Online backchannel as a formative assessment in improving writing skills

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Abstract

Technology integration in language assessment has been regarded as a common strategy in an educational setting. However, teachers need to adjust the perception and cogency of assessment in an online setting as well as the concept of formative assessment in online environments. This research aimed to investigate the students' perception of online backchannel implementation as a formative assessment in improving the students' writing skills in an English classroom. For this purpose, a mixed-method was applied with a closed-ended questionnaire distributed to 32 students and semi-structured interviews carried out to 24 students at the eighth-grade students of a state junior high school in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. The collected data were then analyzed quantitatively using SPSS 23 and qualitatively. The findings revealed positive perceptions of online backchannel implementation as a formative assessment in improving their writing skills. They considered it a new and innovative process of an assessment that helped them get the maximum result of writing. Furthermore, students' motivation and confidence in writing were raised. This study's implication calls for the implementation of online backchannel in English class as a formative assessment during the writing process.

Keywords: online backchannel; formative assessment; writing skills

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Writing is one of the language skills which is considered a difficult skill that employs cognitive processes (Bozkurt et al., 2016; Miftah, 2005). The difficulty comes from an effective coordination process that occurs in the writing process. Fareed et al. (2016) state the coordination process involves linguistics, cognitive, and physio-motor processes. Those complex processes create another problem for students in starting to generate the topic. The students are usually feeling difficult to generate a topic of writing assigned by their teacher in a writing classroom. It might be because they have no idea about the topic assigned by the teacher. Their less knowledge lets them have more time searching for and exploring the ideas to write (Fraser, 2006; Prastikawati, 2018). Meanwhile, they are limited to the time of writing completion to get pressure in writing. This pressure condition then influences the final result of writing which is far from what they wish before (Setyorini & Prastikawati, 2010). To that case, the writing process must be well-facilitated by giving more chance to write a draft and revise it (DiLiDüzgün, 2013). In summary, the teachers should apply the process and product approach enabling all the writing processes in writing teaching and learning activities so the teachers are able to engage their students in active learning through writing and reviewing other's drafts.

Regarding the fact that writing is a complex process for students, teachers must provide effective and fun learning that encourages them to write. Teachers must make an effort to provide interactive and innovative activities which can decrease their writing difficulty (Tshibalo, 2007). It means that teachers may use useful tools, media, and techniques to engage students in being active in a writing section (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015). A study relating to information communication technology (ICT) involvement has shown that students view ICT as a viable pedagogical tool in the writing classroom (Pradana et al., 2020). An involvement of ICT may be considered as a help for teachers in realizing this innovative teaching and learning process. Further, Safitry et al. (2015) noticed that teachers generally felt comfortable in using ICT as teaching and learning tools. Students' positive responses were also given when technology is involved in a classroom (Friatin, 2018; Glessmer et al., 2014). That fact has shown that technology involvement may increase the students' engagement in their learning (Rashid & Asghar, 2016). This engagement may result in raising the students to learn which is considered

crucial for the improvement of learning (Baron et al., 2016). The fact also mentions that students are ready for technology use and learning changes since they live in a rapid technology evolution era (Li, 2017).

The use of technology may also help the teacher to give a new experience of learning for students. Some studies have proven that technology involvement in students' learning drives to a new learning environment. A study showed that technology aided in empowering course learning relevancy with modern centered teaching (Andrei, 2017; Kim et al., 2013). In using the technology, teachers should focus on how it links and create a good interaction between the users and tools. Likewise, a study by Greenhow and Robelia (2009) revealed how the use of technology was absolutely needed in creating successful learning. They mentioned that an educational institution needed to use technology to deliver courses that enabled an effective learning delivery. Meanwhile, research done by Akhiar et al. (2017) claimed that the fast evolution of technology had facilitated the utensils of recent social media applications operated by many scholars and teachers at school.

