

The Effect of Blended Learning on Developing Saudi English Majors' Writing Skills

Arafat Hamouda

Assistant Professor, Assuit University, Egypt

Email: arafathamouda77@Gmail.com

Abstract:

Blended learning seems to be an emerging trend in education and has caught the interest of many educators and researchers as a new approach to encourage students in their learning process. Though blended learning has proven its success and efficiency in teaching and learning of English writing skills in many ESL and EFL contexts, no attempts had been made to investigate its effectiveness in teaching English writing skills in K.S.A. To fill in this gap, the current study attempts to examine the impact of blended learning approach on improving Saudi EFL students' English essay writing. Moreover, it examines Saudi students' perceptiveness toward implementing blended learning approach to develop English essay writing. Sixty participants were selected out of sixty eight English majors based on their scores on a piloted proficiency test. They were then randomly divided into two equal groups undergoing control and experimental conditions. The experimental group was taught through the use of blended learning approach whereas the control group was taught through traditional lecture method. To achieve the study aims, the researcher adopted a mixed method research design so as to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Data collection instruments were pre and post writing essays tests, questionnaire, and interviews. Teaching experiment was conducted for ten weeks in March-April 2017. The researcher used the following statistical methods to reach the results: (Mean, Standard Deviation, and T-Test). The results of the independent-samples t-tests showed that participants of the blended learning group significantly outperformed the control group in their writing performance. The study findings also revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the scores of the paired experimental group in the pre and post achievement test in favour of the post-test. This improvement was ascribed to the use of blended learning approach in teaching essay writing. Moreover, the analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews indicated that students in the experimental group had positive perspectives towards the use of blended learning approach in teaching English essay writing. Finally, the findings of the study hold a number of pedagogical implications for EFL learners, language teachers, material developers, and those interested in essay writing.

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

1. Introduction

Writing is considered as 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).

Though it is important, writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master as it includes multiple skills such as identification of the thesis statement, writing supporting details, reviewing, and editing (Ahmed, 2016; Kurk and Atay, 2007). Similarly, Abu-Rass (2001) added that writing is a difficult skill for native and non-native speakers alike as students should make balance between multiple issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics. Research studies on writing also revealed that EFL learners face severe problems in writing skills that hinder their academic progress(Wei, 2017; Hisham, 2008; Rabab`ah, 2003). These studies also indicated that EFL learners are too weak in writing to write extended writing such as narrative essays, descriptive essays, argumentative essays and expository essays. Many researchers in different parts of the world reported that university students were unable to generate ideas, organize discourse, control sentence structures, choose appropriate vocabulary, and use effective styles (Ahmed, 2016; Oyedele and Chikwature, 2016; Adas and Bakir, 2013; Al-Khairi, 2013, Al-Bataineh, 2010; Cha, 2013). Moreover, many students consider writing a pleasing and boring chore that they do inside the classroom.

However, the agony of EFL learners in writing has drawn the attention of many educators and researchers to find out the reasons for EFL and L2 learners' weak performance in academic writing skills. For example, Yoon and Lee (2010) and So and Lee, (2012) have attempted to investigate the causes behind the low performance of students in EFL writing. They reported that the use of the inappropriate traditional teaching methods is one of the main reasons for students' weakness in writing skills. The same finding has also been reported by Ezza (2010) who ascribed the writing problems to the use of out-dated approaches that have not provided sufficient

opportunities for practicing English writing. There are few opportunities for students to practice their writing skills outside the university to interact and communicate with peers and a teacher regardless of time or place. Thus, providing sufficient writing opportunities and environments for interaction and communication with peers and a teacher regardless of time or place, known as blended learning, which combines the positive attributes of online and face-to-face instruction, has been suggested (Hockly, 2018; So, 2015; Ahmed, 2016; Cha, 2013; Yoon and Lee, 2010). In a blended learning environment, L2 learners are able to interact with peers and a teacher using a variety of computer-mediated communication tools (So and lee, 2013; Yoon, 2011). Providing students with blended learning environments can help students to get involved in the whole writing process actively and effectively, both online and offline.

