are trained to make an essay or report better. Secondly, this tool will train students to implement technical effective writing in which they are given chances to make revision. Thirdly, this tool trains both teachers and students to practice their IT knowledge as they practice every day. Last but not least, students are more skillful to write project papers as the basic requirements to graduate.

Some researches have been conducted regarding these topics. They are coming from Zaini and Mazdayasna (2014), Pennington (2004) and Hirvela (2005). They agree that the use of tools gives positive impacts on their work of writing. The college writing becomes more computer-based and this tool becomes more popular in the writing process. This also helps teachers minimize their burdens in teaching.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study used the classroom-action method. It can also be called as mini research because the participants of this research were chosen only 20 students who were in the fifth semester (1 class). The reason to use mini-research because the number of students was limited. As information, in the Electrical Engineering Department, English subject is given only 3 (three) semesters: semester 4, 5 and 6.

This study was conducted in the study program of Industrial Electronics in the Electrical Engineering Department. The specific reason for choosing the participants because they have more or less equal ability in their English test competency (average TOEIC test is 350-450). Another reason is that the researcher is teaching in this department. So, it is easier for me to conduct the research.

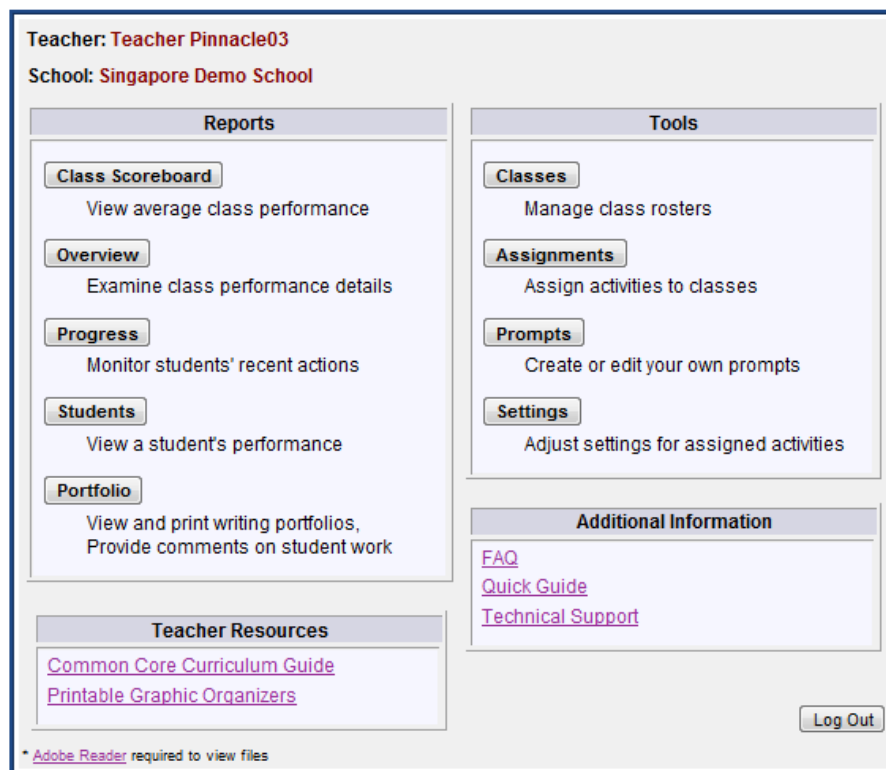
This research was conducted in 3 (three) months with the procedures of (1) planning, (2) implementation of the study, and (3) Report. The planning started by listing all the needs of students in learning writing skills. Then the researcher was choosing the topics and let students choose one of them. During this stage, the lecturer was teaching them how to write essays well and effectively. After that, the following month the researcher was asking students to open the

tool by using their own password. This password was taken from the provider, Pearson Company which owns this system. In doing this, the teacher was conducting this research during the class hour that was a 3-learning-hour.

In practice, students made the essay after the teacher had finished explaining the instruction, the prompts, and the procedures. Students were asked to make essay writing, titled: The Effectiveness of Electronic. They made the writing in a few hours and they were able to revise the writing if they make mistakes. The teacher will see the revision easily how many times the students make the revision. After the teacher saw all the revisions, the teacher would make comments and score of the essay. Students would easily see it by opening again their writing.

