

UTILIZING ESSAY PUNCH IN TEACHING ESSAY WRITING: EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract: The rapid development of technology has brought significant contributions to language teaching. Hence, several up to date writing devices have been used by lecturers to modify teaching and learning activities. This study aims to investigate EFL university students' perception of the use of Essay Punch in teaching essay writing. Essay punch is an online interactive writing tool that provides students guidance in the process of writing step by step in writing an essay. The data were collected through questionnaires administered to the second year English department students of Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin University, Indonesia. The questionnaire was built up into two sections: (1) ten close-ended items and (2) two open-ended items. The ten close-ended items were designed to obtain students' perceptions on the use of Essay Punch as a writing tool from three different aspects. The aspects are the students' perception about the device of Essay Punch, the students' perception about the utility of Essay Punch, and the students' perception about the affective aspect of Essay Punch in essay writing. Meanwhile, two open-ended questions were put to allow students to show their opinion on the Essay Punch. The findings revealed that EFL university students show a positive view of their experience in using Essay Punch in the writing classroom. Thus, it could be concluded that Essay Punch can become one of the potential tools in teaching essay writing.

Keywords: *Students' perception, Essay Punch, Essay writing*

Introduction

Technology becomes an inseparable platform in every area in today's world. In education, for example, technology is an unavoidable device for teaching and learning languages in educational institutions and colleges (Lint, 2017). With its rapid advancement, teachers get boundless access to promote students' language learning as well as to develop students' language abilities (Alnaibi, 2018). In addition Guzman and Moreeno (2019) said, teachers also innovatively shape their strategies and approaches in language teaching and learning from its various applications. Thus, it is necessary to integrate technology as a supporting tool in language teaching and learning.

Several studies have shown the emergence of technology in language teaching, especially in teaching writing. For instance, Suwantarathip & Wichadee (2014), researched the effects of using Google Docs as a collaborative writing activity toward Thai University students' writing abilities. The findings revealed that Google Docs can be used productively to improve the students' writing skills, and the progress can be also identified at the individual level. Similarly, Herrera Ramírez (2013) investigates the use of *Storybird* in collaborative writing at a language institute in Bogotá, Colombia. The results showed that the use of *Storybird* in collaborative writing led students to write narrative texts and increased their positive behavior towards story production. Furthermore, Al-Naibi, Al-Jabri, & Al-Kalbani (2018) accomplished research in assessing the feasibility of incorporating the social networking website 'Edmodo' into the students' writing performance. The research was done on 25 students studying English in the Foundation Program at Arab Open University (Oman Branch). The analysis of students' writing showed a statistically significant improvement and resulted that the students had favorable experiences of using Edmodo in language learning. From those researches above, it showed

that integrating technology platforms into teaching writing plays a crucial role in enhancing students' writing skills.

In Indonesia, writing is presumed as one of the most challenging skills for language learners (Widodo, 2008). One of the challenges is derived from the influence of students' mother tongue on their writing production (Megajab, 2018). They usually write in their first language, and as a result, most of them have problems with grammar, such as spelling, preposition, verbs, tenses, singular, plural, and articles (Arianti, 2016). In a similar vein, Megawati & Anugerahwati (2012) emerge other factors affecting students' writing skills; they are the students' tediousness of learning English, students' insufficient lexical and grammatical competences in English, the teachers' monotonous teaching strategies, and the absence of applying instructional media.

Essay writing, for example, is one challenge mostly faced by EFL university students. Some studies revealed that EFL university students struggle to write a well-developed essay. Vocabulary, punctuation, idea and paragraph development, organization, content, grammatical and spelling problems dominated as main problems for EFL students in essay writing (Persada, 2016), (Rasydah, 2014), (Younes, 2015). Also, Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) reported that Indonesian EFL university students had complexity using grammar, cohesion, coherence, paragraph organization, dictionary, and spelling errors in essay writing. In line with this, Sadik (2009) discovered the other difficulties in essay writing such as poor knowledge of writing techniques, grammatical form, and low interest in writing. In short, further findings showed that EFL university students still have weaknesses in essay writing performance.

