



Keeping Online Diary as an Integrated Activity for Developing Writing Skill in EFL Classes through Penzu

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Abstract

The present study focused on one of the Web 2.0 tools, Penzu. Penzu is a kind of online diary through which users can easily take notes and keep them on the Web. The study discussed the applicability of Penzu in foreign language classes as an integrated activity to develop language learners' writing skills. In this respect, a sample Penzu page was prepared and introduced to foreign language teaching instructors at a state university in Turkey. The study followed a qualitative inquiry. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants, and the data were collected through semi-structured interview questions. After analyzing the data, the results were reported descriptively. The results primarily indicated that the language instructors were in favor of implementing Penzu as an integrated activity in foreign language teaching classes to enhance students' writing skills. The study also reported several strengths and weaknesses which may promote or hinder the implementation of Penzu in language education contexts. All in all, this study attempted to enrich traditional foreign language teaching classes by implementation of Penzu as an integrated activity for writing skill, and to pave the way for further studies that foster application of Web 2.0 tools in language education contexts.

YDİ Sınıflarında Penzu Yoluyla Yazma Becerisini Geliştirmek İçin Bütünleşik Bir Etkinlik Olarak Çevrimiçi Günlük Tutma

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Web 2.0 araçlarından biri olan Penzu üzerinde durmuştur. Penzu, kullanıcıların kolayca not alabilecekleri ve onları Web 'de tutabilecekleri bir tür çevrimiçi günlüktür. Çalışma Penzu'nun yabancı dil sınıflarında dil öğrenenlerin yazma becerilerini geliştirmek için bütünleşik bir etkinlik olarak uygulanabilirliğini tartışmıştır. Bu bağlamda, örnek bir Penzu sayfası hazırlanmış ve Türkiye'deki bir devlet üniversitesinde yabancı dil okutmanlarına tanıtılmıştır. Çalışma nitel bir araştırma izlemiştir. Katılımcılar ile yüz yüze görüşmeler yapılmış ve veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme soruları aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Verileri analiz ettikten sonra, sonuçlar tanımlayıcı olarak bildirilmiştir. Sonuçlar, öncelikle dil okutmanlarının, öğrencilerin yazma becerilerini geliştirmek için Penzu'yu yabancı dil öğretimi derslerinde bütünleşik bir etkinlik olarak uygulama taraftarı olduklarını göstermiştir. Çalışma ayrıca, Penzu'nun dil eğitimi ortamlarında uygulanmasını teşvik edebilecek veya engelleyebilecek bazı güçlü ve zayıf yönleri de bildirmiştir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Penzu'nun yazma becerisi için bütünleşik bir etkinlik olarak uygulanmasıyla geleneksel yabancı dil öğretimi sınıflarını zenginleştirmeye ve Web 2.0 araçlarının dil eğitimi ortamlarında uygulanmasını teşvik eden yeni çalışmaların önünü açmaya çalışmıştır.

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Introduction

Writing as a process can become motivationally challenging especially for non-native language learners as it necessitates special attention and immediate feedback on the text when compared to speaking, though being able to write at a desired level may bring rewards from different domains of life (Brunning, 2000; Olshtain, 2001). Olshtain (2001) stated that writing as a skill in communicative language teaching takes a special attention as it enables to send messages in different ways at various contexts, and writing must be supported in language learning as a communicative activity.

The Web technologies gained an indispensable part not only in daily life but also in education contexts by offering learners a variety of learning opportunities and professionals can benefit from their advantages by employing Web 2.0 tools in education contexts (Arslan, 2018; Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2018; Hurlburt, 2008; Li, Bado, Smith, & Moore, 2013). Web 2.0 tools can be very valuable especially in foreign/second language writing classes. Instructors can benefit from free online tools in a variety of ways from designing integrated activities for students to giving feedback in an online environment. From simple texts to complex texts, writing requires several points that must be followed such as coherence, cohesion, punctuation, grammatical accuracy, etc. in order to convey the intended messages to interlocutors. As this point, Web 2.0 technology can provide engaging tools, which can present interesting activities and foster learner autonomy, in order to practice language skills by replacing real classroom contexts with online environments (Pop, 2010).

This study focuses on the application of one of these Web 2.0 tools, Penzu, as an integrated activity in EFL writing classes. Penzu is an online diary which can also be used as an online journal. It can be used either online or as an application by downloading to phones or tablets. You can use Penzu and customize your page at any time during the day (Murray, 2017). The current study investigated the applicability of Penzu in foreign language classes as an integrated tool to develop language learners' writing skills. It can be regarded as an important one as previous studies did not focus on instructors' views on the applicability of Web 2.0 tools with specific reference to Penzu as an integrated activity in developing students' writing skills. The findings of this study can fill this gap, and contribute to classroom applications in language education contexts. Therefore, the research question of this study is:

- What are the perceptions of EFL instructors concerning online diary (Penzu) applications in developing writing skill in EFL classes?

