Examining How Indonesian EFL Teachers Engage with Online Formative Assessment During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This research article aimed at exploring the engagement of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers with online formative assessment (FA hereafter) in the context of Indonesian EFL writing classrooms. In particular, this study examined how the participated teachers engaged with online FA during covid-19 pandemic, and what factors have affected their engagement with online FA. Three EFL writing teachers from three different Indonesian universities participated in this study. The instruments used to collect data involved semi-structure interviews, teachers' recorded lessons, and teachers' instructional materials in the form of PowerPoint files. The findings of this study revealed 2 main points; (1) the participated teachers showed different types of engagement (disturbing, integral and auxiliary) with online FA in EFL writing, and (2) the teacher engagement with online FA was considerably influenced by individual, contextual, and technological factors. Despite lack of participants and data collection, this study presents several pedagogical implications. It provides EFL teachers with practical insight into how several factors have affected their writing assessment practices, and informs educational institutions with some suggestions to provide EFL teachers with training opportunities to improve their ICT skills.

Keywords: EFL Teachers, Formative Assessment, Teacher Engagement

Introduction

The availability of various types of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools has helped many teachers to conduct online FA. The pivotal role of FA in the context of EFL teaching (Black and William, 2009) has drawn EFL teachers' attention (Gikandi, 2011) to employ ICT tools in their virtual classes during Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that many educational institutions have to switch from traditional face to face teaching to online instruction. For some teachers, the use of ICT in formative writing assessment has become challenged and frustrated activities (Todd, 2020) as they are not used to it. To develop instructors' teaching career and to facilitate students' learning, Mimirinis (2019) and Rahim (2020) argued that it is extremely essential that teachers need to engage with online FA, and researchers need to investigate teachers' FA experiences in online classroom settings

In the context of second language (L2) writing, teachers are encouraged to treat FA as the principal element of writing skills assessment (Lee, 2017). Nonetheless, the implementation of FA in fully online writing classrooms is considerably underexplored (White, 2019). In other words, not many people have disseminated information regarding teachers' engagement with online FA during Covid-19 period, particularly in the context of Indonesian EFL setting. With regards to this, the

present study appears with the purpose to examine the engagement of Indonesian EFL teachers with online FA during Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past few decades, FA has been considered as an effective method to measure students' learning achievement. Black and William (2009) defined FA as the classroom assessment practices conducted by both teachers and learners to make informed decisions about what steps need to carry out in the process of teaching and learning. In the case of EFL writing assessment, some researchers (Lee, 2017 & Wang, et al., 2020) have reported that FA was considerably effective to improve students' writing skills since FA allowed teachers to provide diagnostic feedback and to implement student-centered learning. The development of technology provides teachers with more opportunities to carry out FA virtually (Gikandi, 2011) and to help develop integration of ICT tools in formative writing assessment (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). In other words, the integration of ICT in facilitating online FA was considerably effective and beneficial (Gikandi, 2011; Shute & Rahimi, 2017).

Although some researchers (Gikandi, 2011; Shute & Rahimi, 2017; Zhang & Hyland, 2018) argued that the advancement of technology has enabled EFL teachers to conduct online FA, it was scarce to find the implementation of ICT in formative writing assessment (White, 2019). Furthermore, although some researchers (Lee, 2017; Wang, et al., 2020; Zhang & Hyland, 2018) have evinced positive effects of online FA in improving students' writing skills, not many of them have examined the role of teachers and their engagement with online FA. To a large degree, such investigation is essential to carry out since teachers are the key agents who play important roles in implementing principles of online FA (Mimirinis, 2019).

With regards to teacher engagement, Louis and Smith (1992) define it as the degree to which teachers employ their relevant skills to their teaching work. Furthermore, Klassen et al, (2013) argued that teacher engagement comprises three different types, (1) physical-cognitive engagement, refers to how teachers involve in their teaching practices, (2) emotional engagement, refers to how teachers affectively respond to their teaching work, and (3) social engagement, refers to how teachers concern with their students. In this particular study, teacher engagement can be defined as the degree to which teachers physically-cognitively, emotionally, and socially involve in online formative writing assessment. It can be assumed that teachers may have different degrees of engagement with online FA as the results of various influential factors including individual, contextual, and technological factors.

