

Development of English Writing Skills through Blended Learning among ESL Learners in Malaysia

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Abstract:

Developing writing proficiency is complex as students need to master specific rules and acquire certain skills. This complexity often obstructs students' interest and eventually affects their comprehension and performance in language learning. Research has highlighted the significance of English as a Second Language (ESL), particularly in the Malaysian context. This study, therefore, aims to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning in developing English writing skills, particularly among ESL learners at a Polytechnic in Malaysia. The study adopted quasi-experimental analysis in which pre-test and post-test were used as data-gathering instruments. The data were gathered from a purposive sample of 60 ESL students separated into an experimental group and a control group. The data were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings showed that blended learning is significantly effective in developing writing performance among ESL students in the selected institution. Further analysis revealed a slight improvement among students who learned through the traditional approach. This study highlights useful findings that could be useful in designing English curriculums, particularly in higher institutions. However, this experiment focuses on students' performance, further research may explore instructors' practices in Malaysian higher intuitions.

Keywords: Argumentative essay, blended learning, ESL learners, Malaysia, polytechnic, writing performance

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Introduction

As a result of technological advancement, web-based tools have been integrated into the teaching and learning environment, which is known as blended learning (Abdul Rahman, Azmi, & Hassan, 2020; Graham & Allen, 2009; Ismail, Ali, Yunus, & Ayub, 2014). Blended learning is the mixture of traditional face-to-face learning and web-based learning (Boelens, Laer, Wever & Elen, 2015; Bowyer & Chambers, 2017). The blended learning approach is simply defined “as a learning environment that combines technology with face-to-face learning” (Akkoyunlu & Soyulu, 2006, p. 43). Teachers and students now utilize available web-based software and online platform as well as online materials for teaching and learning purposes (Chan & Leung, 2016; Yusoff, Yusoff, & Md Noh, 2017). This development allows educational activities to occur outside of the physical classroom environment, which enables students to access learning materials anywhere and at any time to achieve their learning goals (Kibby, 2007).

Writing proficiency is considered more complex and challenging than other language skills as students are required to master certain rules and develop skills related to handwriting, spelling, flow, punctuations as well as organizing ideas into comprehensible texts (Richards, Richards, & Renandya & Renandya, 2002; Alsamadani, 2018; Adas & Bakir, 2013, Akhiar, Mydin & Kasuma, 2017). This complexity of writing often obstructs students’ interest and eventually affects their comprehension and performance in language learning. In this regard, Zainab, Isarji, and Zaidi (2017) argued that students with poor writing proficiency tend to perform poorly in written examination and reporting research projects. This is because academic writing requires expertise in productive skills and continuous practice (Akhtar & Hussain, 2019). According to Mohite (2014), students often do not take writing skills important as compared to speaking and listening skills because they do not view written texts as a vital means of communication fluent message.

Studies have highlighted the importance of teaching and learning English as a Second Language (ESL), particularly in the Malaysian context (Atek, Hassan, Azmi, Yah, Azmi, 2020; Darmi & Albion, 2013; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014; Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, Jerome, 2017). However, poor English communication skills have become a major concern in the country (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020; Azmi, Hashim, & Yusoff, 2018). To achieve positive learning outcomes, students must develop good writing skills (Quvanch & Kew, 2020). This is because writing proficiency is one of the most essential skills in language learning (Ahmadpour & Khaasteh, 2017; Banditvilai, 2016; Bowyer & Chambers, 2017; Abdul Kadir & Noor, 2015; Permana, 2017; Quvanch & Naw, 2020; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Thus, there is a need to explore how ESL students can develop writing skills.

To enhance learning outcomes, the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Learning Institution (2015-2025) aims to fully implement the blended learning approach in both public and private higher learning institutions (MOH, 2013). Despite the significance of English writing abilities in the Malaysian educational sector, very few studies were conducted to examine the effectiveness of blended learning in developing writing skills among ESL learners, particularly in the Malaysian context (Annamalai, 2019; Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). These studies used qualitative approaches and suggested further quantitative research. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning in developing English writing skills at a Malaysian Polytechnic.