As for information, the digital tool of WTL is a system created by some researchers from the University of Colorado and New Mexico State University. It has been used for more than 10 (ten) years. The system offers spell- and grammar- correctors which students can easily correct their works.

The picture below is the menu that the Pearson system is made. Teachers just use this menu by following instructions on it. It is friendly used and helps both teachers and students enjoy working with essays. Teachers are easy to change the instructions that they want the students to do. Teachers make the rubrics, durations of writing time, kinds of assignments and even they can put the scores that students get. This kind of system helps teachers simplify their duties, especially in teaching writing skills.



Picture 1: Teacher Tools-Menu
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

In the menu above, teachers just write their names, what kind of classes, writing topics, rubrics, what kinds of assignments on the columns provided then click the next button menu. After teachers have written all that is instructed in the columns, students will see all instructions in own their laptops. Then, students may start their works. By doing this, students are happy to do their works.

Picture 2: Class Editor
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

After teachers finish with step 1 (picture 1), they continue with step 2 or Picture 2, in this process, they group their students by creating a class. Then, teachers will ask students to open their laptops. By doing this, teachers give students a copy of WTL. The teachers can control each student through their own laptops.

The next step is that teachers begin to assign every student to make their choice of topics (please see picture 3). Before doing this, teachers explain what they should do. Students are free to choose their own topics based on their preferences. In this step, students are busy talking to their friends about the reasons why they like the topic or not. Sometimes they ask teachers what the topics are about. Teachers will make certain corridors of what they should do in order to finalize their writing. Another type of way of giving topics chosen is that teachers may start by telling a certain type of writing skills. For example, students are asked to make persuasive writing. Teachers should explain what persuasive writing is. Furthermore, teachers explain the steps as well. This situation makes the class dynamic and lively. In the end, students end up with their final decision happily and begin to write.

Assign Class Activities

WriteToLearn

Assign Class Activities

Teacher Tools Menu | Classes | Assignments | Prompts | Settings | Log Out

Class: Class_Pinnacle03

1118 activities match your selections. To assign an activity, click the appropriate checkbox in the "Assigned" column and click "Save Assignments".

Type: All | Grade: All | Subject: All

Click Find after making selections.

Save Assignments

Assigned	Activity Name	Subject: Topic	Type	Grade Level	Length (in words)	Description
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Community Service	Language Arts, Social Studies	Essay: Persuasive	12	--	Scoring: Overall + Six Traits
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Storm Danger	Science: Reading Street	Summary	5	972	RMM: 5.3, Common Core: 2-3 Lexile: 0760L Includes vocabulary exercises Includes summary hints
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Good Student" Award	Language Arts	Essay: Expository	6	--	Scoring: Overall Includes essay writing tips
<input type="checkbox"/>	"It is more difficult to be a good parent nowadays." Discuss.	User Authored	Essay: Persuasive	12	--	Created by Diana Hon 01
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Oh Rats!" The Story of Rats and People	Language Arts	Summary: ELL	11-12	1588	Keystone E, Page 354, By: Albert Marrin, ELL

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Picture 3: Assign Class Activities
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

If you see picture 3 above, some topics are given. Students sometimes are curious about each topic. Let them busy with themselves. Teachers may give freedom to students to choose their preferences. They like to explore. This is the most exciting step that students may go through.

The next step is that teachers continue with creating prompt (see picture 4). In this step, teachers give examples where students may follow it. The teachers may let students read and learn from what is given by the teachers.

Picture 5 is the example that teachers do in making prompts. Teachers may choose any topics and then write a sample essay. The essay may be supported by data that are taken from the website. What students must know is that they strictly prohibited copy and paste any essay from the web. Students are taught that plagiarism must be avoided. It is a sin. It is related to moral ethics. Students then will understand it.

Create your own prompt

The screenshot shows the 'Prompt Creation Tool' interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: Teacher Tools Menu, Classes, Assignments, Prompts, Settings, and Log Out. Below this, a 'Prompt: - New prompt -' dropdown is visible. The main form is titled 'Provide your prompt information in the fields below and click "Create Prompt". Prompt Writing Guidelines'. It is divided into several sections: 'What the student will see' with a 'Prompt' text area; 'External Resource' with 'URL', 'Label', and 'Title' fields; 'Help with assessment' with 'Topic Words' and 'Sample Essay' text areas; and 'About the prompt' with 'Grade Level' and 'Essay Type' dropdown menus. A 'Create Prompt' button is at the bottom right.

