CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Several things related to the research are discussed in this chapter, which covers the background, research questions, research purposes, research significances, research limitations, rationale, and previous research.

A. Background

Writing is one of the skills in learning English that should be mastered by students, which is also considered as an essential skill in acquiring a language for EFL learners (Harmer, 1986). Furthermore, writing is written communication that is believed to bring opportunities for students' success, self-development, and significant interrelationships (Flynn, 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007). Writing also advantages students to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas, which Clouse (2008) would say that writing helps students retell experiences and deliver messages they want to convey (cited in Amartiwi, 2019). Manchon (2011 in hastuti) claimed that writing is a purposeful and communicative activity of responding to other people or texts.

However, writing is still considered as a challenging and complex skill even for its native speaker (Brown, 2004; Saddler et al., 2004). Since writing is a skill that is an action-process skill that needs more steps, such as organizing the ideas, putting the ideas into written form, and revising the writing product (Meyer, 2005, cited in Hastuti, 2016). Those steps depend on whom the writer is writing to, why the writer is writing, what the writer is writing about, where the writer is, how much time the writer has, what the writer feels, and others. Maley (2021) said that writing also focuses on feelings, physical sensations,

musicality, experiences, intuition of the writer. Otherwise, in non english country such as Indonesia, students has limited contact with language they are learning especially Eglish, they find difficulties in arranging words into sentences and vocabulary lackness (Hastuti, 2016b). The students also consider writing as a boring activity (Jill, 2005).

 Nowadays, there are activities that can support in improving students' writing skills, one of them is writing personal letters (Amartiwi, 2019). In writing an informal or personal letter, the writer sometimes writes his or her experiences, feelings, personal matters and thoughts in the letter (Nordquist, 2020). Since personal letter is usually sent to a personal correspondence, someone we know, or a stranger (Trianto, 2007), it is usually concerns to a personal things which aims to strengthen relationship between the correspondences. As stated by Shepherd and Hogan (2008) in writing an informal letter writer does not have to proofread before sending the letter, since a good letter writing feels like a good conversation which can nourish relationship. Other than strengthen relationships, personal letter also has other purposes which depends on what the letter is going to deliver to the recipient Bly (2011).

 In this digital age, teacher can easily use the technology as a teaching aid or media in teaching the four English skills that include writing skills. The use of multimedia for language instructions recently has developed rapidly over the past two decades. Moreover, many students nowadays interact on social networks, using multimedia and digital tools to communicate in their everyday lives (Williams & Beam, 2018). Thus, a teacher can benefit by applying the

technology the students use in teaching writing. For example, teacher can use the E-pal as the teaching media. According to Harmer (1986), e-pal is a letter-writing activity to interact or communicate with others worldwide, using a computer or other multimedia devices and internet networks. For example, writing an e-mail to people abroad or write a digital letter through an application on a smartphone to someone across geographical country is included as e-pal (Brand et al., 2011). This E-pal writing activity can engage the students in writing English (Hastuti, 2016b). This writing strategy has been widely used in different formal education settings, with participants of all ages and language proficiency levels (Larotta and Serrano, 2012, cited in Hastuti, 2016). Many benefits teachers can get by using E-pal. For instance, it can greatly improve students' English language development and motivation, encourage students' written fluency, and give them a chance to real communication (Harmer, 1986). The E-pal project enables students to communicate with the native speaker of the target language (Yang & Chen, 2007). Harmer (1986) also said that this activity enables a real experience of interacting with a native English speaker.

 This kind of letter writing is more commonly used today since technology has been applied in many things in today's life (Casanave, 2011). There are many writing letter application that can be used on a smartphone, one of them is *Slowly*. This digital letter writing application provides a similar structure and function as a conventional letter. By using this application, user can send and exchange letters with many recipients in many countries with a fluent or native speaker of English. Just like a conventional letter, in *Slowly*, actual-time

estimation is used for a letter to be received by the recipients, yet it is faster than the actual time, which usually takes two days long for the letter to be accepted by recipient from the US.

As stated by Huges and Mahalingappa (2018) saying that other researchers found, digital pen pal has benefited students to achieve vocabulary improvement, reading comprehension, composition skill, and increase students' motivation to read (Gambrell et al., 2011; Teale & Gambrell, 2007). Huges (2018) found that the students (who are pre-service teachers) involved in the project increase awareness of modifying the language to communicate with English learners by scaffolding their vocabulary and sentence structures in order to be more understandable to read.