On the contrary, even the application of technology reported good for the sake of educational development quality; it also had some limitations. The main point was that students were well-facilitated by technology. In their study, Al Zumor et al. (2013) reported that salient limitations of the technology used in learning such as internet connectivity and device unavailability. In that case, internet connectivity had reached the major problem faced by all the participants of technology-involved learning (Cakrawati, 2017). Jumariati and Febriyanti (2020) agreed that internet connectivity was a crucial aspect that led to successful online learning; once it was in a bad connection, it ruined all the process of learning. Another limitation mentioned by Finardi et al. (2016). It was mentioned that the direct interactions among students were decreased in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). Regarding that, classroom interaction, such as oral interaction, was limited since most students only focused on MALL. However, nowadays, all those difficulties are cleared up because many people already have their private internet connection. As stated by Jumariati and Febriyanti (2020), private internet connection is now easy to get. They can register to the internet broadband depending on their financial abilities. It was also supported by the study from Dashtestani (2013). He claimed that the barriers and challenges faced in technology use in learning were solved along with educational technology development. Briefly, the barriers dealing with technology involvement in learning have already been controlled and overcome.

Technology use in teaching and learning is not only limited to teaching media, but it also can be used in the assessment method. As a crucial part of teaching and learning, assessment should provide valid information about the students' learning needs, students' learning styles, and students' weaknesses (Rose & Syrbe, 2018).). In this case, teachers conduct an assessment to evaluate the teaching and learning process which has been done before. This is why an assessment is called a continuous process of assessing and evaluating a student's ability when the finale learning activities are stated (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015). Specifically to students' writing, an assessment, especially in writing, must be well planned and developed to reach the writing classroom's main goal. Basically, an assessment will help students get proper and accurate feedback in their writing to recognize their strengths and weaknesses (Gan & Leung, 2020; Horstmanshof & Brownie, 2013). By a well-developed assessment, students may get feedback from learning activities that they have done in the classroom (Prastikawati, 2019; Wiliam, 2011)

Among all kinds of assessments, formative assessment is considered an appropriate one applied in today's curriculum. Formative assessment aims to investigate the activities conducted by the teachers to give students beneficial information as ongoing feedback. This ongoing feedback can be used to evaluate teachers to improve their teaching activity (Ruiz-Primo, 2011). Besides, it is regarded as a process-oriented assessment applied to determine and counter students' learning results (Zulfiqar et al., 2017). Burner (2016) also explains that online formative assessment yields feedback on teachers' and students' continuing classroom processes. It aims at improving students' learning and accomplishment of the instructional goals. So, by having feedback, the students may reconstruct their understanding and skills (Lawton et al., 2012). To add, it enables the students to improve their performance. The real purpose of formative assessment is reached if it is regularly applied to know the students' learning progress, so it enables to identify the students need and adjust the learning activity (Wong & Mak, 2019). Online formative assessment is also an online measurement device for teachers to indicate the students' understanding of a certain topic so that the teachers can provide and improve their next teaching (Hwang & Chang, 2011; Widiastuti et al., 2020).

As living in this modern era, a formative assessment is no longer used conventionally. It can be embedded in technology-based learning that can stimulate the students' interest in language learning activities (Russell et al., 2006). The technology involved in the formative assessments is also in line with online learning used by teachers recently. Point to that, and some research has

been conducted to seek the effect of online formative assessments on students' learning achievement. Ogange et al. (2018) mentioned that formative assessment was a useful tool in both online and offline learning settings. It provided meaningful feedback for students in completing their tasks and improving their skills. Another study conducted by Shute and Rahimi (2017) also revealed that students earned some benefits when a formative assessment was embedded in an online environment.

An insertion of online environments in the formative assessments issued several advantages for students (Shute & Rahimi, 2017). First, online formative assessment was considered a flexible assessment since it permitted the students to assess their flexible time to reach the assessment deadline. Then, online formative assessments let the students have several attempts until they could achieve their minimum grade. Third, students were given prompt feedback. This kind of feedback was demanded by the students to identify what happened in their learning process. It helped them to determine their learning weakness (Wang et al., 2006). Additionally, another study also declared that the online formative assessment reduces the students' stress level before they have summative assessments as their final learning activities (Kingston & Nash, 2011; Ninomiya, 2016). Relating to those benefits of formative assessment, a study from Vonderwell et al. (2007) agreed that teachers should consider the advantages of formative assessments in an online setting to lift and strengthen the interaction and relationships between educational members; students-other students and students-teachers.

