

Developing EFL Students' Essay Writing: Does Blended Learning Approach Make a Difference?

Fahad Hamad Aljumah

Associate professor of Applied Linguistics

English Language and Translation Department, Qassim University

Abstract: *The blended learning approach is one of the most outstanding and recent trends in education in general and language teaching and learning in particular. This new approach has the advantage of being so encouraging to students in the present age of technology since it combines the traditional classroom facilities with computer online ones. So many studies have been devoted to the effectiveness of this blended learning approach in the field of language teaching and learning of English writing skills in ESL and EFL contexts, yet the exploration of this important topic has been scarce in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To address such critical gap, the present study attempted to investigate the impact of blended learning approach on improving Saudi EFL students' English essay writing skill at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The participants of the study consisted of 70 EFL English major students. They were purposely chosen from the English department, Qassim University. In order to study the effect of blended learning, an experimental research design was deemed appropriate. The experiment was conducted for six weeks in the fall semester of 2018. The experimental group of students was taught the academic essay writing course through the blended learning approach whereas the control group of 35 students was taught the same course through traditional approach. Two tests, pre- and post-ones, were used to measure the effect of the blended learning approach on essay writing skills. The results of the study showed that there were significant differences in the scores of the control and the experimental groups in favour of the experimental group. The conclusions and implications for using the blended learning approach in teaching and learning the English essay writing to Saudi Arabian English major students and are discussed.*

Key words: *Blended learning approach, Traditional learning, perception, Essay writing*

1. Introduction

There is no doubt writing represents one of the most important language skills for second and foreign English language learners (Hussin, et al., 2015; Ahmadpour and Khaasteh, 2017). The importance of essay writing for students is underpinned by Shaffle et al (2010) who mentioned that students will need English writing skills that range from simple paragraph and summary skills to essay writing and professional articles. In the same vein, Grami (2010) stated

that the writing skill “..... is needed for taking notes, describing objects or devices and writing essays, answering written questions, writing their compositions, writing experimental reportsetc”. Moreover, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in higher education have been required to write in English for various purposes, such as academic, practical and communicative purposes (Ho and Savignon, 2013).

Writing in English seems to be a challenging task to students and teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). Considerable research (e.g., Ahmed, 2010; Ahmed, 2016; Bacha, 2002; Ezza, 2010; Manchón, 2009; Tang, 2012) examined students' English writing in EFL contexts and found writing in English as a foreign language is complex. Other researchers have indicated that it depends on several factors including student linguistic proficiency (Cumming, 2001) and therefore requires strategic teaching instruction (Myles, 2002). Students using English as a second or foreign language would need to write correct sentences, use specific and accurate words, and meet specific purposes for the type of writing they are doing. Indeed, writing is a complex activity in which the writer needs to have linguistic and orthographic knowledge as well as content knowledge about what he or she intends to write for a given objective in a particular context so that his/her writing is cohesive and coherent and meets the contextual requirements (Nunan, 2006). However, students learning English in EFL contexts encounter several challenges in producing different types of writings: including narrative essays, descriptive essays, argumentative essays and expository essays. Undergraduate Saudi students are among EFL students who try hard to generate ideas, maintain coherence apt for correct grammatical structures, choose the proper words while writing essays (Ahmed, 2016 and Al-Besher, 2012).

Therefore, many researchers have given great attention to study the reasons for EFL and L2 learners' unsatisfactory performance in academic writing skills. For example, Yoon and Lee (2010) and So and Lee, (2012) have tried to find out the reasons behind the satisfactory performance of students in EFL writing. They attribute that phenomenon to the inadequate traditional approaches. The same finding is also reiterated in Ezza (2010) who maintained that the old approaches (i.e. the product approach, the process approach, the collaborative group work approach and so on) that have failed to provide adequate opportunities for practicing English academic writing.

Later, researchers and scholars (e.g. Hockly, 2018; So, 2015; Ahmed, 2016; Cha, 2013; Yoon and Lee, 2010) have suggested an approach known as blended learning, which combines the positive features of online and face-to-face instruction. This new approach tries to improve the interaction of L2 language learners with class mates and an instructor through a variety of computer-mediated communication tools (So and lee, 2013; Yoon, 2011). The major objective of this approach is to provide students with blended learning environments can help students to get involved in the whole writing process actively and effectively, both online and offline. In the same vein, Camahalan & Ruley (2014) state that blended learning provides spaces for students to practice their writing skills in a safe environment and enhances opportunities and motivation for real interaction and meaningful negotiation (So & Lee, 2013), and develops linguistic proficiency and increases self-confidence (Hasan & Akhand, 2010).