Blended learning approach is a term increasingly used to describe the way e-learning is combined with traditional classroom methods (Thorne, 2003). It has greatly contributed to successful learning experiences throughout the world, and it has been proven through extensive research. Pacheco Salazar (2016) refers to blended learning as a learning approach that combined the best elements of online and face-to-face learning. Blended learning has been recently suggested in the teaching and learning of ESL writing contexts because of its benefits that online and offline environments provide, such as increased time for practice, an abundant amount of input, and a platform for encouraging the students' interaction and communication (Ferriman, 2013; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012; Yoon And Lee, 2010, Cha, 2013; El-Koumy and Mirjan (2008). Blended learning also provides spaces for students to practice their writing skills in a non-threatening environment (Yoon 2011, Lee and Pyo, 2003), enhances opportunities and motivation for authentic interaction and meaningful negotiation (So and Lee, 2013), offers a stronger sense of the audience of peers beyond the instructor, which is better for helping foster awareness of audience (Ware and Warchauer, 2006), and improves linguistic proficiency and increase self-confidence (Ortega, 1997; Yuan, 2003). Besides helping students to develop their skills, the use of blended learning approach may change students' attitudes towards language and this may help them write coherent compositions.

There have been a handful of studies addressing the use of blended learning approach in teaching ESL writing (Geta and Olango, 2016, Al-Haq and Al-Sobh, 2010; Pacheco Salazar, 2016; Yoon and Lee, 2010, Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum, 2016; and Mabuan and Ebron, 2016). These studies indicated that blended learning environments foster interaction among students and teachers and have a positive impact on the development of L2 writing skills. Moreover, research has indicated that blended learning has proven its success and efficiency in teaching and learning of English language skills in general and writing skills in particular (So and Lee, 2013; Yoon and Lee, 2010; Oyedele and Chikwature, 2016; Pacheco Salazar, 2016). Furthermore, with the use of blended learning approach, plentiful information resources have been available for students and teachers in L2 writing contexts. Students make use of a variety of computer programs and social media, such as word processors, e-mail, discussion boards, the Internet, and so on (So, 2015;

Ahmed, 2016). They help students effectively and efficiently compose, revise, correct, store, and share texts (Adas and Bakir, 2013).

Despite the growing number of blended language learning studies, overall the research findings are mixed. In a literature review of blended language learning research, Mendieta Aguilar notes:

Some researchers contend that language learning is enhanced through the exposure learners have to the blended learning model, while others indicate that there is not significant improvement in comparison with more conventional (F2F) means of instruction. In terms of levels of satisfaction, different opinions have also been reported (Hockly, 2018). In addition, cultural considerations can affect the implementation of blended learning. For example, in some contexts, learners may be reluctant to engage in written online forum discussions for fear of making mistakes (Geta and Olango, 2016). This finding is replicated by Li and Chiu, who thus suggest that in implementing blended learning 'cultural adaptation should be intentionally allowed and guided by addressing how different cultural values are embedded in the course design and the teaching' (Mabuan and Ebron, 2016).

The wide range of contexts in which blended learning is implemented, the multitude of factors that can affect language learning, and the different forms that blended language learning can take, make comparisons between studies challenging, and firm conclusions about its effectiveness are difficult to draw.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

According to literature review, it has been found that writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master (Kurk and Atay, 2007). Many researchers in different parts of the world reported that university students are incapable of expressing themselves in a clear, correct and comprehensible manner in writing (Ahmed, 2016; Oyedele and Chikwature, 2016; Cha, 2013). The same problem is also reported in the EFL academic Saudi setting. The students in the Department of English Language and Translation at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, faced difficulties in acquiring English writing skills. The students' exam records showed low scores in writing courses, and their profiles revealed that they had problems in writing their assignments. Evidence of the students' lack of fundamental writing skills was found in their writing pieces, including essays and critique reports.

As an assistant professor of English language teaching for more than 20 years at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia and at Assuit University in Egypt, the researcher could neither close his eyes to the students' results in English writing exams nor close his ears to the complaints of the teachers concerning the deficiencies of the students' performance in writing. During his work, the researcher noticed that EFL students were not reaching the intended writing assessment goals by the end of the course. Students at all levels are required to write essays and compositions both

in class and in final exams. While marking students' essays, the researcher observed the poor performance of students in writing compositions, letters and essays. In discussing the causes of the students' poor performance in writing skills with some teachers who teach writing courses, they have ascribed the poor performance of students to the failure of the traditional methods of teaching in helping students to learn this skill efficiently. The researcher also thinks that teachers still adopt traditional methods of teaching writing despite the information revolution and availability of all technology resources. While incorporating technology in the teaching and learning of English language skills has been explored in many parts of the world, research regarding the applicability and viability of online writing within the ESL context in Saudi Arabia has not been tried out (Alebaikan, 2010 and Al Beshar, 2012). It is this gap that prompted the researcher to explore the pedagogical potentials of blending traditional in-class writing with the technological modern online writing via e-mail, Facebook, and weblogs.