Backchannel is one way to apply formative assessment in an English classroom. It is a conversational device used to show an engagement occurring in classrooms and out classroom settings using internet-based devices such as Instagrams, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Line, etc. Teachers and students can interact and share through this device by commenting or clarifying what is discussed in learning (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015). They mention that backchannel is good to be applied in formative assessment for it uses digital social media which are suitable for the students' needs recently. Using backchannel also gives benefits for teachers that have a large class. A study by Ally and Samaka (2013) mentioned that it was possible to strengthen a collective consciousness and large class students by a well-designed digital online backchannel. The appropriate interaction and feedback set out assistance for students' discussion and pushed them to participate more in their classroom. Likewise, Glessmer et al. (2014) revealed that online backchannel met the newest students' needs for technology and teacher's demand for

assessment for learning. Supporting this study result, a study also claimed that online backchannel stimulated the student's curiosity and interaction in learning so that the desire for learning was increased. It was because the students were facilitated by a community channel that let them share learning activities and build a social interaction (Yardi, 2006).

As previous studies mentioned, online backchannel provides benefits to encourage the students' curiosity and interaction for students, especially for higher-level students. A study showed that backchannel was supposed to give engagement between students and their learning (Harunasari & Halim, 2019; Kassner & Cassada, 2017). They already stated that students could use backchannels as a device to engage them with their learning. Support to that, another study also claimed that backchannel was also called as an online learning interaction room that makes the students sociable (Carpenter, 2015). It assists the students to take part in a discussion even in a writing class that focuses on writing activities. Through this discussion in the backchannel, the students may have more ideas to write. In addition, a study revealed that the students' active participation in backchannel help everyone in a writing classroom, especially when they are crafting their idea and thought to write (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015). Through online backchannel applied as a formative assessment in a writing classroom, students can decrease their difficulty in generating the idea/topic of writing assigned by the teachers. Further, students can comment and share with teachers and other students before they have their final writing composition.

Regarding the benefits of backchannel implementation, utilizing backchannel in the learning process appears to be potential, especially in improving students' writing skills. Most of the previous studies focus greatly on EFL students at the university level. Nevertheless, according to researchers' knowledge, studies on how the students' perception and responses in junior high school level on the implementation of backchannel as a formative assessment have not been conducted. As it is noticed, the students in high school characteristics are different from those who are in university. Students in the university have been mature and aware of ICT use in the teaching and learning process. Meanwhile, the junior high school students are in the beginner and adaptive phase in using technology in learning (Jailani et al., 2017). An experimental study undertaken by Wiyaka et al. (2019) revealed the effectiveness of online backchannel in improving junior high school students' English achievement. However, the study did not reveal how the students respond to online backchannel implementation in the English classroom. This

present research tries to address the existing gaps by focusing on junior high school students' perception of online backchannel as a formative assessment in improving writing skills. Therefore, the research problem addresses, "What are the students' perceptions on online backchannel implementation as a formative assessment in improving their writing skills?".

METHOD

Research Design

This research applied a mixed method. Specifically, this design was chosen since the researchers wanted to present the quantitative and qualitative data on students' perception of online backchannel implementation as a formative assessment in improving writing skills. This mixed-method entails data collection and analysis quantitatively and qualitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This paradigm is intended to get a proper and better understanding of what the research searches for (Malik & Hamied, 2014). This study is intended to get quantitative and qualitative data appropriately of the students' responses to the online backchannel implementation through this paradigm. A mixed-method employs the power of two research; qualitative and quantitative (Mohajan, 2018). To compare the data, whether it has convergence and difference, the design of a concurrent triangulation was adopted in collecting quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lodico et al., 2010).