There are many studies dealt with the use of blended Learning in teaching writing skills in universities. For example, Bataineh (2010) studied the use of the internet to teach and improve the writing skills of university students. In that study, the students who used the internet in their writing showed better performance than those who did not use the internet. They also showed more motivation. Therefore, Bataineh recommended that the internet should be included in teaching academic writing skills in particular and language skills in general.

Shih (2011) reported similar results. Shih included "Facebook" and peer assessment in teaching university academic writing in a blended learning /teaching model. Shih's study concluded that the integration of "Face book" and peer assessment proved effectiveness in teaching academic writing skills. He highlighted the role of peer co-operation in making students more interested.

Yoon and Lee (2010) reported the use of the blended learning approach in teaching L2 writing. They similarly found that the blended learning approach was effective in teaching writing skills. The study stresses the role of student-student and student-instructor interaction in making students more motivated.

To sum up, in all these studies, the blended learning approach has been successfully used in first and second language settings to improve writing skills. However, research has not kept pace with this approach so as to monitor its impact on developing writing skills in many countries including Saudi Arabia. Some studies (see Al-Saleh, 2018; Alaidarous and Madini,2016; Khan 2014; Farooq and Javid, 2012; Almalki, 2011) also indicate that the issues

investigated in most of the previous studies on blended learning dealt with the instructors and the students' perceptions towards the utilization of blended learning at schools and universities, but no attempts had been made to investigate its effectiveness in teaching English language skills, particularly writing skills in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, most of the previous studies have focused on ESL and EFL learners in different majors, but none of them considered EFL English majors as participants. There are similar studies conducted in other contexts, but the variables and environment are different. For illustration, Ibrahim (2014) investigated the effect of Blended Learning on Fourth year students' achievement in EFL methodology at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, King Khaled University. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no attempts had been made to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching and learning English writing skills in S.A. So, the main challenge, but also motivation for this study was the dearth of research studies on the use of blended learning approach in instructing essay writing in the Saudi instructional settings. To fill in this gap, the current study will attempt to examine the impact of blended learning approach on improving Saudi EFL students' English essay writing and examine students' perceptions toward utilizing blended learning approach to develop English essay writing. Therefore, this study may offer EFL teachers with a suitable way that they can employ technology to teach writing skills effectively. Findings may also be used to modify the current blended learning approaches to facilitate the writing process.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The present researcher is an associate professor in the English Language and Translation Department at Qassim University. While teaching English as a foreign language, the present researcher noticed that EFL students find it difficult to improve their academic writing skills and to reach the targeted goals in their writing output assessment scores. Students of the department need to write paragraphs and essays in most of their subjects of the study as well as in their academic writing subjects. They need to do this in their in-class, home, midterm and in final exams. The marking of these assignments and exams is judged by their instructors on the basis of their proficiency, accuracy and quality.

Discussing the phenomenon of the unsatisfactory writing output of the students of the department of English Language and Translation with fellow teachers and senior teaching staff, the present researcher notices that the phenomenon is commonly attributed to traditional methods

of teaching writing. Some studies (Alhojailan, 2015; Al Beshar, 2012; Almalki, 2011 and Al-Jarf, 2004) have suggested the inclusion of online technology in teaching EFL writing in the Saudi context. Inspired by such studies the present investigator decided to resort to the blended learning approach which aims at combining traditional in-class writing with the technological modern online writing via e-mail, Facebook, and weblogs. Using e-mail, Facebook, and weblogs together with the traditional methods, the present researcher hopes better writing output assessment scores will be achieved.

Several studies have reported the effectiveness and success of blended learning approach in developing L1 and L2 writing skills (see Bostanci and Çavuşoğlu, 2018; Ahmed 2016; Arslan, 2014; Eydelman, 2013; Behjat, Yamini, and Bagheri, 2011; Ferriman, 2013; Jung, 2010; Kim, 2011; Al-Haq and Al-Sobh, 2010; So and Lee, 2013; Yoon and Lee, 2010). the present researcher notices that studies about the use of blended learning in the Saudi Arabian context are too scant. Hence came this study to fill this gap. This study aims at investigating the effect blended learning in teaching English writing skills in K.S.A. So, the main challenge, but also motivation for this study was the dearth of research studies on the use of blended learning approach in instructing academic essay writing in the Saudi instructional settings. To fill in the gap, the present study was primarily intended to investigate the impact of blended learning approach on Saudi EFL learners' essay writing.

1.2 The context of the study

In the Saudi Arabian context, the teaching of other skills such as grammar and vocabulary has received more attention than that of teaching of writing (Albeshar, 2012; Alnofal, 2003; Al Haysony, 2008). To cite Albeshar (2012: p. 16):

“Teaching English writing in Saudi schools is based on the belief that the students who learn more vocabulary will be good writers. Therefore, students are required to memorize a great deal of vocabulary in order to speak, read, listen, and write in English, but little emphasis is placed on other important writing techniques, such as planning, organization”.