Literature Review

Popularity of blogs or online diaries has increased recently among the Internet users, mostly among teenagers, by affecting their writing behaviors, and combining teaching practices with blogs or online diaries in educational contexts has become the subject of many studies for different purposes (Bloch, 2004; Coşkun & Marlowe, 2015; Featro & DiGregorio, 2016; Meechai, 2010; Morgan, 2012; Mynard, 2007; Noytim, 2010; Vurdien, 2013). The studies which are directly related to the current study were provided in this section.

Several studies reported findings related to the implementation of Web 2.0 tools in terms of writing skill. For example, Blackmore-Squires (2010) investigated the impact of blog use in improving writing skill in second language learning. Questionnaires, interviews and the comments made by students on the blog were employed to gather data from the students. The results revealed that the students were in favor of the blog use, and the blog helped them to enhance their writing. Similarly, Noytim (2010) explored the potentials of Weblog practices on English language learning through the views of students at a university context in Thailand. Questionnaires and student blogs were used to gather data. The results reported that the participants viewed blogs as effective tools contributing their writing and reading skills in English. McGrail and Davis (2011) questioned the impacts of blogging on students writing development. Blogging posts of fifth grade students at elementary level were collected as primary data and were analyzed through content analysis. The results indicated that the students took ownership of their writings after blogging. Additionally, Alshumaimeri (2011) figured out the implementation of wikies in developing students' foreign language writing performance in Saudi Arabia. The results revealed that the target group performed better than the other group in terms of accuracy and quality in writing. Furthermore, Dizon and Thanyawatpokin (2018) tried to compare the implementation of Facebook and blogs on writing skill with regard to syntactic complexity, lexical variety and fluency at a Japanese EFL context. The results showed that blogging was more influential in promoting of EFL writing and the students had more favorable attitudes

towards blogging in EFL writing than the students in Facebook group. Lastly, Alsmari (2019) searched for the use of Edmodo, one of Web 2.0 tools, as an integrated tool in Saudi students' EFL writing skills. The results indicated that Edmodo was very effective in developing their writing skills.

There are also studies regarding the implementation of Web 2.0 tools in developing other language skills and application of these tools in language education contexts. For example, Sun and Yang (2015) integrated Web 2.0 tools into EFL speaking classes, and reported that this process helped students to enhance their speaking skills in English. Aşıksoy (2018) tried to reveal the attitudes of ELT students towards Web 2.0 tools in improving their language skills. The results indicated that most of the students had insights on Web 2.0 tools in EFL learning. Also, the students expressed that Web 2.0 tools support them in developing their foreign language skills, especially listening skill. Furthermore, Mynard (2007) explored the blog keeping habits of Japanese female college students. They kept blogs in order to reflect on their language learning during their stay in the UK for learning English. The results suggested the application of blogs in language education contexts. Ulrich and Karvonen (2011) investigated the integration of Web 2.0 tools into formal online learning settings. The results highlighted several areas for professional development, design in instruction and institutional changes. Balbay and Erkan (2018) investigated both the perceptions of ELT instructors regarding the Web 2.0 technology use in academic English classes at university context and the effects of using Web 2.0 tools in teaching. The results indicated important changes in the instructors' perceptions towards Web 2.0 tools use in classes. Cho and Casteneda (2019) searched for whether a grammar-focused mobile application causes motivational and affective engagement in Spanish courses. The results revealed that the mobile application helped students in facilitating their engagement.

Method

Research Design

This study was carried out in the spring term of 2018-2019 academic year. The study tried to explore the views of foreign language instructors on the applicability of Penzu in foreign language classes as an integrated tool to develop language learners' writing skills. Accordingly, a sample Penzu page was prepared and introduced to the participants. The study followed qualitative inquiry and collected data through face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interview questions were directed to the participants to collect the data. The researcher wrote the expressions of participants during the interviews. Descriptive analysis was applied to the data. The results were categorized and presented through tables and quotations from the participants.

Study Group

The study was conducted at School of Foreign Languages of a public university in Turkey. The participants were instructors of foreign languages, and they were chosen purposefully and conveniently in line with the purpose of study (Bernard, 2000; Patton, 2002). Only volunteer instructors were included in the study. There were nine participants in total. Most of them (n=8) were EFL instructors and only one of them was instructor of French (n=1). Their experiences in teaching foreign language ranged from three years to twenty-five years. There were three instructors who graduated from an English Language and Literature (ELL) department, four instructors who graduated from an English Language Teaching (ELT) department, and one instructor who graduated from a French Language Teaching department (FLT), and one instructor who graduated from an English Linguistics (EL) department.