Participants

In this study, the 90 students from the three classes of a state junior high school in Semarang, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia to be participants. The purposive random sampling was applied in choosing the sample. The sample (32 students) in class A was chosen because it was the class where online backchannel had been implemented fully by the English teacher in a state junior high school in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. Moreover, those samples confirmed that they had good internet connectivity to be involved in online backchannel group discussion. Meanwhile, the other two classes (class 8B and class 8C) did not get online backchannel as a formative assessment fully in the English classroom. The questionnaires were given to those 32 students as the samples of the study. Besides, 24 voluntary participants participated in the interview.

Data Collection

In this study, 13 items of a closed-ended questionnaire in the form of five Likert-scales and semi-structured interviews were carried out. The questionnaire was adapted and developed from a previous study carried by Friatin (2018). Mero-Jaffe (2011) states that questionnaires can be used to collect the data, and the researcher is permitted to measure people's perceptions and attitudes. To ensure the validity, the inter-rater approach was carried out. Two university professors validated the content and layout of the questionnaires, and it improved significantly after the feedback from two university professors was given. In addition, the reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha Test. Based on the measurement, the calculated Alpha, using SPSS, is .776, which means the high level of the items' internal consistency. Moreover, the choice of using rating scales in this research is to determine which participants accept or contradict the questions asked (Saldaña, 2009). The items of questionnaires consisted of four main topics (see Table 1) that spread into 13 items of questionnaires.

Table 1. The content of closed-ended questionnaires

Topics	Content	Total items
1	The use of online backchannel for generating the writing ideas	2
2	Online backchannel for their writing motivation and confidence	3
3	Online backchannel for students' and vocabulary enrichment and grammar awareness	2
4	Online backchannel for feedback and interactions in the students' writing process	6
Total Items		13

Meanwhile, a semi-structured interview consisting of 7 questions (as shown in Table 2) was also conducted to gain in-depth information and explanation on the use of online backchannel as a formative assessment to improve the students' writing skills.

In the process of collecting data, before the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were carried out, the researchers gave a brief explanation about the study background, the study purpose, and the participants' confidentiality and procedures. When the brief information was clearly conveyed, the questionnaires were given to the students. To make clear the content of the questionnaires, the researchers also gave more explanation of

each item in the questionnaires. It aimed to make clear the point of what was asked in each item so that the students could give their responses clearly. Meanwhile, after the administration of questionnaires was done, the semi-structured interview was carried out. The participants were invited to participate in the interview, but not all participants accepted the interview invitation. Twenty-four students accepted the interview invitation. In the interview, they were asked for permission to save and record the interview data in a voice recorder. Additionally, note-taking was also used to highlight the important points of the interview.

Table 2. The content of interview questions related to online backchannel as a formative assessment

No.	Topics of interview questions
1	Online backchannel in English writing classroom
2	Online backchannel for generating idea in writing
3	Online backchannel for students' writing motivation
4	Online backchannel for students' writing confidence
5	Online backchannel for students' vocabulary enrichment
6	Online backchannel for students' grammar awareness
7	Online backchannel for feedback and students' interactions

Data Analysis

The closed-ended questionnaire data were analyzed statistically in the form of percentages and interpreted descriptively. In analyzing a closed questionnaire, the rating scale was converted into numbers (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Disagree, 3=Undecided, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree) by coding procedures. Every item was counted statistically using Microsoft Excel and SPSS 23, counted reported in the form of graphics, and interpreted descriptively. Further, to determine the level of students' perception according to 5-opinion rating scales, they were reduced into two; agree and disagree.