Referring to the students' challenges above, it is necessary to find an appropriate way to meet the challenges and to overcome the students' difficulties in essay writing. Essay punch can be an alternative way to help lecturers in teaching essay writing. It is an online interactive writing tutorial site that can be accessed at <http://www.essaypunch.com/>. By accessing this site online, the students are guided in the process of writing step by step in making an essay, including pre-writing, outlining, organizing, revising, rewriting, and publishing. As a writing prompt, Essay Punch helps students develop their essays in three different ways: through the description, information, and persuasion. The program offers 9 writing themes and 1.080 aid prompts to lead students through each step of the writing process (Merit, 2020). This research used a demo-version which can be freely accessed from essay punch website.

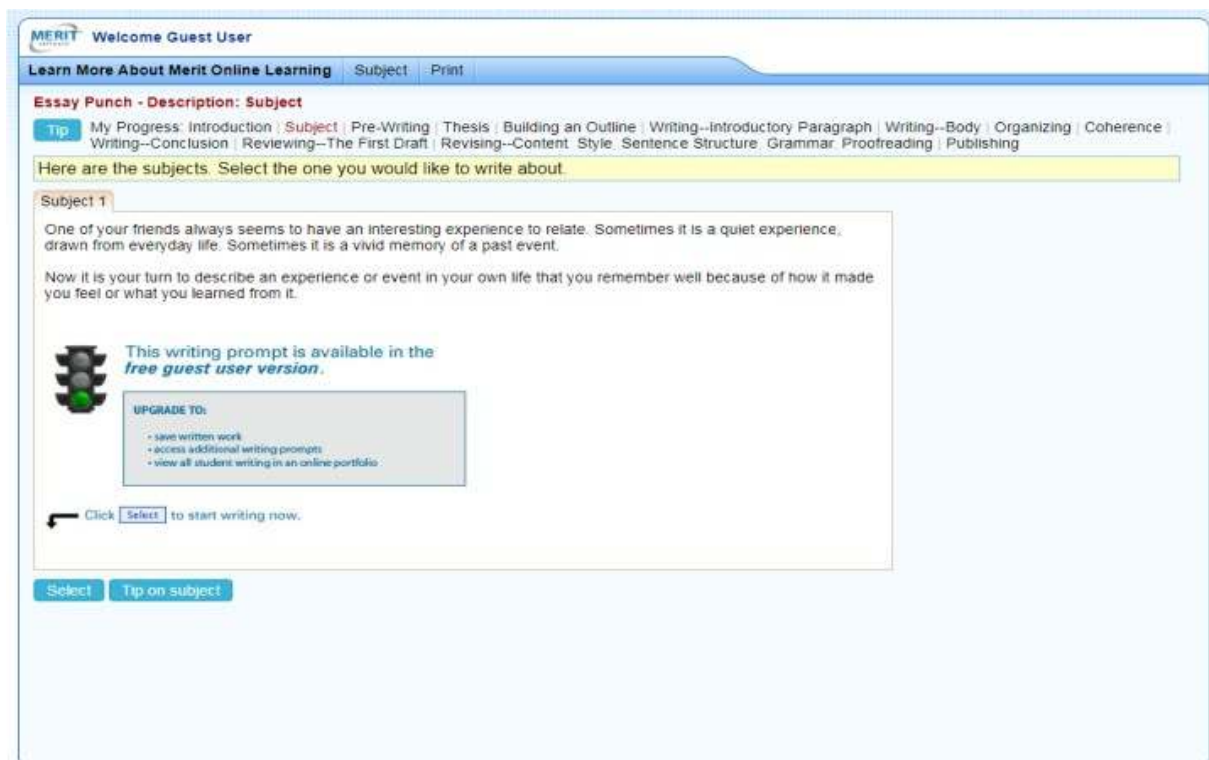


Figure 1. An essay punch display demonstrating how the program directs the user

From the program, it guides students step by step to create an essay. The first step is the introduction. The students can select a particular category of essay that includes arguments,