Moreover, Alhojailan (2015) indicates that Saudi Arabian learners of English give more attention in their writing to form (i.e. spelling, choosing vocabulary and correcting any grammatical mistakes rather than content and style).

The present study deals the context of Saudi EFL students in the English Language and Translation Department at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The department was inaugurated in 2006. The main aim of the department is to provide the labour market with graduates whose major is English. Such graduates are mainly required for fulfilling the huge need for English language instructors for pre-university educational institutions whether state- run or private. Before the normal four-year study, such students are a semester-long 400 hours course called the Intensive English Programme. After the completion of this course, the students are admitted into the bachelor degree programme in the department of English Language and Translation an 8-semester long period of university study. The programme includes not only skill-developing courses targeting the four language skills of writing, speaking, reading and listening, but also the sub-disciplines of linguistics like phonology, syntax, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and pragmatics. The programme also includes several types of translation courses such as literary, scientific, spontaneous and machine translation.

1.3 Aims of the Study

To address the above gap, the present study aims to explore whether there is an effect of blended learning approach on the English essay writing of Saudi EFL English major learners at Qassim University. Moreover, it attempts to investigate the impact of the blended learning approach on the students' writing performance in terms of elements of rubric a score (use of language and organization). To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher formulated the following research questions:

1. Would blended learning affect essay writing of undergraduate Saudi students majoring in English?
2. Would blended learning affect the students' writing performance in terms of elements of rubric a score (use of language and organization)?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is threefold. At the outset, the study findings will provide Saudi EFL teachers with student perspectives on a different learning approach to consider in their pedagogy. Also, the findings will contribute to the little literature on blended learning in EFL university settings. Third, the findings may motivate the use of technology in Saudi EFL

classrooms. Finally, the results of the study can contribute to current theories that suggest blended learning approach may have an influence on teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

1.5.1 Blended learning

Different researchers have defined BL differently. For instance, Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008) defined blended Learning as a combination of two models: the traditional face-to-face model and the “e-learning model”. Similarly, Thorne (2003) define blending learning as a combination of online learning and traditional face-to-face instruction. The definition given by Thorne is adopted in the current study.

1.5.2 Academic Writing

According to Baily, 2010, “academic writing” generally refers to all writing tasks assigned to students for the purpose of study at the college level. The researcher adopts the previous definition as an operation definition for the present study.

3.2 Research method

The current research was undertaken to explore the effectiveness of using blended learning to develop English academic writing skills of Saudi EFL students. It was conducted at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia from the 4th, November 2018 to 14th, December 2018. A quantitative approach for collecting data for this research was chosen. Since the nature of this study is experimental so an experimental design was used. The experimental design is used not only to describe the phenomenon or fact but also observes the effects involving two or more variables under certain conditions (Johnson and Christensen, 2008). Moreover, experimental studies keep the conditions in which research is conducted under control to demonstrate the cause-effect relationship.

According to Dornyei (2007), ‘from a theoretical perspective, the ultimate challenge is to find a way of making the control group as similar to the treatment group as possible’ (116). It is ensured by the researcher that both the control and treatment groups are same in terms of size and the time devoted to treatment right from the start to the end (Albeshir, 2012). In addition, it was important to ensure that both groups’ members had equal writing proficiency as possible and that they had the same or very similar backgrounds at the beginning of the research study.

The participants were studying in the same context in the same department and in the same year of studying.

Therefore, this design is compatible with the primary goal of the present study, namely the effect of using a blended learning approach on the academic writing skills of the students of Qassim University.

The experimental group was taught writing using blended learning approach to develop students' Academic English writing skills. Face book Group was used in teaching the experimental group a class teacher and learners.

3.3 Sample of the Study

The sample of the present study consists of 70 Saudi undergraduate students studying in the second year in the English language department at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The participants are 19-20 years old. They are enrolled in the writing course (II). The study sample was equally divided into two separate classes. The first class included 35 students and it was called the control group that was subject to the conventional face-to-face teaching approach. While the second class included 35 students and was called the experimental group and was subjected to the blending learning approach. Both groups were taught by the same instructor and received academic writing instruction for two hours weekly for six weeks. While experimental group students had access to personal computers, students of the control group were not allowed to use any type of technology in their essay writing during the study. Students were informed about this research study and signed an agreement to participate in it. They have been also informed that they could withdraw from this research study whenever they wanted to.

3.5 The procedures of data followed in recruiting the study sample

- Two groups were randomly selected for the research sample, and the head of the department was requested to provide the researcher with the name of the course instructor involved in teaching the two groups so that he could contact him on his mobile.