Meanwhile, data from a semi-structured interview was transcribed, translated in English, and analyzed to sustain the key features that were in line with the use of backchannel as a formative assessment. This semi-structured interview was analyzed using a qualitative coding technique. There were some steps applied in the coding technique in this study. In the first step of applying the coding technique, the researchers collected the interview data (in the audio recording). The next was transcribing the audio data into text (verbatim data). The third step was to code every interview data into NT1-NT24 as there were 24 subjects of the interview. Then, every single data was categorized by identifying

the keywords that related to what topics were explored. After coding the data, the researchers looked for important data and dug the meaning of the data. Then, the researcher also compared to the previous studies results. The last step was interpreting and stating the finding. Finally, this semi-structured interview data was used to give more descriptions of online backchannel as a formative assessment in an English classroom and how it is related to the students' writing skills improvement.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research showed some important points of the students' perceptions of online backchannel implementation in developing the students' English writing skills. According to closed questionnaires and semi-structured interview data, students revealed positive perceptions and attitudes when online backchannel was implemented in the English classroom, especially for their writing skills improvement. The closed questionnaires were tested using Cronbach's Alpha Test and got .776 (high internal consistency) as the calculated Alpha. Then, in answering the research question, the students' perceptions were statistically analyzed using SPSS 23 to get the mean score and standard deviation. As shown in Table 3, it shows the level of perceptions, whether it is low/mediocre/high. The students' perceptions were divided into four perceptions; perception on online backchannel for expressing writing's ideas (perception 1), perception on online backchannel for students' writing motivation and confidence (perception 2), perception on online backchannel for students' vocabulary enrichment and grammar awareness (perception 3), and perception on online backchannel for students' interaction in the writing process (perception 4).

Table 3. A result of descriptive statistical analysis

Students' perceptions	Mean	SD	Level
Expressing writing's ideas	4.06	.04	High
Writing motivation and confidence	4.14	.16	High
Vocabulary enrichment and grammar awareness	3.88	.00	High
Interaction in the writing process	3.92	.19	High

Table 3 shows that students had high perceptions of online backchannel applied as a formative assessment in improving writing skills. Point to that, this finding was divided into four sections deal with the research question on the students' perception of online backchannel as a formative assessment in improving their writing skills. First, the data showed that online backchannel was considered a new and enjoyable experience for students' writing skills

improvement. Second, the implementation of online backchannel as a formative assessment raised students' motivation and confidence in their writing practice. Next, online backchannel helped the students gain new vocabulary and grammar error awareness to generate and develop ideas of writing topics. Additionally, students took a benefit from the communicative interactions in their process of writing. To clarify this study's finding, the entire data result of students' closed-questionnaires is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Result of close-questionnaire on students' perception of online backchannel

According to Figure 1, results in questionnaires (Q1-Q13) showed more positive results in the scale category of agreeing than in the scale category disagree. In responding to closed-questionnaire, which was spread into Q1-Q13, students showed good responses to online backchannel implementation as a formative assessment that had been applied for one semester in an English classroom. This result affirmed that students showed their positive perception of online backchannel as a formative assessment to improve their writing skills.

A New Way of a Formative Assessment for Expressing Students' Writing Idea

The first data finding revealed the result that online backchannel was considered innovative as a formative assessment in students' writing development process. In this case, the students were assisted by the online backchannel discussion group, which let them share writing ideas among the classmate. Focusing on Figure 1 and Table 3, the result of questionnaires 1 and 2 (Q1 and Q2) showed a positive category. Table 3 showed that most students agreed that online backchannel was an innovative and enjoyable way that helped them express their thoughts/ideas in writing easily.

Table 4. Students' perception of online backchannel 1

No	Question	SD (%)	DA (%)	Un (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	An innovative facility in writing.	-	3.12	3.12	75	18.75
2	Easily expressed the idea of writing	-	9.37	3.12	62.5	25

Table 4 shows the result of students' responses in Q1 and Q2. The result showed most of the responses were in a positive category. It was proved that in Q1, most students agreed that online backchannel is an innovative and enjoyable facility of writing discussion for them. The result in Q2 responses also showed a similar reaction that online backchannel helped students support them in expressing their writing idea without feeling assessed. Regarding Q2 responses, online backchannel had assisted them to have more elaboration in expressing their writing ideas. Although there were students who were neutral and disagreed in Q1 and Q2, the high percentage still could be seen by the students who chose agreed and strongly agreed. It proved that the gap between neutral or disagree indicated that the students positively responded to online backchannel. Their uneasiness in writing was released when they were facilitated by online backchannel in their writing processes. It meant that they were not in pressure when trying to generate a topic/idea assigned by the teachers. Those results were supported by the interview data showing how the students specified their opinions on online backchannel as an innovative formative assessment method. The interview transcripts had been translated into English by the researchers so that they are easily understood. Student 3 said:

I like backchannel in my English class, especially in writing sessions. It is a new one for me to have it.