Data Collection Tool

An interview form involving four semi-structured interview questions was developed by the researcher. The questions addressed at investigating the views of participants on the applicability of Penzu in foreign language classes as an integrated tool to develop language learners' writing skills. The questions focused on applicability of Penzu as an online diary in developing foreign language learners' writing skills, applicability of Penzu as an integrated activity in foreign language writing classes, strengths and weaknesses of Penzu. The semi-structured interview questions of this study were: 'Can Penzu as an online diary help foreign language learners to develop their writing skills?', 'Can we use Penzu as an integrated activity in foreign language classes to develop learners'

writing skills?’, ‘What are the strengths of Penzu as an online diary?’ and ‘What are the weaknesses of Penzu as an online diary?’.

Data Collection

Firstly, the researcher introduced Penzu to the participants, and they were required to engage in the features of Penzu. After they had gained insight about Penzu, they were interviewed by the researcher on face-to-face basis. The interviews took nearly half an hour. The researcher noted the expressions of participants during the interviews. The researcher labelled each participant with an alphabetical letter from “A” to “H” to ensure the confidentiality of their identities.

Data Analysis

After the interviews, the data were analyzed by the researcher and an expert in the area. Descriptive analysis was applied to the data. The themes were defined in line with the interview questions, and direct quotations from the participants were given to reflect the participants’ views in a clear and striking way (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Member checking, intercoder agreement, peer review and external audits strategies were followed by the researcher in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the processes (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). First, the interview transcriptions were shared with the participants to prevent any misunderstanding. Next, the interview transcriptions were shared with other experts to seek agreement on the data set. Then, processes followed by the researcher were discussed with a peer who had experience on the subject. Last, a reviewer provided comments on the processes which were followed during the study.

Findings

Whether Penzu as an online diary can help foreign language learners to develop their writing skills was investigated in the first interview question. The following table (Table 1) shows the results of descriptive analysis for this interview question:

Table 1. Penzu as an Online Diary

Theme	Category	Participants	n	Total
Writing Skill	Positive Views	A, C, D, E, F, G, H	8	9
	Negative Views	B	1	

According to Table 1, most of the participants (n=8) think that Penzu as an online diary can help foreign language learners to develop their writing skills, while only one of the participants (n=1) expressed negative view regarding Penzu. Sample quotations from the participants for this interview question are as follows:

A: “Exactly. Writing online and having the possibility of correcting mistakes help a foreign language learner to develop writing skill.”

B: “If a person likes writing, even just one piece of paper is enough. So, this website can only be helpful for such kind of learners. For others, I don’t think it will be useful.”

C: “I searched the site. I think it might help. This site provides a positive contribution to improving students’ writing skills.”

D: “I suppose that it would help in certain aspects. In my views, getting the students do it regularly could be the main issue with this part.”

E: “I think it can only help foreign language learner develop their fluency in writing. Their accuracy in terms of grammar, vocabulary or punctuation will not develop because of lack of assessment or feedback. It can also help them in developing their creativities.”

F: “Yes, it can.”

G: "Penzu can improve learners' creative writing skills."

H: "I believe in the usefulness of this online diary to improve greatly pupils' writing skills."

Whether we can use Penzu as an integrated activity in foreign language classes to develop students' writing skills was investigated in the second interview question. Table 2 shows the results of descriptive analysis for this interview question:

Table 2. Penzu as an Integrated Activity

Theme	Category	Participants	n	Total
Integrated Activity	Positive Views	A, B, C, D, F, G, H	8	9
	Negative Views	E	1	

Table 2 shows that most of the participants (n=8) had positive views regarding that we can use Penzu as an integrated activity in foreign language classes to develop students' writing, while only one of them (n=1) had negative views. Quotations from the participants for this interview question are as follows:

A: "Of course, we can."

B: "Using technology may affect some students positively."

C: "Yes we can use it, because students are already using the internet constantly."

D: "Yes, it seems possible. The question is how to get students do it use it regularly."

E: "Since it is the online form of an ordinary journal, there is nothing special about it other than appealing to students who like technology. However, they print out the material and take it to the classroom for feedback or assessment, it will serve the purpose. Again, students who keep an ordinary journal can also bring their writings to class."

F: "Yes, we can."

G: "It can be given as daily/weekly homework."