- The researcher held a meeting with the teacher of the two groups and he agreed that the instructor would be able to undertake the teaching process by himself as he was aware of the research procedures and samples.
- The instrument featuring the achievement pre-test- was distributed to the two study groups on 4/11/2018 to ensure the equivalence of control group with the other experimental group with respect to.
- The researcher obtained the consent of the head of computer department in Qassim University to use the computer laboratory to train the two experimental groups on the use of asynchronous virtual classroom.
- The researcher met with the experimental group in computer lab on 4/11/2018 and with second control group on 4/11/2018 to carry out a practical training on how to use the blended learning approach in developing their writing essay.
- The teacher undertook the task of teaching the two groups by himself for 8 weeks i.e. from 4/11/2018 until 14/12/2018. The experimental group of students (blended learning group) studied the writing content using the asynchronous virtual classroom besides attending lectures in the classes, whereas, the control group studied the same content by attending the lectures in the class only. The teacher, via giving lectures, taught ‘Sections of different types of essay’, ‘Selecting and Presenting Ideas’, and how to write the essays. The students were required to listen carefully. Although some exercises were done in class, because the teacher had to use most of the class time to explain the lesson, there was limited time for the writing practice itself.
- After the end of the actual application of the experiment on 14/12/2018, the researcher distributed the writing test to the research sample groups on 14/12/2018 in order to measure the effect of using the blended learning approach on their writing.
- The period between pre-test and post-test was six weeks to reduce the potential effect of pre-test on students’ responses in post-test. The application of the study has been completed by 14/12/2018.

3.6 Study Variables

Following are the two variables of this study.

1. **An independent variable** which was the blended learning in EFL writing class. The two levels of the independent variable included exposure to blended learning and conventional essay writing.

2. **A dependent variable** which was students' scores in writing.

The study measured the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable by using pre- and post-tests to measure and compare participants' writing scores.

3.7 Research Instrument

The data collection process in the current study included the following instrument.

3.7.1 Pre/Post Test

For the purpose of this study a pre- and post-test writing essay was designed based on the researcher's experience in teaching English writing. The essay writing test was administered to participants before and after the instruction. It should be noted that the tests had two different but similar topics.

1. At the beginning of the treatment, the students of the control and experimental groups were asked to write a 5-paragraph essay on the following: *"How is your generation different from your parent"?*

At the end of the experiment, both groups were also asked to write an essay on the following: *"Is plagiarism illegal?"*

3.7.2 Research Instrument Reliability

In order to check the reliability of the research instrument, 25 male students were asked to write a 5-paragraph essay before applying the experiment. Once the students had finished essay writing, twenty-five essays were collected and given to two expert teachers to check *rater reliability*. According to Wang (2009), *rater reliability* generally refers to the consistency of scores that are assigned by two independent raters (*interrater reliability*) and that are assigned

by the same rater at different points in time (*intra-rater reliability*). The raters score the students essays using the scoring rubric (iBT TOEFL)

To study the inter-rater reliability and agreement of the rubrics, two classroom teachers were asked to score the twenty-five essays in two sessions according to the iBT TOEFL Independent Writing rubrics for grading and assessment. This will check whether there is great discrepancy of two teachers' scoring or not. If the scorings do not show great discrepancy, this means that the test is reliable.

To check consistency of raters, Cronbach's alpha coefficient has been used. Alpha values above. According to some researchers, an acceptable level of Cronbach's alpha is between 0.70 and 0.80, so the higher the number of participants, the higher the alpha value can be (Larson-Hall, 2010; Brown, Glasswell, & Harland, 2004). It is therefore important to establish a positive correlation in order to ensure consistency between the two raters.

The correlation coefficients seen in Table 2, was “.87” which means that the test is reliable.

Table.3. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardization Items	No. of Items
.87	.897	2

After two weeks, the two raters were asked to mark the same essays again to ensure the test's intra-reliability and stability over time. Finally, the results were recorded and statistically analysed. It has been found that the correlation coefficient equals “1” which signifies that the test is reliable.

3.7.3 Research Instrument Validity

A jury of experts in the field of applied linguistics and teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) at Qassim University (English and Translation Department) was consulted to ensure the appropriateness of research instrument (pre- and post-test) and to approve its content and form.

Their beneficial feedback and comments regarding the research instrument were taken into consideration before producing the final versions of the pre/post-tests.

3.7.4 Scoring Stage

Scoring procedures to assess writing may follow either holistic or analytical scales (Brown, 2010). The current study utilized a holistic scale. The scoring stage takes place before and after the treatment. All students were asked to write a 5-paragraph essay.

At the beginning of the treatment, the students of the control and experimental groups were asked to write a 5-paragraph essay on an assigned topic.

Once the students finished their writing test, the teacher would collect the written essays and submit them to the two raters. The essays would be scored using analytic scoring system in the scale 0-5 in which score 0= poor, 1= needs improvement, 2= satisfactory, 3= good, 4 very good and 5= excellent. Rubric for scoring the writing product was shown on the table below.