Despite the use of the blended learning approach was positive and proved its success in many First and L2 countries in writing skills, research on the impact of the blended learning approach on the development of writing skills has not been touched upon satisfactorily in EFL settings, particularly 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 learners who might need to be studied. There might be similar studies conducted abroad, but the variables and environment are different. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no attempts had been made to investigate the effectiveness of 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 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 Purpose of the Study

The current study attempts to serve a number of purposes. They are as follows:

1. To investigate the effectiveness of the blended learning on developing Saudi EFL students' English writing skills.
2. To examine the perspectives of Saudi EFL students towards the use of blended learning approach in English essay writing at Qassim University.

1.3 Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the pedagogical viability of integrating technology into a traditional approach in writing in an EFL classroom setting. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the effectiveness of the blended learning approach on developing Saudi EFL students' essay writing skills?

From the above main question, the following sub-questions emerged:

- a. Is there any statistically significant difference between the mean gain scores of the students of the control group (those who study the same English course using the traditional face to face classes) and the experimental group (those who study the English course using the blended learning approach) in the pre-test?
 - b. Is there any statistically significant difference at between the mean gain scores of the students of the control group in pre and posttest?
 - c. Is there any statistically significant difference between the mean gain scores of the students of the experimental group (those who study the English course using the blended learning) in pre and posttest?
 - d. Is there any statistically significant difference between the mean gain scores of the students of the experimental group and of the students of the control group in the post-test?
2. What are the students' perspectives toward using blended learning approach in the essay writing process?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

The answer to the first research question was sought by testing the following hypotheses.

- There is no significant difference between means of scores obtained by the experimental group and the control group in terms of their overall writing performance in the pre-test.
- There is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of overall writing performance for the control group.
- There is significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of overall writing performance for the experimental group and this difference is in favour of the post-test.
- There is significant difference between means of scores obtained by the experimental and the control group in terms of their overall writing performance in the post-test and this difference is in favour of the experimental group.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is among the first to be conducted in the Saudi context. In addition, due to the lack of studies that investigate the effectiveness of the blended learning approach on developing Saudi EFL students' essay writing skills, this study comes to fill such a gap. The researcher believes that this study is significant for the following reasons:

1. The significance of this study comes from the fact that it will provide teachers and students with a blended learning technique for developing English writing. The blended learning technique may motivate students and help them enjoy learning writing skills and get rid of frustration as they feel their English writing improves.
2. Findings of this study are supposed to contribute to knowledge in the field of English writing learning and instruction for learners of English as a SL/FL. It helps in explaining how BL approach affected FL students' writing.
3. This study can change students' perspectives about writing and can open doors for them to practice writing using various innovative digital tools.
4. The present study has pedagogical value, since its findings can be used to urge EFL instructors and decision-makers in the Saudi Ministry of Education to create and provide new, attractive and motivating environments for students.
5. Therefore, the current study is expected to contribute to the existing literature on how to practice writing using various innovative digital tools.
6. Such investigation will be an extension of what has been done in this regard in other international cultural contexts (So and Lee, 2013; Yoon and Lee, 2010; Oyedele and Chikwature, 2016).

2. Operational definition of terms

2.1 Blended Learning: Blended Learning has been defined as a combination of face-to-face and online learning so that instruction occurs both in the classroom and online, and where the online component becomes a natural extension of traditional classroom learning. Blended learning is thus a flexible approach to course design that supports the blending of different times and places for learning, offering some of the conveniences of fully online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact.

2.2 Traditional Classroom Setting: A course that occurs in the classroom with the instructor and the student in which lectures, discussions, and activities were face-to-face. There is eye to eye contact, direct interaction and intervention, and an established routine. In such setting the teacher decides methods, activities, and techniques that are to be learned and how the class is to be run (Yoon and Lee, 2010).

2.3 Essay writing

According to Bataineh (2010) "Writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language" while Alsamadani, (2010) describes writing as the mental

work, which involves inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into sentences and paragraphs that will be clear to readers.

2.4 perception

The researcher adopts the definition mentioned by Alebaikan (2010) who defined as perception as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour”.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

The current study follows an experimental approach that is designed to offer answers to the main research questions and provides more information related to the students' attitudes regarding the use of blended learning approach to learn English writing.