Although researchers have examined the benefits of FA in facilitating students' learning, many of them have mainly focused on the context of face-to-face learning. For example, Marshall and Drummond (2006) mentioned two types of teacher engagement with FA, namely the spirit and the letter. While teachers with the spirit engagement highly valued students' independent learning, those with the letter engagement had no efforts to foster learner autonomy and focused on following rigid procedures. Meanwhile, Leirhaug and MacPhail (2015) reported that Norwegian EFL teachers demonstrated high level of engagement with FA, but received insufficient institutional support and

emphasized more on grading. In the context of L2 writing, Lee (2017) and Wang, et al. (2020) found that different types of teacher engagement with FA were affected by various factors including length of teaching experiences, institutional assessment regulations, and high-stakes tests. Another study by Krishnan, et al. (2020) reported that teachers' engagement with FA was influenced by individual factor (teacher beliefs) and contextual factor (curriculum policies), provided no information about technological factors on teacher engagement with FA, which requires further investigation.

It can be clearly seen that not many people have investigated the extent to which EFL teachers engage with FA in online classroom environment, particularly in the context of Indonesian EFL context. To fill in this gap, the present study examines the engagement of three Indonesian EFL teachers with online FA during Covid-19 pandemic. To sum up, two research questions which form the focus of this study are outlined below:

1.   How did the teachers engage with online formative assessment?

2.   What factors have affected the teachers' engagement with online formative assessment?

Research Methodology

This study was conducted at West Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia and purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. A questionnaire which contained questions related to FA was designed and sent to four universities. Among the 14 questionnaires returned, 5 teachers reported high level engagement with online FA. Medium-level and low-level engagement with online FA were also reported by 6 and 3 teachers respectively. Based on the results of questionnaire, three teachers were then purposively invited- David, Julia, and Kevin (pseudonyms) to participate in this study to gain more in-depth understanding of their engagement with online FA. Although these teachers had implemented FA in their face-to-face writing classes, they revealed different levels of engagement with online FA in their writing classes.

Table 1. Participants' background information

	Academic qualification	Length of teaching experience	Writing assessment training	Level of engagement with online FA	ICT tools for online FA before Covid-19	ICT tools for online FA during Covid-19
David	MEd in English Education	2	No	Low	No	Google Classroom, Whatsapp application
Julia	PhD in TESOL	8	Yes	Medium	Google Classroom, Google Meet	Google Classroom, Google Meet
Kevin	MA in Applied Linguistics	7	Yes	High	Google Classroom, Zoom Application	Google Classroom, Zoom Application, Skype, Kahoot, Worklivesheet

Semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect the data regarding teachers' engagement with online FA. Each teacher was interviewed for about 90 minutes in Bahasa Indonesia to allow them articulate their opinion and thoughts naturally. The interview process was audio-recorded and transcribed. To triangulate the interview data, teachers' recorded lessons and instructional materials in the form of PPT files were also collected.

To analyze the data gained from interview transcripts, recorded lessons, and instructional materials, a qualitative and inductive approach was employed. The data were first coded with 2 purposes, (1) to identify the teachers' physical-cognitive, emotional, and social engagement, and (2) to identify the individual, contextual, and technological factors in the teachers' socio-technical systems. The data coding were then resulting three key themes, namely online FA as disturbing, auxiliary, and integral.

Finding and Disucussion

Finding

Based on the data analysis, it is found that the teachers showed three different types of engagement with online FA in EFL writing classes, namely disturbing, auxiliary, and integral.

1.   David: Online FA as Disturbing

Based on the questionnaire result, David has participated in several training programs in FA, but never in EFL writing. Despite this, he has implemented FA in face-to-face EFL writing classes for almost two years. When the classes had to be conducted virtually during Covid-19, he found that online classes disturbed the implementation of FA. Overall, David showed negative reactions towards online FA in EFL writing classes. For example, during interview sessions, he responded:

> *"Honestly speaking, I think that the traditional face-to-face assessment is more comfortable to carry out. I admit that there have been ICT tools for promoting FA in EFL writing classes, but I doubted the benefits of them. Besides, I have no experience of conducting online FA and no relevant training programs had been provided by my institution."*

As the consequence of his unenthusiastic, David not only carried out very limited ICT-related classroom activities but also implemented a rare practice of FA. In his teaching practices during Covid-19, he mainly employed two types of ICT tools, Google Classroom and Whatsapps application, which allowed him to provide lengthy comments on his students' writing tasks. Due to lack of face to face – like interactions, however, his feedback seemed to fail to encourage his students to assiduously participate in writing activities.