In terms of the rating procedure, two raters were involved in the rating process. Two raters are considered a customary number of raters in such an approach (Carr, 2011). The researcher, therefore, trained the rater in a systematic process for consistently applying the rating scale and marking scheme (Weir, 2004). In addition, the rater found the scoring system to be feasible and was able to finish the task within the specified time limit.

3.8 The instructional procedures

After preparation and confirmation of validity and reliability of the essay writing test, the researcher started the actual application of the experiment study.

Every week at the end of the lesson, the lecturer would select the specific topics for students to write on and upload them on Facebook Group. Each student wrote with the certain criteria and posted them on the FB Group. Both teacher and students provided comments on posts related to essay writing. All students are encouraged to post comments on posted writing.

In contrast, the control group was taught using the traditional method (board, pen and paper). Both experimental and control groups were taught academic English writing by the same teacher. The study was conducted in November, 2018 and lasted for six weeks.

Before beginning the treatment, both groups underwent a pre-test to determine if both have the same skill level. The pre-test of both groups was conducted on the same day. Then, the experiment was carried out for six weeks two sessions a week for the experimental group, and two sessions for the control group. Both the experimental and the control groups received 12 teaching sessions in 6 weeks. English writing lessons for the experimental group were the first class period on Monday and the last class period on Tuesday, whereas English writing lessons for the control group were the last class period on Monday and the first class period on Tuesday.

The participants of both groups (experimental and control) were to write five paragraph essays in six-week experiment and submit them to the teacher in order to obtain feedback. The experimental group (n=35) wrote their essays on their accounts. Furthermore, they were asked to comment on their classmates' posts. Their posts were checked by the teacher and the feedback was given in the comment section. In addition, the participants of experimental group could ask their questions about writing or technical problems of the Facebook Group in the comment section.

On the other hand, the control group (n=35) exactly did what was done by the experimental group. The only difference was that the instruction of the control group was conducted in the traditional classroom using the traditional method of teaching (board, paper, and pen), while the instruction of the experimental group was taught in the computer lab using blended learning. The essays of the control group were received and handed over to them face-to-face, while the essays of the experimental group were received and handed over to them through the Facebook Group.

After conducting the experiment for six weeks, the post-test was administered to both groups. It should be noted that the post-test of both groups was conducted within the same day. After collecting the essays from the participants, two raters assess them using "iBT TOEFL Independent Writing Rubric".

The present study was completed throughout six weeks; included activities and tasks are summarized.

3.9 Data Analysis

-The data obtained from the essays of the participants in the writing course were quantitatively analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science, version 21) to determine if students had any significant change in marks for the essays produced during the treatment.

-A paired sample t-test was carried out to compare the mean difference between pre and posttest scores of each group.

-An independent sample t-test was also used to obtain the mean difference between both groups' pre and post test scores. According to Ary, et al. (2002), the established levels of significance normally used in the field of education is between .05 and .01. In this study, the alpha for testing the hypotheses was .05.

-The data obtained from the essays of the participants were also used to answer the second question of the study which dealt with the effect of the blended learning on the students' writing performance in terms of elements of rubric a score (use of language and organization).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter is organised into four sections. In the first section, the researcher will present the findings from the analysis of data to answer the first research question "Would blended learning affect essay writing of undergraduate Saudi students majoring in English?". The control and experimental groups of students were taught in two different ways. A pre- and post-test was designed to investigate and compare the students' mean scores before and after the treatments. In this section, the researcher shows the mean performance and standard deviation of the two groups on the pre-test and post-test.

The second section will be a report on the findings from the analysis of data to answer the second research question: Would blended learning affect the students' writing performance in terms of components of the rating scale?

In this section, the researcher shows the mean performance and standard deviation of the two groups on the pre-test and post-test as relates to the components of the rating scale, i.e., content, organisation, mechanics, ideas, and vocabulary.

In the third section, the researcher will discuss and compare the findings in this study in the light of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

The last section will be a summary of the study findings.

4.1 Question 1

The study results regarding the first research question which explores the effect of the blended learning approach on the students' writing performance in terms of elements of the writing rubric (use of language, organization, mechanics, ideas and vocabulary) were presented in tables 1,2 and 3).

The students made a considerable progress in their writing performance during the blended writing course in terms of different aspects. One of these aspects of the academic writing is

appropriate essay organization. Aspect of the organization is the ability of students to manage writing skill that they developed by using the sentences and paragraphs completely and interconnected to one another. Another aspect of academic writing is language use which refers to the ability to display consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity. The third aspect deals with mechanics. According to McNaught and Shaw (2016), aspect of Mechanics is very technical in writing. It relates to the accuracy of writing and the writing appearance in general. The aspect included in mechanics is the use of capital letters, punctuation, abbreviations and units of quantity. This aspect is basic ability that generally has been taught since elementary school. Discipline and accuracy become important factors in the aspect of mechanics. The fourth aspect concerns with content. Aspect of the content is the ability of students to express their ideas explicitly and completely with some examples or related opinions. Content is the core of concept to be conveyed to the readers.