viewpoints, or descriptions to support the subject. After that, the students are given a variety of subjects to be selected as the topic of their essay. After choosing a subject, the pre-writing process begins. Through this section, the students do brainstorming by using words or phrases about the topic they have selected. Besides, the program presents a series of quick questions and aid messages to stimulate students' thinking. After completing this step, the students begin to formulate a thesis statement that describes what the essay is about. The program also includes an example of a thesis statement, plus an insufficient statement for students to complete as an exercise. Then, students construct a thesis argument of their own.

After coming up with the thesis statement, students continue to build an outline. The students should look at their list of written ideas and group them under one heading as subtopics. The program lets students write possible headings and offers a range of choices that encourage students to make corrections. The process continues in making the introductory paragraph. From the program, the students are given a sample sentence that could match the opening sentence. Students must write at least one additional sentence of their own for their introductory paragraph. After seeing their work, students are advised to add transitional terms to make sentences flow seamlessly from one thought to another. Furthermore, the students begin to make a body of the essay. Here, the students use the outline as the guidance for writing the body paragraphs of the essay. The program directs students, step by step, to extend each heading and its subtopics into sentences that shape paragraphs. It might consist of several paragraphs. After developing the body of their essay, students arrange all the paragraphs they have composed for the body of the essay. They have an opportunity to review and make some improvements so that the essay is more logically and effectively structured. The program also gives examples of linking words or phrases that might be useful for the coherence of the essay. For the concluding paragraph, again, the program guides the students to write a concluding paragraph that reiterates their introductory paragraph and summarizes what their essay is about.

After finishing the essay, it continues to review the first draft. The program enables students to review their work, paragraph by paragraph, using the essay notepad buttons: add, remove, move, or edit. Then, the students revise their work. The program asks the students to check their work and guides them in the use of the "Add", "Change Text", "Remove", or "Move Buttons." The program also offers an options menu that contains four subsections: style, sentence structure, grammar, and proofreading. Each subsection includes lessons intended to help students develop their writing. Finally, students can publish their essays either by saving it, printing it, or transferring it to a word processor.

Therefore, incorporating essay punch can be used by the lecturer as a new way to increase students' learning engagement and students' writing skills. This paper, explores the EFL students' perceptions about the use of essay punch in teaching essay writing. The researcher formulated the following research question:

- 1) What are students' perceptions of the use of essay punch in the essay writing?
- 2) From the students' point of view, in what way Essay Punch can enhance their writing skills?

Research Methodology

This study employed descriptive research to measure the EFL university students' perception of using Essay Punch in teaching essay writing. The participants consisted of 13 second-year English department students of Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin University enrolled in the essay writing class. To obtain the data of the study, the questionnaire was delivered to the participants to know their perception about Essay Punch in teaching essay writing. Before delivering the questionnaire, the participants were given practice and experience in using Essay Punch for three meetings. During that time, they were served by the programs to be guided in making an essay. After the trial, they were required to answer the questions provided in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was built up into two sections: (1) ten close-ended items and (2) two open-ended items. The ten close-ended items were designed to obtain students' perceptions on the use of Essay Punch as a writing tool from three different aspects. Questions 1 to 3 concentrated on students' perception of the Essay Punch device, while questions 4 to 7 were intended to provide the answer on the utility of Essay Punch. Finally, questions 8 to 10 were intended to pay more attention to the

affective aspects of Essay punch. The close-ended items were measured by a five-point scale; strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Meanwhile, Two open-ended questions were put to allow students to show their opinion on the Essay Punch.

Findings and Discussion

The results and discussions are presented into three subsections which explain the students' perception of using Essay Punch in teaching essay writing. The aspects are the students' perception about the device of Essay Punch, the students' perception about the utility of Essay Punch, and the students' perception about the affective aspect of Essay Punch in essay writing.