In sum, as the result of his limited knowledge and experience of integrating ICT in EFL writing, insufficient relevant training courses from his university, students' low participation in virtual classes, and ICT's inability to facilitate face to face – like interactions, Kevin was skeptical and

reluctant to utilize ICT tools for promoting FA in his EFL writing classes. In other words, Kevin demonstrated a low-engagement with online FA during Covid-19 pandemic.

2. *Julia: Online FA as Auxiliary*

The questionnaire result reported that Julia received several training programs in formative writing assessment and practiced it in her EFL writing classes. When Covid-19 came in and the classes had to be carried out virtually, Julia manifested an auxiliary stance on with online FA. This is showed by her extensive efforts to find appropriate ICT tools to assess her students formatively and to monitor her students' learning. Different from skepticism about ICT showed by David, Julia had positive attitude towards online FA in EFL writing classes. When asked during interview sessions, for instance, she answered:

> *"Although I was firstly uncertain about the benefits of using ICT in the online FA, I feel ICT helps me to flexibly assess my students' writing tasks since I can interact with my students, whenever I have something to confirm or clarify. Additionally, there have been several number of relevant workshops organized by my university which have helped me improve my skills in writing assessment.*

Supported by her institution, Julia was feeling more positive about the use of ICT in online FA. During Covid-19 pandemic, she employed two types of digital applications; (1) Google Classroom, to upload learning materials, and (2) Google Meet, to conduct live conference and provide timely oral feedback. Nevertheless, she could not intensively utilize these two platforms to develop students' autonomous learning due to her limited digital literacy.

To conclude, while Julia recognized the auxiliary role of ICT and felt more familiar with ICT for writing assessment, her limited digital literacy impeded her to develop autonomous learning for her students. As a result, she simply used ICT to monitor her students' learning and showed mixed feelings (challenged and frustrated) toward it. In other words, it can be assumed that Julia demonstrated a medium level of engagement with online FA.

3. *Kevin: Online FA as Integral*

Similar to Julia, the questionnaire data reported that Kevin has participated in professional training courses on formative writing assessment. In addition to this, he has integrated ICT and FA in his EFL writing classes for more than seven years. Therefore, he assumed that online FA was integral to writing assessment. In other words, Kevin demonstrated a high-level of engagement with online FA which was indicated by his positive reaction towards ICT, actively use of ICT in assessing his students' writing tasks, and extensive efforts to develop students' autonomous learning. The following is an interview excerpt with Kevin:

> *"I am actually into ICT and I found it very beneficial for assessing my students' writing tasks. Besides, ICT-related training programs have been provided by my university with the purpose to help teachers improve their skills and digital literacies. These help me to become more engaged with online FA"*

Aside from his positive reactions toward the use of ICT in online FA, it is clear Kevin was privileged to have such an enormous support from his institution. Before Covid-19 came in, Kevin had already employed various types of digital platforms (e.g. Zoom application, Skype, Kahoot and Worklivesheet) to conduct online writing classes and to assess his students' writing tasks. Although he often noticed that some of his students had low level of participation in virtual writing activities, he was willing to motivate them by finding suitable ICT tools, and guide them to use ICT tools to foster learner autonomy. In sum, the combination of interest in ICT, institutional support, lengthy experience on the use of ICT and extensive effort to develop learner autonomy result in Kevin demonstrated high-level of engagement with online FA.