Literature Review

Blended Learning Approach

The blended learning approach is a strategic and systematic method that incorporates face-to-face learning and virtual methods of learning for educational purposes (Saliba, Rankine, & Cortez, 2013). The blended learning tools are categorized as Learning Management System (LMS) mechanisms, synchronized tools, and social networking platforms. LMS tools are web-based technologies, such as Blackboard and Moodle (Alias & Zainuddin, 2005). Synchronized tools comprise openly accessible tools such as Dropbox, Google Apps, and Zoho Apps, while social networking tools consist of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp (Al-Samarraie & Saeed, 2018; Kakosimos, 2015; Wang, Chen, & Khan, 2014). Various learning resources, such as e-notes, live streaming videos, academic software, forums, and blogs, make blended learning appealing (Ike & Okechukwu, 2015).

Moreover, Tarus, Gichoya, and Muumbo (2015) mentioned that blended learning consists of three components, namely; technological components, organizational components, and pedagogical modules. Technological modules consist of computers, network connectivity. Organizational components consist of e-learning policies, financial allocation, training, and top management support towards the utilization of online learning. Pedagogical components characterize instructors' skills in using technological devices and quality content in the teaching and learning environment.

The blended learning approach is now widely used in the educational environment due to its various advantages. According to Bowyer and Chambers (2017), blended learning enables students to work and develop learning skills independently. Lloyd-Smith (2010) also mentioned that blended learning helps in maximizing classroom space and school resources because it allows students to have multiple responsibilities outside of the school environment. Additionally, research shows that blended learning tends to improve students' communication and reduce communication anxiety as well as encourage students to be self-directed and motivated learners (Liu, 2013; Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). It also engages learners in a pedagogical experience that suits their personal and academic interests (Krasnova & Ananjev, 2015).

Additionally, Andrejeva and Ostroverkhaia (2017) found that the blended learning approach helps students to collocate, use reference materials, and search for information independently. Another study identified some of the strengths of blended learning such as personalization, flexibility, adaptability, and interactivity Shaidullin, Safiullin, Gafurov, & Safiullin, 2014). Similarly, Shand and Farrelly (2018) enumerated some benefits of blended learning, including flexibility, accessibility, and interaction. Blended learning makes learning more creative and easier for both educators and students (Miniaoui & Kaur, 2014; Purnawarman, Susilawati, & Sundayana, 2016). In blended learning, students do not have to wait until the next meeting or see appointments to see instructors in their offices (Miniaoui & Kaur, 2014).

According to Cui and Hu (2020), blended learning makes it easier for teachers to organize learning materials compared to the traditional approach where teachers deal with paper documents. Thus, blended learning saves time for both teachers and students. However, students must have self-discipline and time management to succeed in the blended learning environment (Shand &

Farrelly, 2018). In the traditional learning approach, students are given questions to discuss and solve the problems during classroom time and or group discussions among students, while teachers facilitate, explain, and provide exercises. In contrast, blended learning requires students to work independently. Teachers provide related videos, lecture notes, and tutorial exercises in online mode (Yusoff et al., 2017). For the blended learning approach to be successful, students must possess certain qualities such as self-motivation and the ability to work independently (Wivell & Day, 2015).

Blended Learning in the ESL Writing Context

A number of previous studies have concentrated on the effectiveness, effects, and benefits of blended learning using varying designs, scopes, and participants (e.g. Abdul Rahman et al., 2020; Alrouji, 2020; Annamalai, Tan, & Abdullah, 2016; Anggrawan, 2020; Camalahan & Ruley, 2014; Jin, Su, & Lei, 2020; Lam, Hew, & Chiu, 2017; Lien, 2015; McCall, 2017; Milad, 2017; Permana & Santosa, 2018; Permanda, 2017; Scott, Ulmer-Krol, & Jason, 2020; Spanou & Zafiri, 2019; Yusuf, Yusuf, Erdiana, & Pratama, 2018). These studies proved that blended learning is significantly effective in developing positive learning outcomes among ESL students. For example, Anggrawan (2020) examined how the blended learning approach impacted students' learning outcomes. The findings indicated that blended learning had a significant impact on students' learning outcomes.