This research aims to figure out the experience and benefits of a digital pen pal (e-pal) helps on improving the aspects of EFL students' personal letter writing. Regarding to research questions, first, the researcher aims to figure out on how the activity of e-pal helps in improving the aspects of EFL students' personal letter writing. Second, this research inteds to find out students' responses toward the activity of e-pal related to their improvement of their English writing The researcher employs three former students of the English Education Department at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia, and three English speakers who act as the recipients responding to the students' letters. To focus her discussion, the researcher concerns with 1) the students' progress in their personal letters, which are regarded as the only manuscript which is plausible to be analyzed to see what aspects of English writing are possibly improved,

and 2) the students' responses toward the activity of e-pal related to their improvement of English writing.

B. Research Questions

Referring to the background, the problems of this research are formulated as follows:

1. What aspects of the EFL students' personal letters are improved in English writing within the activity of e-pal?
2. What are the students' responses toward the activity of e-pal related to their improvement of their English writing?

C. Research Purposes

From the research questions above, this research is intended to gain the following purposes:

1. To find out the aspects of EFL students' personal letters are improved in English writing within the activity of e-pal.
2. To find out students' responses toward the activity of e-pal related to their improvement of their English writing.

D. Research Significances

The researcher expects that this study becomes the source of information about improving students' learning English using e-pal activity. This study is expected to give some new information or ideas for teachers about the benefit of using E-pal in learning activities. Practically, this research gives significance to:

1. Students

This research is also expected to help the students improve their English learning by using e-pal, since this writing letter activity helps students gain a realistic experience in practicing English.

2. Teachers

This research may offer the benefits of using the E-pal for teachers in engaging the students in learning English writing activity. Moreover, it can be an alternative way as a writing activity for the teacher to choose. Since e-pal activity may be a personal trait for the students in their daily life to practice their English writing.

Theoretically, this research can help some academicians or other researchers do other research related to this research to support their research.

E. Scope of Research

Some points limit this research. First, to see students' learning English improvements, only the manuscript of letters is used. Second, three participants, who were former students at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung involved in this research. Third, "Slowly," a letter corresponding application on smartphone, is used as a media for sending a digital letter.

F. Conceptual Framework

Sending a personal letter, making a pen pal was a popular activity throughout the world, particularly for a language learner. Learning a new language by communicating with new people with different cultures is an exciting activity to do. This exchanging letter activity to each other allows language learners to share experiences, cultures, or even daily activities casually with limited writing restrictions (Moore & Ritter, 2008 cited in Hughes & Mahalingappa, 2018). A personal letter has four general structure: the heading that usually contains a date, the opening contains opening salutation and identity information of the recipient, the body contains all information, and the closing contains complimentary closing and the letter writer's signature (Sabin, 2011). Unlike formal letters that need to be aware of many elements, jargon and cliches which often appears in informal letter (Fry, 2012, p. 95). Since a personal letter is written in an informal writing style, it is often sent to a close friend or people have chatted often (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007, cited in Huriyah & Nurhasanah, 2019). However, conventional personal letters are done traditionally by writing

on a paper and sent through post office. In fact, in the age of technology, conventional writing letter is rarely used nowadays. Many people are now interacting among themselves using social networks, multimedia, and digital tools for their everyday communication (Williams & Beam, 2018).

However, kind of conventional writing letter still exists and not extinct. It evolves into various forms of letters like an e-mail that people often use today to apply for a job, chat with a friend abroad, or find a friend to learn a new language and culture (Huriyah & Nurhasanah, 2019). But now, letter does not only appear as an e-mail form. It turns into many letters writing application and slightly similar to a social network application that allows users to find new friends by sending a digital letter. This digital exchange letter is also known as digital pen pal (E-pal) (Hughes & Mahalingappa, 2018). E-pal or mouse pal activity is an exchanging letter to make a friend or connection all over the world (Harmer, 1986). This e-pal writing activity can engage the students in writing English (Hastuti, 2016). This writing activity has been widely used in different formal or non-formal education setting; it has been used with participants of all ages and language proficiency level (Larotta and Serrano, 2012 cited in Hastuti, 2016) since e-pal activity is costless and easier to do (Shepherd & Hogan, 2008).

Furthermore, this e-pal activity will involve students interacting with the recipient using a smartphone application called Slowly. Students were matched with three English fluent speakers from several countries as recipients, and they were allowed to talk things randomly since the researcher does not establish the topic of letter. This random topic helps writing letter goes naturally as its nature of writing letter. Creswell (2014, p.234) stated that one of qualitative research characteristics is a natural setting, in which the researcher does not arrange research situation to collect data. Instead, the research is done in its natural setting where the participants experience the study's issue since natural settings also influence participants' behaviors and outcomes (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The digital letter exchange activity will be held in three weeks with minimally two times letter writing or interaction in a week. As mentioned before, to interact with recipient, a digital letter application will be used, and it is Slowly.