Also, Student 12 said:

It is an excellent way of teaching that my teacher did in my writing class. I enjoy it so much. I am not afraid to write something in an online backchannel group.

Student 21 added:

Backchannel groups gave me an unpredictable experience that my teacher did in the English class. I am not nervous about guessing the topics. It makes me easier to develop the topic into sentences.

The interview data showed that most of the students considered online backchannel applied as a formative assessment as a new and excellent way to help them express their idea more. Through online backchannel, they did not feel afraid and nervous in developing their topic.

Students' Writing Motivation and Confidence

Another positive perception of online backchannel as a formative assessment was students' writing motivation and confidence. It was supported by the data of closed-questionnaires in Table 5.

Table 5. Students' perception of online backchannel 2

No	Question	SD (%)	DA (%)	Un (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	Eliminating a lack of confidence in writing	-	9.37	6.25	59.37	25
2	Raising writing motivation	3.12	6.25	-	59.37	31.25
3	Giving a chance to think easily on some new ideas in writing	6.25	-	-	68.75	31.25

Table 5 shows the majority agreed that a formative assessment in online backchannel helped them eliminate lack of confidence and motivation in their writing. Their motivation was increased well when they had read what their friends wrote in online backchannel group discussion. It was also shown in Table 5 that high positive perception was revealed by the students mentioning online backchannel gave more chance to have new ideas in writing. In online backchannel, the students were allowed to discuss some ideas among their friends before they finally wrote a whole text. Here are some students' responses in a semi-structured interview that are in line with their closed-questionnaires responses. Student 12 said:

I start enjoying writing English text since my teacher uses backchannel. I feel confident to write for backchannel helps me in discussing the topic with friends freely.

Student 23 added:

I am not afraid to try writing some sentences in English directly. I used to write in *Bahasa Indonesia* and translated it to English before. But now I am easier to write for online backchannel is facilitated by my English teacher.

Students' Vocabulary Enrichment and Grammar Awareness

Another supporting fact is based on the following results. It mentions that in the implementation of online backchannel as a formative assessment technique, students learn new vocabularies and raise their grammar error awareness.

Table 6. Students' perception of online backchannel 3

No	Question	SD (%)	DA (%)	Un (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	Enriching many new vocabularies through the others' statements.	6.25	6.25	3.12	62.5	21.87
2	Increasing grammar awareness	-	3.12	21.87	59.37	15.62

Table 6 shows that many students who disagreed to online backchannel helped their vocabulary enrichment. However, half of the students agreed that their vocabulary was increased significantly through an online backchannel, and their grammar awareness was improved. In this case, the students could learn new vocabulary from their friends' ideas written in a backchannel group discussion. Then, the other aspect of writing that students are worried about is grammar. Point to the finding; their grammar awareness was increased since they got feedback relating to their sentence in the online backchannel. It was helpful for them to be more aware of grammatical mistakes in their sentences. Further, those results above were also noticed by what the students specified their opinions in a semi-structured interview. For example, Student 24 said:

I can have new vocabulary because I can read my backchannel group. My friends and my teacher write many new vocabulary items that I do not know before. That is challenging and helpful in generating more ideas in writing.

Student 27 added:

I notice my grammar error well when I am in an online backchannel group discussion. It's nice because I can reduce my grammar mistake.