Specifically, Alrouji (2020) examined the effectiveness of blended learning in developing English written communication skills among Saudi female students and their level of satisfaction with the learning approach. According to the findings, blended learning facilitates interaction and communication as well as reduces pressure in the English writing course. Similarly, Keshta, and Harb (2013) used an experimental design to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching English writing skills in Palestinian institutions. The study revealed that blended learning helps students to develop writing skills significantly.

Additionally, Abdul Rahman et al. (2020) used focused group interviews to explore ESL learners' perceptions of blended learning in the English writing course. The findings revealed that blended learning "helps the students to develop written communication skills, self-esteem, and interest in learning English writing" (p. 7698). This development occurs through the exchange of written information as well as access to several reading materials on the online platforms. Likewise, McCall (2017) explored the usefulness of blended learning in enhancing students' academic reading and writing skills. The study employed action research involving classroom observation, survey, and interview. The participants viewed the blended learning approach as an resourceful and collaborative means of developing reading and writing skills.

In essence, previous studies found that students' writing performance had improved significantly after learning through the blended learning approach (Annamalai et al., 2016; Camalahan & Ruley, 2014; Jin et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2017; Lien, 2015; Milad, 2017; Permana & Santosa, 2018; Scott et al., 2020). Blended learning was found to improve ESL learners' writing ability, essay composition, critical arguments, linguistic competencies, grammar, spelling, topic sentence, punctuation marks, capitalization, organization, planning as well as reduce language

anxiety and outline ideas (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Challob, Bakar, & Latif, 2016; Lam et al., 2017; Permana & Santosa, 2018; Spanou & Zafiri, 2019; Yusuf et al., 2018).

Although blended learning was found to be effective in developing students' writing skills, research shows that there are certain challenges associated with this learning approach. These challenges include the high cost of internet, poor technical skills, connectivity, and management issues (Hassan et al., 2021; Lien, 2015; Stine, 2014; Yusuf et al., 2018). According to Hassan et al. (2021), challenges of using blended learning tools among ESL learners include "include inadequate knowledge of technology, poor internet connectivity, inability to upload large files, and loss of password" (p. 300). Another problem is that blended learning might be unsuitable for students with different backgrounds (Chen & Lu, 2013).

To sum up, previous studies have proven the effectiveness of blended learning in developing ESL learners' writing abilities. The studies used various designs such as experimental design (eg. Permana, 2017; Spanou & Zafiri, 2019), observation and interviews (e.g. Challob et al., 2016), and focused group discussion (e.g. Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). Also, the studies were conducted in different parts of the world, including Saudi Arabia (e.g. Alrouji, 2020), Palestine (e.g. Keshta & Harb, 2013), Greece (e.g. Spanou & Zafiri, 2019). A few studies focused on the Malaysian context (e.g. Abdul Rahman et al., 2020; Annamalai, 2019; Challob et al., 2016) and suggested further quantitative research. Therefore, using an experimental approach, this study aims to evaluate the performance of ESL learners after learning English writing through the blended approach at a Malaysian Polytechnic. Based on the literature review, we developed the following hypotheses to be tested.

H₁ There is a significant improvement in writing performance among ESL learners after learning through blended learning in the selected institution.

H₀ There is no significant improvement in writing performance among ESL learners after learning through blended learning in the selected institution.

Methodology

Design

This study adopts a quantitative approach in which a quasi-experimental analysis was conducted to explore how the blended learning approach improves ESL learners' English writing skills. Experimental design is utilized to determine relationships between variables (Creswell, 2013; Barnes, Hauser, Heikes and et al., 2016; Harwell, 2011).

Instruments

This study used pre-test post-test data-gathering instruments. The pre-test and post-test were conducted to determine the students' writing achievement before and after learning through blended learning. The students were given 45 minutes to respond to the pre-test and post-test respectively. To ensure reliability and validity, the instruments were checked by experts to determine whether valid results and intended outcomes can be obtained. This is because validity and reliability tests are crucial in evaluating data collection instruments (Mohajan, 2017; Sekaran, 2003). Additionally, the questions were checked using a test-re-test procedure to ensure

consistency. Consistency is achieved when a test yields similar outcomes from similar respondents and situations (Sekaran, 2003). The tests contain an argumentative essay on a particular topic.