H: "Written assignments could be inflicted over Penzu, where teacher evaluation can be performed and realized online by teachers having assigned related posts."

The participants' views on the strengths of Penzu as an online diary was investigated in the third interview question. Categories obtained for this interview question are as follows:

Table 3. Strengths of Penzu

Theme	Category	Participants	n
Strengths	Appealing for New Generation	A, B,C, E, F, D	8
	Being Free of Charge	B, G	2
	Availability	B, C, E, F, H	5

According to Table 3, the strengths of Penzu as an online diary was categorized under 3 main categories and these are 'appealing for new generation', 'being free of charge' and 'availability'. Quotations from the participants for this interview question are as follows:

A: "Students have difficulty in writing on a paper. But if they can write as they text, it will be much easier."

B: "Unfortunately, I could not see any."

C: “In my opinion, the most advantageous part of the site in question is that it is always online, available and not too boring for students.”

E: “It appeals to new generation who do not like paper and pencil. It is customizable. Students can decorate their online journal according to their own delight. They can change color, font or add photos easily. Penzu has a mobile app so it is available wherever students go. They won’t lose their writings because the program or the app stores them online.”

F: “You can use it both on the Web and mobile. Students may prefer writing online to writing on a paper. It is easy to share journals via e-mail.”

G: “It is free of charge. Students can use it as a personal diary.”

H: “Internet connection could once be a problem, but now that is so irrelevant. I can’t think of any problems caused by Penzu-based homework or assignments.”

The participants’ views on the weaknesses of Penzu as an online diary was investigated in the fourth interview question. Table 4 presents categories obtained for this interview question as:

Table 4. Weaknesses of Penzu

Theme	Category	Participants	n
Weaknesses	Giving Feedback	B, E	2
	Penzu Pro	E, F	2

According to Table 4, ‘giving feedback’ and ‘Penzu Pro’ were two categories that two participants expressed similar views on the weaknesses of Penzu as an online diary. The other participants expressed different views on the weaknesses of Penzu as an online diary. Quotations from the participants for this interview question are as:

A: “There is nothing to do if the student is not willing to write. So, at this point Penzu should encourage students to write.”

B: “What I found missing in this platform is a virtual classroom, where participants can see each other’s work. Yet, I don’t mean public in general instead the real classmates. Moreover, almost everything is charged with a fee via Penzu Pro. Another annoying thing about this website is that it sends “how is your day” message every day.”

C: “As an online diary, I can’t say that it has many weaknesses, but I think the diaries that the students write are too difficult to control.”

E: “Students cannot get feedback from their teachers or peers. Some premium features of the program need paying. Some old school may worry about privacy.”

F: “It is more of a personal thing rather than being a classroom material. There is not a teacher student module. Therefore, it is impossible to give feedback on Penzu.”

G: “It lacks progress monitoring tools. Guided writings cannot be designed as homework. There are no daily/weekly topics.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study primarily indicated that the EFL instructors were in favor of implementing Penzu as an integrated tool in foreign language teaching classes to enhance students’ writing skills. Findings obtained from this study supports the previous research studies indicated in the literature. For example, Coşkun and Marlowe (2015) both introduced Web 2.0 tools of Animoto and Fotobabble for ELT contexts, and tried to reveal EFL instructors’ attitudes towards their implementation in ELT. They reported that the participants had positive views on their application in language teaching. Anglin (2017) stated that the teachers had positive views on Web 2.0 tools as these tools support students in terms of learning, building community and presenting instruction in different ways. Similarly, Güler and Özkan (2018) investigated prospective EFL teachers’ opinions on the

usages of Web 2.0 tools with specific reference to podcasts and to what extent they benefit from podcasts in their education contexts. The results demonstrated that the participants are in favor of using podcasts in their practices. Likewise, Park (2013) provided college instructors with guidance on Web 2.0 tools to increase learner engagement in tasks, and suggested practical ways for using various Web 2.0 tools in order to foster engagement in reading tasks at classroom contexts.

However, one of the participants (E) stated that instructors who are digital immigrants may worry about their application educational contexts in relation the weaknesses of Penzu as an online diary. This finding also supports previous studies. For example, Morgan (2012) stated that explicit teaching is required in order to benefit from these tools' potentials in a maximum way. Moreover, Konstantinidis, Theodosiadou and Pappos (2013) provided a source of Web 2.0 tools for education contexts in order to motivate teachers to use these tools in their classes. The teachers with low technology skills showed positive attitudes towards them.

In conclusion, this study showed that foreign language instructors at a public university in Turkey were in favor of implementing Penzu as an online diary in foreign language classes as an integrated activity to enhance foreign language learners' writing skills though it involves several weaknesses.

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