Feedback and Communicative Interactions in Students' Writing Process

The last finding mentioned that students were well-facilitated by the feedback given and the communicative interactions through online backchannel as a formative assessment implemented by their teachers. In Table 7, the

students agreed that online backchannel was facilitated in producing more sentences in their writing. It was because they could easily type and share their ideas in an online backchannel. In this case, the online backchannel discussion used Whats App. It then encouraged the students to be direct in giving their ideas in writing. This also made the writing process's effectiveness increased because it was supported by the feedback and the communicative interactions among the teacher-students and students-students in online backchannel group discussion. Even though many students disagreed, there was a high percentage of students who agreed to that opinion. The data from a semi-structured interview supported this fact.

Table 7. Students' perception of online backchannel 4

No	Question	SD (%)	DA (%)	Un (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1	Producing more sentences through typing in (online)	-	6.25	-	56.25	37.5
2	The effective and communicative writing process.	-	6.25	6.25	78.12	9.37
3	Challenging writing process through backchannel interactions	3.12	9.37	3.12	65.62	18.75
4	Creative writing through online backchannel	-	12.5	6.25	53.12	28.12
5	Saving energy of writing due to physical effort	3.12	6.25	12.5	59.37	18.75
6	Getting clear feedback	6.25	9.37	12.5	56.25	15.62

The concern of Table 7 can also be derived from the students' opinions from the interview. Student 4 said:

It was such an effective process of writing when my teacher used online backchannel. In the online backchannel, my friends and I were allowed to use WhatsApp so we could share and gave feedback to each other. It was better than we had to write on a piece of paper.

Student 11 added:

It was a nice process of writing when my teacher implemented an online backchannel in my English classroom. I am not good enough in English writing, but WhatsApp's discussion and the online backchannel helped me a lot. I also got feedback from my teacher through that online discussion.

To conclude, according to the findings above, online backchannel as a formative assessment in improving writing skills was positively perceived.

DISCUSSION

This research focuses on investigating and describing the students' perception of online backchannel as a formative assessment implemented in one semester by the English teacher. The findings can be summarized well that students show positive and optimistic perceptions of online backchannel as a formative assessment in improving writing skills. These positive perceptions were generated in some points that clarified how online backchannel was positively perceived.

First, online backchannel as a formative assessment in English writing classrooms was regarded as an innovative way, so the students had a new atmosphere in their learning process, especially in writing. ICT use, such as mobile learning applications, had given a chance for the students to be in their era. The merging of technology in formative assessments has gained evocative learning (Baleni, 2015) to create an ongoing partnership between teachers and students in a new learning ambiance. Moreover, this technology insertion in a formative assessment built the students' good feeling on the term of assessment in writing. This makes them feel free in expressing the writing ideas. As mentioned previously, in writing the students need to go through before they start to write (DiLiDüzgün, 2013). Hence, utilizing online backchannel provides students a chance to generate their idea and decide what they will elaborate. Mobile learning as ICT has provoked students more enthusiasm in writing for they are in the social media era (Yardi, 2006). Those are related to the finding that online backchannel that is facilitated by Whats App brings a new concept of the writing process for students. It is why online backchannel covers all learning varieties resulting in mobile learning (Barhoumi & Rossi, 2013). In this case, online backchannel creates a new learning undertone in English learning and gains students' curiosity.

Furthermore, online backchannel also becomes an adventure of learning that directly involves the technology application in English classrooms. The use of WhatsApp is deemed a tool for mobile learning assessment as it contributes to the dissemination of actual and authentic language and uplifts the purposeful interaction between the students (Bozkurt et al., 2016). Further, point to the technology and writing process correlation mentioned above, online backchannel provides an improved writing process that students need to

do. This confirms the research findings conducted by Jumariati and Febriyanti (2020) and Bozkurt et al. (2016) that technology use in the writing process helps them express and generate the idea in their writing process. This is also approved in the study carried out by Miftah (2005) that the students should be facilitated an adequate chance to define a topic, compose a draft, and edit the draft into the fixed draft. It also provides a new way of writing English language learning that follows ICT learning evolution (Chun et al., 2016).