Participants

The data were collected from a purposive sample of 60 ESL students who take the Communicative English Course at a Polytechnic in Malaysia. According to Kumar (2011), purposive sampling refers to a technique of selecting participants based on a specific research purpose. Therefore, the participants of this study were selected based on their willingness and ability to provide relevant information. Only first-semester students of the Communicative English Course were selected. The participants were divided into a control group and an experimental group. First, a pre-test was conducted to determine the students' performance before the experiment. Subsequently, the control group was taught the skills of argumentative essay writing using the traditional teacher-centered approach, whereas the experimental group was taught using the blended learning approach.

Both the control group and the experimental group were taught for 12 weeks using the traditional approach and the blended learning approach respectively. Each semester lasts for 20 weeks which is enough to conduct an experimental study. Facebook, CIDOS, and WhatsApp were utilized in the blended learning approach. CIDOS is a web-based system designed for effective control over teaching and learning materials as well as knowledge sharing. After the 12th week, a post-test was conducted to ascertain the students' improvements in English writing skills for both groups.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test and descriptive statistics. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to evaluate the students' performance in the English writing course. This statistical tool is used "to examine differences between two independent groups on a continuous scale" (Milenovic, 2011, p. 73). The writing performance was evaluated based on their degree of improvement as obtained from the students' scores in both pre-writing and post-writing tests. The marking scheme was adopted and adapted from Communicative English course rubrics. All inferences were set at an alpha of ≤ 0.05 using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Findings

This study was set to examine the improvement of English writing performance through blended learning. A total of 60 first-year ESL students who take a communicative English course at a Malaysian higher institution were examined. The students' demographic information shows that 81.7 % of them were females while only 18.3 % were males. All the participants Malays and their ages range between 18-19 years. Also, all of them have been learning English for more than seven years. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the students' performance in English writing after learning through the blended learning approach. The pre-test and post-test results obtained from both groups were compared. These results are depicted in the following tables.

Table 1. *Differences in Writing Performance*

Writing Tests	Control Group			Experimental Group		
	N	Mean Rank	Ranks Sum	N	Mean Rank	Ranks Sum
Pre-test	30	30.58	917.50	30	30.42	912.50
Post-test	30	22.10	663.00	30	38.90	1167.00
Total	60	26.34	790.25	60	34.66	2079.5

Table 2. *Extent of writing performance*

Pre-writing test				Post-writing test			
Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
447.500	912.500	-.038	.969	198.000	663.000	-3.823	.000

Table 1 shows the differences in English writing performance between the experimental group and the control group. The findings revealed that the control group performed better (Mean Rank 30.58) than the experimental group (Mean Rank 30.42) in the pre-test essay writing. However, in the post-test, the experimental group performed significantly better (Mean Rank 38.90) compared to the control group (Mean Rank 22.10).

Table 2 further reveals the extent to which the scores differ in the pre-test and post-test. The pre-test results showed that there is no statistically significant difference in writing performance between the control group and the experimental group ($U = 447.5$, $p = .969$). The p-value, quoted next to Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed), is .969 which is beyond 0.05. However, the post-test results revealed that the experimental group performed significantly higher compared with the control group ($U = 198.00$, $p = .000$). The p-value is < 0.05 , which shows there is a statistically significant difference in the scores of post-tests between the experimental group and the control group. Based on this outcome, we accept the alternate hypothesis which assumes that there is a significant improvement in writing performance among ESL learners after learning through blended learning in the selected institution. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis which assumes that there is no significant improvement in writing performance among ESL learners after learning through blended learning in the selected institution.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study showed that blended learning is significantly effective in developing writing performance among ESL students in the selected institution. The control group achieved better than the experimental group in the pre-test. However, after learning through the blended learning approach, the experimental group improved significantly and outperformed the control group. The findings also showed a slight improvement made by students in the control group who learned through the traditional teacher-centered approach. However, a few factors that might influence the students' writing performance were observed, including restricted self-regulated learning, high level of inhibitions, and limited classroom activities. These findings are consistent

with many previous studies (e.g. Camalahan & Ruley, 2014; Jin et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2017; Milad, 2017; Permana & Santosa, 2018). According to Jin et al. (2020), blended learning improves learners' writing as they use different tools to generate in-depth discussion.