Table 1: Students' response to the device of Essay Punch

No	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
		f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)
1.	Essay Punch is easy to access and operate	10 (76.9%)	2 (15.4%)	1 (7.7%)	0	0
2.	Essay Punch procedure is easy to follow	9 (69.2%)	3 (23.1%)	1 (7.7%)	0	0
3.	I can easily doing my essay projects through Essay Punch	9 (69.2%)	3 (23.1%)	1 (7.7%)	0	0

Table 1 shows the students' responses toward the device of essay punch. It consists of three statements. For the first statement, All students (SA= 76.9%, A= 15.4%) agreed that it is easy to access and operate Essay Punch. Furthermore, the majority of students strongly agreed (69.2%) that procedure in the programs is easy to be followed. For that reason, 61.5% of students strongly agreed that Essay Punch helps them easily in their essay project.

In addition, the students also showed a positive perception of the utility of Essay Punch for their essay writing. The statements were included in item number 4, 5, 6, and 7. From the analysis, all students (61.5%) agreed that essay punch helps guide them to outline their essay. Similarly, a high percentage of the students (69.2%) also agreed that the spelling checker in the program gives benefits to correct their writing mistakes and error. In line with this, most of the students (92.3%) also agreed that essay punch improves their writing skills by guiding them step by step to expand their ideas into a complete essay and helps them to correct spelling mistakes and error in their essay.

Table 2: Students' response to the utility of Essay Punch

No	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
		f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)
	Essay Punch helps me to outline my ideas and write it systematically	8 (61.5%)	3 (23.1%)	2 (15.4%)	0	0
5.	The Essay Punch guides me step by step to expand my ideas into a complete essay	9 (69.2%)	2 (15.4%)	2 (15.4%)	0	0
6.	The Essay Punch allows me to improve my writing by providing subsection for checking style, sentence structure, grammar and proofreading	12 (92.3%)	1 (7.7%)	0	0	0
7.	The spelling checker in the Essay Punch helps me to correct spelling mistakes and error in my essay	12 (92.3%)	1 (7.7%)	0	0	0

Furthermore, an item 8 to 10 aims to probe students' feelings on the use of Essay Punch in their writing activity. A relatively high percentage of the students (84.6%) agreed that they enjoy accomplishing writing essays through Essay Punch. Most of them also considered that the activities in Essay punch were interesting and fun which is reflected in a high percentage of 76.9%. Finally, the majority of the students' (76.9%) expressed that they like to use essay punch as writing prompts in developing an essay.

Table 3: Respondents' response about the utility of Essay Punch

No	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
		f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)	f(%)
8.	I enjoy writing an essay through essay punch	11 (84.6%)	2 (15.4%)	0	0	0
9.	The activities in essay punch are interesting and fun	10 (76.9%)	3 (23.1%)	0	0	0
10.	I like to use Essay Punch as my writing prompts to develop an essay	10 (76.9%)	3 (23.1%)	0	0	0

Item 11 was an open-ended question whereby it asked for the respondents' opinion concerning the ways Essay Punch helps them in the Essay writing process. The majority of students (10 students) surely stated Essay Punch is very helpful in assisting them step-by- step to develop the essay. Such guidance was necessary for them, as many of them still could not be able to follow the steps of writing an essay. Besides, from the clear instructions given, they pretty much understand the structure of an essay and how to develop its part meaningfully. Some examples selected from the respondent views may be seen below:

The website was well-designed so that I could practice my writing activity in conducting essay easily. Also, I can experience the practice of writing an essay by following the steps in the program so that I do not get stuck in developing my ideas.

By following the instructions from the program, it could help me improve my writing, vocabulary, and grammar. I think I can produce an essay easily by the prompts given in the program.

In my mind, the program was well designed to give me guidance in the essay writing process. Through the guidance, I know how to write my thesis statement correctly develop my body and concluding paragraph, and I also get practice to improve my grammar directly. The most amazing thing that I can get practice in writing an essay wherever and whenever I want.