The last aspect deals vocabulary. Aspect of wording is the aspect of seeing the students' ability to choose words and use a variety of words so that their essay narration would be flowing and easy to read (Sulisworo et al, 2016). This capability is basically influenced by the coverage of insight on the topic written by the students. Background knowledge will affect the students in choosing the words to make sentences explaining certain concepts. Score results for this ability can be seen in table 1, 2, and 3 below.

The results on these aspects can be seen in the following tables (5,6 and 7).

4.1.1 Pre-test Results of writing components between the experimental group and the control group

Table1. Pre-test Results of English Academic writing components between the experimental and the control groups

Pre-test	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Organization	Control Group	35	4.00	.874	68	-.2404	.128
	Experimental Group	35	4.54	1.010			
Language Use	Control Group	35	4.31	1.231	68	-.1561	.730
	Experimental Group	35					

Mechanics	Control Group	35	2.94	1.413	68	-1.519	.757
	Experimental Group	35	2.43	1.420			
Content	Control Group	35	3.97	1.248	68	-1.595	.643
	Experimental Group	35	3.51	1.147			
Vocabulary	Control Group	35	3.63	1.395	68	-.180	.392
	Experimental Group	35	3.69	1.295			

In Table 1, the pre-test results between the experimental group and the control group indicated that there was no significant difference before the intervention in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use as well as mechanics. From the independent sample t-test results, the significant values were $>.05$.

4.1.2 Post-test

4.1.2.1 Results related to comparison of the mean of the writing pre-test and post-test within the experimental group

Table 2 shows that the mean scores of writing aspects of essay organization (4.54), language use (4.80), mechanics (2.34), content (3.51), and vocabulary (3.69) in the pre-test are lower than the mean scores (7.71), (7.89) (3.77), (5.51) (6.03) in the post-test for the experimental group. The scores of the experimental showed remarkable improvement in the post-test compared with their counterparts in the pre-test. The difference between the two tests is significantly in favour of the post-test. This indicates the importance of using the blended learning approach.

Table 2: Pre and post-test mean scores of aspects of writing performance of the experimental group.

Writing Aspect	test	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Organization	Pre-test	35	4.54	1.010	34	-14.246	.000
	Post-test	35					
Language Use	Pre-test	35	4.80	1.368	34	-9.768	.000
	Post-test	35	7.89				

Mechanics	Pre-test	35	2.34	1.420	34	-4.379	.082
	Post-test	35	3.77				
Content	Pre-test	35	3.51	1.147	34	-5.873	.061
	Post-test	35	5.51	2.063			
Vocabulary	Pre-test	35	3.69	1.255	34	-7.710	.002
	Post-test	35	6.03	2.051			

This improvement in essay organization and language use was attributed to the effectiveness of the blended learning approach which helps students to develop self-learning strategies in an interesting way, to recognize the relations between the content components, to re-organize the information presented in various forms, and to deduce from the available information such as searching for additional information about the writing skill from the searching drives on the internet. The blended learning approach also enables students to express themselves freely via writing, to participate according to their competencies and learning styles. It took into account the individual differences among students, too. This showed the significance of the implementation of the blended learning program and the improvement of the experimental group students' achievement level.

4.1.2.2 Post-test Results of English Academic writing between the experimental and the control groups

From data in table 3, it is evident that students of the experimental group made a considerable progress in their writing performance during the blended writing course in terms of essay organization, language use, mechanics, content and vocabulary aspects. In Table 3, the independent t-test of the post test scores indicated that there were significant differences between the experimental and the control groups in terms of organization, language use, mechanics, content, as well as vocabulary.

In Table 3, there was significant difference after intervention for the experimental group in essay organization. The post-test means score of control group was 4.54 while for the experimental group was 7.71. There were also significant differences after intervention for the

experimental group in language use. The post-test means score of control group was 4.71 while for the experimental group was 7.89.

In Table 3, it is evident that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the content aspect. The post-test means score of control group was 4.11 while for the experimental group was 5.51.

Based on Table 3, aspect of mechanics has the lowest score of all other aspects. Students are relatively less able to perform well in the aspect of mechanics. The post-test means score of control group was 2.43 while for the experimental group was 3.77. This aspect should gain special attention in the learning process. Some errors frequently encountered in students' writings were in the use of punctuation and capitalization.