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Picture 4: Create your own prompt
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

This screenshot shows the same 'Prompt Creation Tool' interface but with an example prompt filled in. The 'Prompt' field contains: 'The world is getting closer but family is getting further apart in the ever-changing world we are living in now. "It is more difficult to be a good parent nowadays." Discuss.' The 'URL' field has 'http://www.parentingscience.com/'. The 'Label' field has 'Parenting Research'. The 'Title' field has 'It is more difficult to be a good parent nowadays." Discuss.' The 'Topic Words' field has 'advancement in technology, maturity, busy lifestyle, small family, peer pressure.' The 'Sample Essay' field contains a paragraph about parenting. The 'Grade Level' dropdown is set to '12' and the 'Essay Type' dropdown is set to 'Persuasive'. The 'Assigned To' field shows '1 class' with a 'Modify Class Assignments' button.

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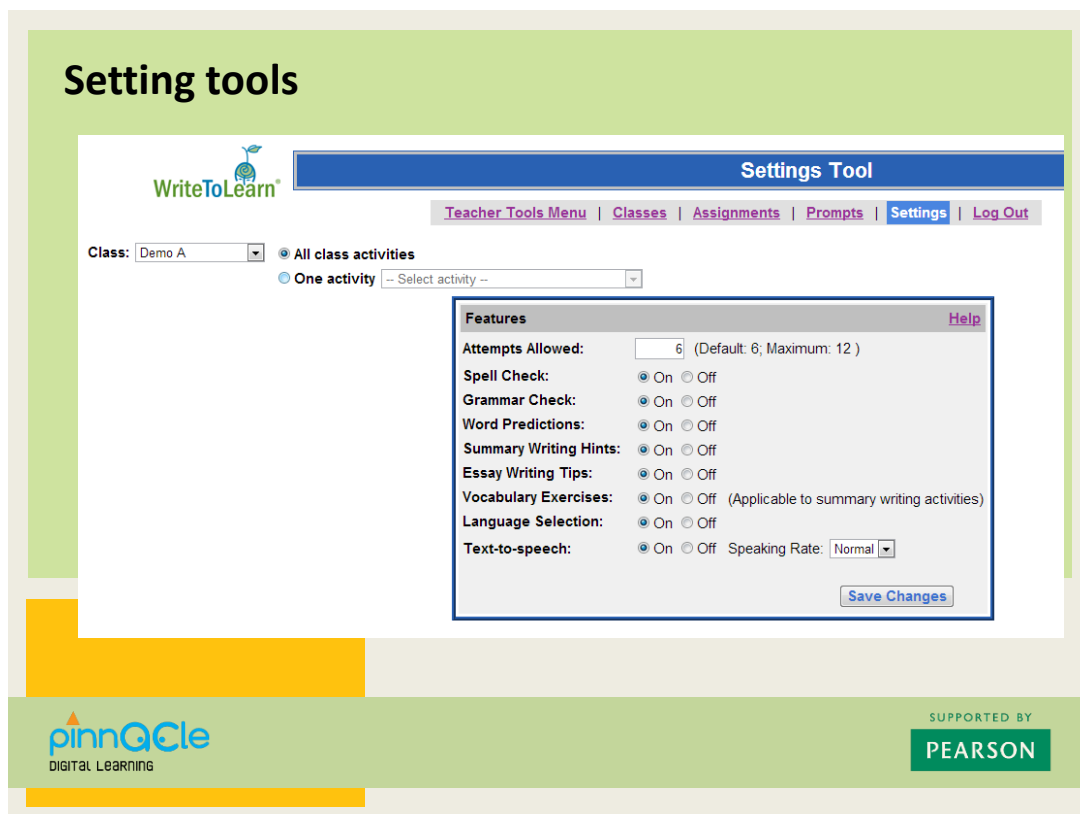
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Picture 5: Example of Prompt
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

The good thing about this tool is that it provides important features for spelling checks, grammar

check, word predictions, essay writing tips, summary writing hints, vocabulary exercises, language selections, and text-to-speech (see picture 6). Students may check their own errors and they can correct them immediately. Students are given the opportunity to make mistakes for 12 times maximum. At the end of the activity, students may check their writing before submitting it to the teachers.