3.2 Sample of the Study

Sixty eight male students, majoring in the Department of English language and translation studying at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia in two sections of essay writing course, volunteered to take part in the 10-week study. The Study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2017-2016. The researcher selected this 3ed year as the nature of the study required more mature learners familiar with using computers and the internet. All participants in this study were native Arabic speakers and learning English as a foreign language. They were enrolled in advanced academic English writing course. They were at an average age range of 19 to 21 years old.

In order to manifest the participants' homogeneity in terms of language proficiency level, a version of Oxford Placement Test called Solutions Placement Test (Edwards, 2007) was used in this study. Data analysis showed that 60 participants (88.2%) were in the same level and 8 (11.8%) students were in another level. So in order to homogenize the participants, eight of participants were discarded. Then, the sixty randomly assigned to the experimental and the control group. (30 students in the control group and 30 in the experimental group)

The Experimental group (n=30) was taught through the blended learning approach. The blended mode of learning was implemented by combining the traditional teaching methods using a writing textbook with sections offered interactively via the web, enabling students to be more active and to choose the time that best suited them. The control group (n=30) was taught based on the traditional teaching methods of writing and received the materials, instructions, and feedback through traditional classroom methods.

3.3 Study Variables

The study contained the following two variables.

3.3.1 An independent variable

The independent variable refers the treatment implemented in this study (the blended learning approach implemented with the experimental group versus the regular instruction received by the control group).

3. 3.2 A dependent variable

Dependent variables were the subjects' scores on the English writing test and the scores of their responses to the items of the questionnaire.

3.4 Research Instruments

A variety of data-collecting instruments were employed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data to serve the purpose of answering the research questions. A mixed-method approach was applied with placement test, writing test, questionnaire, and interview used for triangulation. Data triangulation in qualitative research plays an essential role in strengthening the validity in that it seeks to find out if the data collected by different research instrument would lead to the same findings (Yin, 2011). Triangulation is often used to mean bringing different kinds of evidence to bear on a problem (Alebaikan 2010). Thus, if you have access to interview data, questionnaire data, and test data, your analysis is likely to be much sounder than if you rely on only one source of evidence.

To gather pertinent data for this study, the following research instruments were utilized.

3.4.1 Oxford placement test

In order to manifest the participants' homogeneity in terms of language proficiency level, a version of Oxford Placement Test called Solutions Placement Test (Edwards, 2007) was used in this study. Oxford Placement Test was a valid and reliable test and a highly effective instrument in grouping participants, was used to follow the placement procedure. The test and its criteria for placement were used to appropriately place learners in relevant proficiency levels. Oxford placement test has been used after consultation with teachers and it was administered to assess students' knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and reading. It also enabled the researcher to have a greater understanding of what level their participants were at. The test contained 50 multiple choice questions assessing students' knowledge of key grammar and vocabulary from elementary to intermediate levels, and a reading text with 10 graded comprehension questions (five true-false and five multiple choice items). The test was administered to sixty eight participants. Data analysis showed that 60 participants (88.2%) were in the same level and 8

(11.8%) students were in another level. So in order to homogenize the participants, eight of participants were discarded. Then, the sixty randomly assigned to the experimental and the control group. (30 students in the control group and 30 in the experimental group)

3.4.2 An essay writing test

According to Hammad (2014), written essay tests can effectively evaluate students' writing. Thus, the researcher designed two essay writing tests to be used as an assessment tool to assess the experimental and the control groups' writing performance before and after the application of the experiment. In the first session, before students received any instruction all the students, the experimental group and the control groups, sat for a pre-test to decide their actual level before being taught. All subjects were asked to write a five-paragraph essay. The essay test was evaluated using the scoring rubric developed by Al-Abed Al-Haq and Ahmed (1994). In the last session of the treatment, a five-paragraph essay was given as a post-test to all subjects in the two groups.

For reliability purposes, the participants' writings were scored by two ratters. The researcher assessed the validity and reliability of the writing test and found out that it is valid and reliable for the study.

3.4.3 Questionnaire

A 37-item questionnaire was the second research instrument. The aim of the questionnaire is to delve deeper into the students' attitudes regarding the use of blended learning approach to learn English writing. The researcher consulted many related research studies including the ones conducted in the EFL context (such as Yoon, 2011; Grami, 2010; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Al-Hazmi, 2006; Ahmed, 2016) to collect data to develop a suitable questionnaire to elicit the responses of English-major undergraduates of Qassim University related to the use of blended learning approach in instructing English essay writing. The questionnaires were administered at the end of week 10 when the students of the experimental group had completed the experiment.