In the aspect of vocabulary, the post-test means score of control group was 4.43, while for the experimental group was 6.03. This finding showed that blended learning was applied well. Discussions carried out by the students, the tasks of reading through browsing in learning process, and the relevant topics presented by teacher were several factors that increase the ability of students on the aspect of vocabulary.

The results in table 3 show that the experimental group performed better than the control group in terms of their writing aspects.

Table 3. Post-test Results of English Academic writing between the experimental and the control groups

Post-test	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Organization	Control Group	35	4.54	.950	68	-13.913	.911
	Experimental Group	35	7.71	.957			
Language Use	Control Group	35	4.74	.950	68	-13.528	.622
	Experimental Group	35	7.89	.993			
Mechanics	Control Group	35	2.43	1.632	68	-3.446	.829
	Experimental Group	35					
Content	Control Group	35	4.11	1.586	68	-3.182	.034
	Experimental Group	35	5.51	2.063			
Vocabulary	Control Group	35	4.43	1.650	68	-3.596	.074
	Experimental Group	35					

This considerable improvement in the writing components is ascribed to the effectiveness of the blended learning approach which helps students to develop self-learning strategies, to identify the relations between the content elements, to re-arrange the ideas in various forms, and to reach conclusions from the ideas available. It also helps learners to express themselves freely through writing and participate in such a way to reflect their own individual standards of achievement. It took into consideration the individual differences among students, too. This signifies the effectiveness of the blended learning approach.

4.2 Findings related to the second research question

4.2.1 Results related to comparison of the pre-test mean scores of the control and experimental groups

The pre-test of both experimental and control groups was administered on the same day. The goal was to assess the level of essay writing skill of the students before conducting the experiment and to test whether “there is any statistically significant difference at ($P < .05$) level between the mean gain scores of the two groups. An independent sample t-test was used (see table 4). This was done to ensure that the results obtained after the treatment would not be due to the differences between the mean scores of the groups before conducting the treatment. The findings showed that the mean score of the control group was 18.31 with a standard deviation of 3.660, and the mean of the experimental group was 18.53 with a standard deviation of 3.788. Table 4 presents a comparison of pre-test results for the experimental and control groups.

Table 4: Pre-test means scores of overall writing performance

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	35	18.31	3.660	68	-.241	.699
Experimental Group	35	18.53	3.788			

The results show that while there are differences between the experimental and control groups in essay writing on the pre-test, these differences were not significantly different a related to the mean performance of the groups. It can, therefore, be implied that the participants of both

groups (experimental and control) were approximately at the same level of writing performance before the experiment.

4.2.2 Experimental and control groups pre-and post-test results

The differences between the pre-test results and the post-test results for each group are shown in details in table (5). As can be seen from table 5, there was a clear development from the experimental group students in their overall writing performance.

To test whether “there is any statistically significant difference at ($P < .05$) level between the mean gain scores of the students of the control group (those who study the English course using the traditional face-to-face classes) in pre and post-test”, a paired T-test Score was conducted and the data shows that there was no significant difference in the pre- and post-test of this group.

Table 5: Comparison of the mean of the writing pre-test and post-test within the group

Group	Test	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	Pre-test	35	18.31	3.660	34	-4.071	.000
	Post-test	35	20.37	4.551			
Experimental Group	Pre-test	35	18.53	3.788	34	-20.094	.000
	Post-test	35	30.86	5.801			

In the pre-test and post-test results the mean of scores of the control group were 18.31 and 20.37 respectively. The t value (-4.071) revealed significant difference between means of scores of the control group on the pre-test and post-test basis. This affirms that there was slight improvement in the students' overall writing performance in the control group. It can, therefore, be concluded that the traditional method of teaching inside the classroom, that is, the instruction, had an impact on students' essay writing development. These findings assure that there is significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of overall writing performance for the control group.

A paired t-test was also conducted to compare the experimental class's pre- and post- test

scores. Results of the t-test showed that there was a significant improvement in experimental students' essay writing. Students' mean score improved from about 18.53 in the pre-test to 30.86 in the post-test.

As shown in table 5, it can be concluded that students' performance in writing was generally improved due to the impact of instruction. That is, both the control and experimental groups were able to improve their essay writing as a result of the instruction they received.

4.4 Comparison of the post-test mean scores of the control and experimental groups

An independent-samples t-test was used to test whether "there is any statistically significant difference at ($P < .05$) level between the mean gain scores of the experimental and control groups. The post-test means score of control group was 20.73 while for the experimental group was 30.86. These results indicate that the experimental group performed better than the control group in terms of their post writing scores and the difference was statistically significant. The reason for this high performance of the experimental group can be attributed to the effect of using blended learning approach in teaching and learning essay writing skills. These results, also, affirm that there is considerable difference between means of scores obtained by the experimental and the control groups in terms of their overall writing performance in the post-test. Figure 3 shows the raw scores of the students in the post-test.