Discussion

This study reveals three different types of EFL teachers' engagement with online FA during Covid-19 pandemic. The first type of engagement is demonstrated by David who negatively reacted to online FA. Due to his negative reactions, David conducted a very limited technology-based FA activities. It can be assumed that he had no efforts to create students' autonomous learning, the essence of formative assessment (Black & William, 2009). In fact, his feedback on students' writing tasks was considerably useless since he believed that online classes were lack of face to face – like interactions. Align with finding reported by Zou, et al (2021), such technical issues led teachers to doubt the efficacy of online FA and become more disengage with it. Supported by her institution, on the other hand, Julia was feeling more positive about the implementation of online FA during Covid-19 period. This finding was in contrast with that of Lee (2017) which revealed that as the result of contextual constraints, many teachers who felt positive about technology-based FA activities may not fully integrate them in their classroom practices. Although she received multiple support from her institution, however, Julia could not intensively utilize digital platforms to develop students' autonomous learning due to her limited digital literacy, one of the main skills in online formative assessment (Zou, et al, 2021). Similar to Julia, Kevin showed positive reactions towards the use of ICT in online FA and received support from his university. This finding aligns with that of Zou, et al (2021) which reported that institutional support was one of essential elements that could help teachers to emotionally engage with online FA. His lengty teaching experience also allowed him to conduct online writing classes and become more engaged with online FA. Taken together, three different types of EFL teachers engagement with online FA were found in this study. While David demostrated low-level of engagement, Julia and Kevin displayed medium and high-level engagement respectively.

This study also found that the teachers' engagement with online FA was considerably affected by three main influential factors. In line with the findings on previous studies (Krishnan, et al, 2020; Wang, et al, 2020), the present study found that the first thing which has been affected teachers' engagement with online FA was contextual factor. When compared with David who worked in a

institution with insufficient training support, Julia and Kevin received multiple opportunities to participate in training programs on technology-based formative assessment. They also reported that intensive communication with their more experienced-colleagues benefitted them in enhancing their expertise in online FA. When asked during interview sessions, Julia reflected:

> *"Like what I said earlier, I had participated in several useful relevant training and workshops organized by my institution. These help me to improve my skills and digital illiteracies. But, I need to tell you that I discussed a lot with my colleagues to ask for help or advice regarding online formative assessment. These also are very beneficial."*

Other than contextual factors above, the present study also revealed the influences of under-explored technological aspects on the teachers' engagement with online FA. In accordance with what Gikandi, et al (2011) have reported, the affordance of technology was very contributive to the implementation of formative assessment in the classroom which can be seen in the case of Julia and Kevin. Nonetheless, in contrast with previous finding (Williams and Beams, 2019) which reported that ICT was able to engage students in their writing tasks, the present study found that ICT tended to lower students' participation in writing as the result of limited face to face - like interactions which eventually affected the teachers' engagement with online FA.

The third aspect found to have played a more decisive role in the teachers' engagement with online FA was the individual factors. The three teachers possessed different types of beliefs, digital literacy rates, and length of teaching experiences resulting in different reactions towards online FA which then indicated different levels of their engagement. In the case of David, for example, he had a very limited knowledge and experience of integrating ICT in EFL writing. He then quoted that his students' low participation in virtual classes as the reason of his low engagement with online FA.

> *"Since online classes are unable to provide certain interactions like in the face-to-face classes, I think that nothing could be done to encourage students to actively participate virtually. Therefore, I rarely used ICT to assess my students' writing tasks formatively."*

On the contrary, Julia was aware of positive impacts of ICT in facilitating online FA and monitoring students learning. Although she had made some extensive efforts to find appropriate ICT tools and use them in her online classes, her limited digital literacy hampered her to successfully develop independent learning for her students. This corroborates what Zou, et al (2021) have reported that teachers' skill and knowledge about technology affect teachers' capability to transform their students to become autonomous learners. With regards to Kevin, he had been implementing ICT in his writing classes to conduct online FA for years. He believed that online FA was integral to writing assessment and thus actively worked on it to help his students to become more independent in their learning. It can be assumed that his beliefs, expertise, and teaching experience had contributed to his high engagement with online FA.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This study explored the engagement of three EFL teachers with online formative assessment in the context of Indonesian EFL writing classrooms. Overall, the findings of this study showed that the teachers demonstrated varied stance on FA. Based on the data analysis, it was found that the teachers displayed three different categories of teachers' engagement with online FA in EFL writing classes, namely disturbing, auxiliary, and integral. This study also reported that these three types of engagement were considerably mediated by individual, contextual, and technological factors.

Several limitations can be identified in this study, including a limited number of participants and a small number of data sample. It is therefore future studies may apply similar methods, but on a larger scale or in different educational contexts. Nevertheless, it is worthed to note that some pedagogical implications occur in the present study. For instance, it provides us with practical insight into how various factors have affected teachers' engagement with online FA, and it suggests educational institutions to provide EFL teachers with training programs to help improve their ICT skills.

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