The participants were asked to respond to a Likert-scale agree- uncertain-disagree questionnaire.

Statements in the questionnaire were categorized into several domains as follow:

- The items (1-6) identify students' experience of online learning in EFL writing classes
- The items (7-26) are related to learners' perspectives on the use of blended learning approach in teaching EFL essay writing course.
- The items (27-37) address the negative impressions of BL for English courses from the students' perception.

3.4.3.1 Validity of the questionnaire

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was presented to some experts in TESOL and applied linguistics at Qassim University in order to ensure its validity and provide written feedback. According to their suggestions and comments, the researcher made slight alterations to the wording in a few questions to make them clearer. Some items were modified in a way that is more appropriate to the aim of the study.

3.4.3.2 Reliability of the questionnaire

The reliability of the questionnaire has been determined using Cronbach's Alpha. They were given to a pilot sample of 30 students who did not take part in the study. Then, the same sample re-took the same questionnaire after one week to enable measuring the change in results. The value of questionnaire reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability was (0.79), which indicates a high level of internal consistency for the scale. According to Gable (2003) and Kaplan and Saccuzzo (2009) alpha value above 0.7 is the acceptable level in most of the studies.

3.4.4 Interview

The second tool employed in this study is semi-structured interview. The reason for using the semi-structured interview is to clarify the points that might seem unclear to the researcher and to triangulate the findings and interpretations obtained through written essay tests and questionnaires.

Interviews in the current were conducted to obtain data about the students' the use of blended learning approach to learn English writing. The interviews were conducted at the end of the course (week 10) as semi-structured interviews in English. The interviews were all voice-recorded and notes were taken during the interviews.

To carry out the interview, ten students from the experimental group and interviewed by the researcher using the interview form in a comfortable place at the college. The ten students were interviewed simultaneously. That is, when a question was asked, all students expressed their opinions with respect to the question. The interviews ranged in time between forty to sixty minutes each.

To make sure that the interview form is valid and appropriate for collecting the data, the form was sent to another five people (including university and teacher training lecturers in the field of educational technology, and applied linguistics). Reviewing the comments from all the reviewers revealed that the interview form was appropriate for collecting the data on students' satisfaction.

3.5 Research Design

The researchers adopted the quasi experimental approach. Two groups were assigned as the participants of the study; the experimental group, and the control group. The research includes three variables; the first variable is blended learning approach, the second variable is essay writing skills, the third variable is perceptions and attitudes. The experimental group was taught writing via blended learning, while the control group was taught via the traditional method. The experiment lasted for eight weeks. Both groups were taught by the same teacher.

3.6 Course Selection

The course chosen for this research was Advanced Academic Writing which is taught for English-majors who have already finished the previous writing courses including Writing 1, Writing 2 and Writing 3. This course is designed to be

taught in 10 weeks of the second semester, which means students need to attend hundred fifty-minute periods every week. As designed in the syllabus, the focus of writing course is on essay writing which instructs students to write different kinds of academic essays. In addition to that, there is time for revisions and practice before the final exam. To serve the purpose of the research, students who participated in this blended writing course had to learn in both conventional classroom and online environment.

3.6 Steps of implementing the blended learning approach in teaching essay writing

At the beginning of the treatment, the students in the experimental group were trained in three-course hours. During this training, the students in the experimental group were informed about the blended learning technique and about what they were expected to do. Secondly, the website was introduced to the experimental-group students via the Internet with the help of a computer connected to a projector in the classroom. The experimental group used the Internet at home or at the university. The blended course components were described and instructions on how to use certain course components were given to students at the beginning of the semester. They were demonstrated in practice how to sign up the website and what to pay attention to while following up the activities. In the experimental group, while teaching the lessons, a balance between the face-to-face and online environments was established as appropriate to the objectives of the lesson. Before coming to the classroom, the students prepared themselves for the lesson by examining the summary of the subject, the visual presentation (in video format), the videos and animations related to the subject, the dictionary and the other related links via the Internet.