This activity indeed needs two (2) important aspects. The first one is that teachers must provide more time in essay class. It may be more than 2 times regular times, but the teachers may continue it for the next meeting. As long as the goals are achieved, the time does not matter. The second aspect is the patience of the teachers. The teachers may face various problems of students' competencies in writing. This can be minimized by explaining before the students begin to write.



Picture 6: Setting Tools
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before students did the writing on their laptop, the teacher gave a brief explanation about what they should do in their essay. Fry and Villagomez (2012) confirm that it is important to give students a brief explanation before writing. This will make students clearer about what they should do. The teacher can monitor students' activity through their laptop or computer.

As it is already mentioned in the previous paragraph that students are given the opportunity to revise their essays before they submit the essay. This opportunity may increase their self-confidence in stating their arguments through their writing.

According to WTL tool, the score will be based on the following table:

Goal	Below	Target	Above
Overall score	<4	4	>4
Word count	<150	150-200	>200
Repetition	>10	6-10	<6
Overall Performance	Poor, Fair	Good	Excellent

Table 1: Scoring Rubric
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

From the above table, we can see that the WTL tool evaluates based on their repeated words used, amount of words and target score. Grammar and spelling checking is not included in the evaluation table. Repeated and counted words are included in the evaluation process because the teacher can see how many vocabularies that students have. The more vocabulary students master, the better the writing students can make.

Based on the score table, students' writing is evaluated and scored. From 20 students, for the overall score, it finds that there are 7 students who got 4.5; 8 students got 4 and 5 students got 3. So when it is calculated, it presents in the table below:

Word Count	Repeated Content	Overall Performance	Overall score
200-550	2.38	Good	3.9

Table 1: Sample Evaluation
WriteToLearn Digital Tool [source]

Based on the result presented in table 2, it can be said that students of PNJ have got a good result of writing on average. They need to be guided when writing. The WTL digital tool has helped them increase their confidence in writing on their own. This WTL digital tool-assisted students to write a better way by following their steps. They may also check their mistakes without doubting. In classroom instructions, students might be found shy or doubtful when they started writing. They were reluctant to ask the teacher although teachers always ask them not to hesitate to ask the teachers, they did not do it. Thus, it is the typical way of Indonesian students.

In contrast, it did not happen in the United States of America where this digital tool was founded and used. Basically, students of America have a different type. They are so open and highly confident (WriteToLearn™ | A Web-based Personalized Tool to Build Writing Skills, n.d.). By using this WTL digital tool, their confidence increases and the feedback from teachers is important as well. According to the research conducted, in only four weeks of practice, the students improved their content summary scores.

Like other classes in the university, the class of polytechnics contains mixed-ability students. Mostly in polytechnics, the students have a TOEFL score of around 300-450. One of the typical students of polytechnics is quiet but attentive and obedient. It is not easy to make them talk. They will not talk unless they are asked. In writing cases, therefore the teacher should give guidance of writing beforehand. For this WTL practice, the teacher already gave the rubrics about what they

should do. The teacher also gave the corridor of good writing before starting writing. Students who get scores 4.5 and 4 actually belong to students whose English is excellent or good at average. Their good English performances are shown daily when they interact with friends and teachers. Usually, they involve actively in discussion and they are brave enough to make mistakes. They are usually diligent to read. The rest who got 3 does not mean that they are not good enough to write. They just need more practice to find ideas and make good grammar.

CONCLUSION

This study proves that the digital tool of **WriteToLearn (WTL)** is able to minimize the students' problems in writing in English. This web-based program evaluates students' understanding of the text, not just grammar and spelling because this tool provides the menu of spelling and grammar checker. It also facilitates teachers the ability to deliver on-demand, personalized feedback. When incorporated into the classroom, the WTL tool is proven to help students become better writers.

After some experiments done in one class of Electronics students by using the WTL tool, the results of their essay show significance. Students have made small mistakes by using WTL because they can recheck their writings again and again by using the facility given on the menu. The students are happy to do their jobs and feel fun. This is what the WTL tool is meant and it is made to ease both teachers and students to do their writing tasks.

Every system has two sides of a coin, advantages, and disadvantages. in the previous descriptions, there are many advantages mentioned of using this system. On the other hands, the WTL tool is just a system which comes from the United State of America. If we want to use this tool, we must subscribe to this kind of paid system. The system cannot be downloaded for free. The price of this tool is quite expensive. If it is already bought and paid, this system will be in use for a year and can be extended after that.

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