A secure smartphone application which provides access to communicate with people worldwide in the form of digital letter writing. Like conventional letter exchange, digital letter through Slowly needs time for the letter to be received. It depends on how far the distance between sender and recipient. However, to access this application, students must register and make an account. Then students initiated the digital letter exchange by sending their first letter to some recipients. Students will report their letters every time they get answers from recipient to researcher to be analyzed each week.

Many benefits learners can get by using e-pal as a learning activity. For instance, it can significantly improve students' English language development and motivation and encourage students' written fluency, giving them a chance to real communication (Harmer, 1986). Since e-pal activity enables students to communicate with native speakers of the target language (Yang & Chen, 2007). E-pal activity may also reflect students' new role as a content expert (Eppley et al., 2011), a content expert related to a book that students read, discussed with the e-pal in letter communication process. Regarding writing skills, research by Huges (2018) found that students can create comprehensible written vocabulary and sentence structure while the students were communicating with English learners. Barksdale (2007) stated that pen pal allows students to enjoy writing since they were motivated to read the letters and write responses to pen pal.

Other than writing skills, other studies found that e-pal activity can increase other language skills (reading). It also increases social and cultural awareness, can expand students' world view, and students or instructor perceptions that technology enhances language learning (Shandomo, 2009; Yang & Chen, 2007). Beauvois (1994) stated that students get confidence in speaking. The conversation via network or e-pal, certain routinized expressions, encourages students' development of structures that assist speaking (cited in Yang & Chen, 2007). Pen pal also gives the students more positive perspectives about learning English since essential to communicate using well written and understandable English to easily understand their pen pal peers (Barksdale et al., 2007).

This study uses a rubric by Brown (2007) in assessing students' personal

letter writing to see the improvement of English learning aspect through writing letters three weeks in a row. Only three aspects of English learning will be assessed: grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Brown (2004, p.220) stated that writing letters are included as imitative in the category of writing performance that learners need to attain besides other writing mechanics such as punctuation, words, and spelling. That is why spelling, punctuation, and capitalization will be the focus on the mechanics aspect. Simultaneously, the writing's grammatical aspect will only focus on the subject-verb agreement and tenses used in the letter writing.

G. Previous Research

Some studies discuss improving students' English writing, particularly the pen pal and digital pen pal activity, which can be used as the present study references. As the study conducted previously regarding pen pan and digital pen pal found, letter writing benefits were shown to the English learners and adult pen pal (Gambrell et al., 2011; Brock et al., 2007) cited in Huges (2018).

Qualitative research by Huges and Mahalingappa (2018) involving pre-service teachers as the participants and English learners as the recipient, used the journal reflections or a literature-based pen pal program with the written expressions throughout literature as the central point of exchanging letter through an e-mail and aims to analyze gained experience and benefits by the pre-service teacher after interacting with the English learner through the digital pen pal (E-pal). This research also shows that pre-service teachers were able to build the written vocabulary and sentence structure to be a more comprehensible language for English learners. So, digital pen pal provides potential benefits to the students and the pre-service teacher.

Furthermore, Hastuti (2016) reported that letter writing with the pen pal could be an alternative way to motivate the writing students, since letter writing is a fun and exciting activity. Students also can directly communicate with people around the world (Harmer, 1986). The subject of this descriptive-qualitative study were senior high school students and using recount text. The

conclusion is that pen pal project can be used as an alternative way to teach writing recount text to senior high school students.

While Shandomo's (2009) research resulted, pen pal can broaden the elementary students' view of the world. This research also used the traditional letter exchange among elementary students in a different country. Besides, it broadens the world's view, the pen pal project allows elementary students to learn and appreciate another culture. Students' progress and success in writing can be identified since they show their interest and motivation in witting.

Another research by (Gambrell et al., 2011) shows that authentic literacy tasks such as reading, writing and, discussion using pen pal intervention potentially supports and sustain students' literacy motivation and critical thinking. This research explores elementary students' engagement with the focus on authentic reading, writing, and discussion task. A mixed-method design with triangulation model is employed, and involving elementary students and adult pen pal as participants to read books and exchange letters about the books.

This study is different from some aspects if compared to the previous research, for instance, participants of the research. This research, involves former university students as the participants. Another difference is that the letter exchange is done electronically, and the methodology used is different. Besides, this study focuses on English writing learning aspects' improvement while other previous studies do not.