Table 6. Post-test means scores of overall writing performance

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	35	20.73	4.551	68	-8.413	.000
Experimental Group	35	30.86	5.801			

From the table above, it can clearly be seen that the performance of the experimental group in the post-test was higher than that of the control group. These differences show that the experimental group after learning via blended method performed better. This indicates that blended learning was effective in improving students' academic essay writing capabilities in general.

Discussion

The researcher found that the blended learning approach left a positive impact on the experimental group as compared to the control group which was taught through the traditional method. Hence use of online instruction as a supplement to traditional in-class writing instruction was significantly more effective than using traditional writing instruction alone. Online instruction seems to be an important factor in enhancing EFL students' writing skills. It helped enhance their writing ability and resulted in a significant improvement in their post-test scores.

From the independent-samples t-test and paired sample t-test analysis, it was found that there were significant differences in terms of overall performance as well as five components of writing. This indicates that blended learning group had improved students writing performance after the intervention. However, the experimental group who used Facebook obtained higher scores compared to the control group who used face-to-face instruction. This shows that social networking platforms like Facebook increased students' writing ability and helped them performed better (Abdul Rahman, 2018; Shukor and Noordin, 2014; Al-Haq and Al-Sobh, 2010 and Al-Jarf, 2004) compared to face-to-face method. Sulisworo et al (2016) emphasizes that authentic language interaction can be achieved via the interaction in Facebook which boosts students' confidence level and improve their English language performance. Learners were allowed to express themselves in a more expressive manner without worrying about committing language mistakes (Yoon and Lee, 2010).

Furthermore, the adequate usage of online material learning improves students' writing abilities. This finding is in line with the results of Johnson' study (2002) which has proven that the online communication of the experimental students increases when the course content is uploaded online. This explains the reason why the experimental group' results in the post-tests were significantly better than the pre-test results.

This improvement in the performance of the experimental group in academic writing can, moreover, be attributed to the fact that students are more motivated to learn when they are offered the same material in different ways using online technology (Cameron, 2003). Moreover, the significant difference in the academic essay writing scores can be ascribed to the instructors' use of more writing exercises as all the online tasks are additional to the tasks already used in the

traditional classroom instruction. This is why experimental group showed remarkable improvement in the writing performance (Adas and Bakir, 2013).

The researcher ascribes the improvement in the performance of the experimental group in essay writing to the utilization of the blended learning approach. The improvement can be justified as follows:

1. The blended learning was presented in an easy and interesting way. It does not require advanced computer skills and students enjoy working using the web. So, the students who have the least experience of dealing with the new technology of computer programs get maximum benefit of blended learning approach.
2. The direct feedback given to students helped students to be motivated irrespective of their level.
3. The intervention of technology speeded up interaction and communication among students and teachers and in turn influenced students' writing positively.
4. Students might consider the blended learning approach as a new experience, so they exerted much efforts to learn using this method.
5. The fact that students in the experimental group outperforming their counterparts in the control group may be due to the fact that the former group read a lot of relevant web materials for the purpose of communicating their ideas in writing, whereas the control group only had a teacher-directed oral discussion held in a traditional classroom.

Therefore, the increase in the scores shows that appropriate blending of online and offline resources and activities such as using chat programs, instant messengers, and having face-to-face feedback sessions had positive effects on the overall essay writing ability of the Saudi university students who participated in this study.

The results of the current study are completely in line with previous researches on blended learning and writing skills (Hockly, 2018; Pacheco Salazar, 2016; Geta and Olango, 2016; Shukor and Noordin, 2016; Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum, 2016; Mabuan and Ebron, 2016; Bataineh, 2010; Zhang, 2007; Al-Haq and Al-Sobh, 2010; Al-Jarf, 2004; Shih, 2011; Sun, 2010;

Simsek, 2009; Kitchakarn, 2010; Ahmed, 2016 and Kashani, Mahmud, and Kalajahi, 2013; Ladyshefsky, 2004; Motteram, 2006; Yoon and Lee, 2012). These studies revealed the outstanding impact of blended learning on the achievement of English writing skills and showed significant improvement in students' writing skills in general.

Conclusion

The present study was intended to investigate the impact of blended learning approach on Saudi EFL learners' essay writing. To this end, a group of 70 EFL learners were divided into two groups: an experimental group, namely Blended Learning and a control group, namely Classroom Learning. Participants of the Blended Learning group received traditional teaching methods of writing plus learning through the web. Participants of the Classroom Learning group, however, were taught based on the traditional teaching methods of writing and received the materials, instructions, and feedback merely through traditional methods. In order to collect the data, writing test was used. The findings showed that there were statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in favour of the experimental group. In conclusion, the results of the study revealed that employing a blended teaching method can create a more desirable condition to enhance the EFL learners' writing performance.

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