The platform is not difficult to use. I can get practice in class or at home by having an internet connection. It helps me a lot in brainstorm my ideas and arranges them into the correct ones. From this platform, I also get practice to write the correct thesis statement and how to develop it into my body essay. Then, I got knowledge about using appropriate transition words to run my essay flow smoothly.

In opposite, 2 students showed different views on how Essay punch benefits for their essay writing. Both of them agreed that the essay punch guides them to write, but the platform was not maximizing assist them in expressing their ideas clearly. Because the form of instruction given was only a short question and the answer must be answered with a good sentence according to correct English grammar. The problem is that they have very clear ideas in their minds, but it is difficult to write them in correct English due to their limited ability in English. So they still have difficulty developing their writing ideas and this program did not get much help. The students' responses can be seen below:

Essay punch is good at giving training and guidance in essay making. But for me, it did not help me in structuring my ideas well in English. The instructions presented in the program were only questions that must be answered in English while writing ideas into proper English is still a bit difficult.

Besides its usefulness in providing steps to write an essay, I still need more practice to use it, especially in transferring my ideas into English.

Item 12 was the last open-ended question which aimed to obtain the students' opinion on the way Essay Punch helps them to review and revise the essay. All of the students agreed that Essay punch practically served them an experience to do revision for their essay. They could review their essay, do correction, and make revision by choosing option 'style', 'sentence structure', 'grammar', and 'proofreading' in the program. The students' response on the effectiveness of using Essay Punch for

the revision of their essay can be described below.

By using essay punch, I can review my essays and correct them through the options in the program. This activity provides a new experience for me because usually lecturers or colleagues provide corrections to my writing, but now I can do self-correction independently.

The revision prompt in this feature is very useful in improving the quality of my writing. I became aware of how to do an essay review well and was able to correct my mistakes right away.

The features in essay punch like sentence structure, grammar, etc really help me in editing my writing. Through these features I learned how to develop essays well, linking paragraph by paragraph coherently so that it helps to improve the quality of my writing.

From the result of the data above, it indicates that the students had positive perceptions about the benefits of Essay Punch use in learning writing. Specifically, they perceived that learning writing using online platform is appropriate and feasible to promote their writing performance in developing a good essay. There are several reasons that make them had a positive view on the Essay Punch use. First, Essay Punch is an easy device which can be accessed easily by the students. The features given in the program are well operated and the procedures given in the writing process are clearly understood by the students. As a result, they could follow the writing practice immediately in the website.

Second, Essay Punch enables students to write a short well structured essay by guiding through several steps of writing. From the steps, the students are assisted to do writing process stating from brainstorming the ideas, pre writing, writing thesis statement and introductory paragraph, writing body paragraph, and writing concluding paragraph. These features of essay punch assist them in generating and organizing more ideas. After that, the program also provides a space for review and revises the essay. The students are easily to use options for checking style, sentence structure, grammar and proofreading in the program. They could also have spelling checker to correct their spelling mistake and error in the essay. As a result, the goal to produce quality paragraph writing can be achieved by having a lot of practice from essay punch.

Third, the activities done in the essay punch are fun and interesting. It drives and motivates the students to work independently owing to the extensive instructions. This enables them to write on their own with little assistance from the lecturer.

Conclusion

Referring to the finding and discussion, it gives an evidence that Essay Punch is a potential tool which can be utilized by lectures in teaching essay writing. The students showed positive experience while using Essay Punch in the writing class. The program is easily accessible and the procedure is easy to follow. Meanwhile, the program is also beneficial in guiding students to construct a good essay by assisting students step by step starting from brainstorming, outlining, making thesis statement, making introductory paragraph, making body of paragraph, making concluding paragraph, reviewing the first draft, revising and publishing the essay. Finally, the students also enjoy doing the writing task through the program. Therefore, it can be emphasized that utilizing Essay Punch in teaching essay writing can be an effective way to enhance students' essay writing performance.

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