Further, since writing is a complicated process that involves cognitive processes, students also need to be encouraged well to start it. They need to be motivated to produce English sentences without being afraid of making mistakes. Based on this study finding, online backchannel has raised students' motivation and confidence in writing. When implementing online backchannel as a formative assessment, students could have connections and discussions with their friends and teacher in the class. Through this online discussion in the online backchannel, students interact freely in elaborating the writing idea, so they are encouraged to continue their writing. The finding of this current study correlates with the previous studies' results that online discussion can help the students eliminate their less confidence and barriers to producing the comprehensible text (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Yunus & Salehi, 2012).

Third, the increased motivation and confidence have also stimulated the students to have better encouragement in discussing with friends and the teacher through an online backchannel. They share the vocabulary that relates to the topic assigned. Likewise, this online backchannel discussion creates self-awareness of grammar too. When discussing the writing idea, the students unconsciously correct the spelling and even the sentences share. Relating to that, the teacher also provides feedback on what in the discussion is. The feedback among students-and teacher-students assists vocabulary enrichment and grammar awareness. In this phase, the students can comment on the other students' writing relating to vocabularies used and the sentence structures. It then leads them to have corrections to each other, so their vocabularies vary, and their sentences are in good structures. This finding relates to the studies conducted by Horstmanshof and Brownie (2013) and Burner (2016) that online discussion in a formative assessment results in students' feedback. It may help the students to gain more vocabulary and a better grammar check in the writing process they are involved. They can also learn new vocabulary from their friends' ideas written in an online backchannel discussion.

It is really helpful for students who are lack of ideas in writing. A similar result to this present study was also described in Vonderwell et al. (2007) who mentioned that online formative assessments served quick and continuous feedback on students' English grammar mistakes in their writing composition. Further, the feedback and corrections support the discussion; the student's writing skills are improved well as well as their vocabulary and grammar awareness.

As noted before, online backchannel creates more interactions among the students and the teacher. The interaction happened is not only limited to the topic generalization process but in the process of writing and revising the draft. In this case, the students' writing skills are explored by having interactions with their friends. During the online backchannel discussion, they were able to read the others' writing and required to comment or respond to every aspect of writing. It means that they were intended to be critical in giving feedback to their friends' writing. Further, the teacher also provides feedback to his/her students' writing. As stated in the previous study finding from Agbayahoun (2016), the students' effective use of teacher's feedback will be compromised as an influential component of students' writing process. When the students feedback from the teachers, they will directly correct their writing mistakes. It is supposed to be an acceptance for students to recognize their writing mistakes. In this context, teachers strive to give feedback to the students' writing in order to upgrade the students' writing skills (Al-Naibi et al., 2018). An implementation of online backchannel (as a formative assessment) in English writing classrooms had proven a beneficial way for students' writing process. It was in line with what the previous studies had claimed that using online discussion increased the students' engagement (Harunasari & Halim, 2019) and writing skills improvement (Jumariati & Febriyanti, 2020).

Hence, this present study confirms the previous studies that revealed technology's insertion in improving the students' writing skills. As a formative assessment, the online backchannel brings innovative learning circumstances for students to feel assessed by their teachers. It helps teachers improve their teaching process intensively by considering the students' moment in writing activities such as an online discussion on writing aspects. As the writing process is crucial to the next level of English proficiency, teachers should balance their teaching and assessment properly to result in better students' learning achievement.

CONCLUSION

This research has concluded that online backchannel, which is implemented as a formative assessment, is positively perceived by the students in improving the writing skills. It was considered as an innovative learning assessment that increases the students' motivation and confidence in writing. Moreover, online discussion activities provide feedback that helps the students enrich their vocabulary and be aware of grammar mistakes. From this study finding, it is recommended for English teachers to incorporate the use of online backchannel as a formative assessment in English classrooms, especially in improving their students' English writing skills. It is also to confirm that a technology insertion in students' writing process helps the students. A further study is recommended to examine the other profits of online backchannel for other English skills. Moreover, involving larger subjects of the study is also recommended to confirm the benefits of online backchannel based on the students' perception.

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