Specifically, research shows that various areas of English writing can be improved through the blended learning approach. For instance, the findings of Adas and Bakir (2013) demonstrated that through the blended learning approach, ESL learners can improve their writing skills in areas such as topic sentence, spelling, grammar, punctuation marks, and capitalization. Additionally, previous studies have proven that after experiencing the blended learning approach, ESL students improved their linguistic competencies (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019), argumentative essay writing (Lam et al., 2017), grammar, organization, planning, and development of writing ideas (Challob et al., 2016), communication competence, interest, and self-confidence in learning English writing (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020).

Moreover, the blended learning approach plays a crucial role in enhancing learners' writing skills, but tremendous efforts are required from the students, instructors, and institutions (Lien, 2015). This is because challenges, such as improper training of staff, poor technical competence among students, high cost of internet, poor connectivity, and administrative issues can hinder the smooth application of the blended learning approach. Also, learners must be managed carefully as blended learning might be unsuitable for students with different backgrounds (Chen & Lu, 2013). Adjusting ways of learning from secondary education to higher learning institutions, particularly in the case of this study, could be a challenging process for first-year students.

The application of blended learning in English writing courses could enhance self-regulated learning, self-confidence, and interactive classroom activities (Alouji, 2020; Cui and Hu, 2018; Scott et al., 2020). This is because active learning activities, such as collaborative learning, discussions, and presentations, would engage students more and foster social and academic learning outcomes. However, the Malaysian government needs to consider the possible challenges of the full implementation of the blended learning approach. The process taken must ensure students are prepared for the transformation. Various factors must be considered, including students' needs and preferences, teachers' skills, materials and sources, and type of courses.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the success of blended learning in developing English writing skills, particularly among ESL learners at a Polytechnic in Malaysia. The findings demonstrated that blended learning significantly improves ESL learners' writing skills. The effectiveness of blended learning could be due to its focus on active learning activities that entail interactivity and flexibility. In the blended learning approach, learners are equipped with easily accessed learning materials as well as reciprocal interaction with both their classmates and instructors. Thus, blended learning could boost positive learning outcomes and help students to learn independently, especially if well-implemented. Nevertheless, the blended learning approach does not aim to replace the major role of instructors; it merely transforms the instructors' duty as facilitators in the integrated teaching and learning environment.

In essence, the blended learning approach is proven to be effective but its full implementation requires the collective efforts of governments, instructors, institutions, and relevant authorities. This is because there are a lot of challenges in the blended learning environment, such as improper training of staff, poor technical competence among students, high cost of internet, poor connectivity, and administrative issues. To tackle the challenges of blended learning among ESL learners, particularly in the Malaysian context, curriculum designers should tailor the educational programs toward blended learning with suitable online materials and special training for the English teaching staff. This goal can be achieved through collaboration with special training centers such as English Language Centre (ELS) and British Council Malaysia (BCM). Also, students should be given opportunities for proper training on self-learning attitudes to improve their blended learning capabilities, whereas educators should understand learners' needs and capabilities.

The findings of this study could advance our knowledge of how the blended learning approach improves ESL learners' writing performance. Blended learning is proven to be a promising, creative, and feasible innovative approach for both students and instructors by providing a pleasant learning experience as well as an attractive teaching environment. This study could help educators, governments, and appropriate authorities in determining an appropriate approach to the teaching and teaching of English writing in higher institutions. The study also provides valuable information that can be used in designing English curriculums, particularly in higher institutions. However, this quasi-experimental study is limited to ESL learners at a particular higher institution. Further research may investigate instructors' practices using the blended learning approach in Malaysian higher intuitions.

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