The Blended Learning course was implemented through explaining the EFL essay writing course of the students at the department of English. Various techniques like: educational videos, online live lectures, recorded lectures with kinds of movements and effects, blogs, wikis, discussion forums, e-mails, on line groups and e-monthly tests were incorporated with the lectures presented in the face-to-face interaction classes in the course.

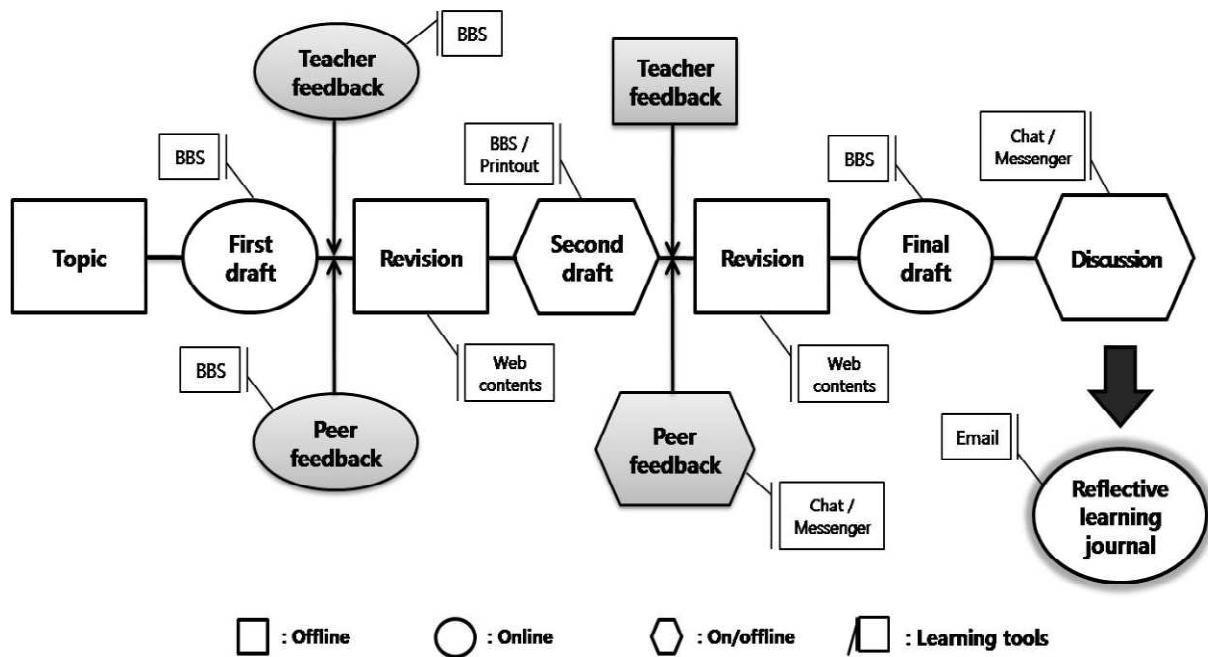


Figure 1 illustrates the blended learning model and the steps of the cycle involved.

The pedagogical cycle starts in offline class with a set of pre-writing activities to activate the students' schema on the topic, followed by a set of while and post-writing activities. Throughout the whole offline session, the participants were informed of the topic in class, and they uploaded the first draft on the class BBS by the next day. They were asked to write the first draft by the next day because they needed enough time to give online peer feedback, to make revisions to the second draft, and to read peers' second drafts in one week before the class met again offline. After uploading the first drafts, the participants had four days for giving online peer feedback and checking the feedback which they received through the tag-line function in the BBS at the same time. In addition to peer feedback, teacher feedback was also provided through the BBS. Given the online feedback from peers and the teacher, the participants made revisions in two days by using online

web contents such as web concordances, online dictionaries, search engines and so on. Then, they were asked to upload the second draft on the BBS and to read their group members' second drafts to give feedback effectively in the second offline class. When the class met again, the participants were required to bring their printed copies and give offline feedback to each other for about an hour. The participants could have more chances to provide online feedback using chat programs or instant messengers if the offline feedback was not enough.

After the second outline class, the participants were given a week to revise the second drafts using both teacher and peer feedback. Then they were required to upload their final drafts on the class BBS. When the class met again, they shared final drafts, discussing and summarizing the activities and feedback before starting a new cycle. At the end of the process, the participants gathered all the feedback that they had received and wrote their essay.

3.8 Research Procedures

In order to answer the research questions, the following procedures were adopted:

- Surveying the relevant literature and previous studies to determine the characteristics of the variables of the study: blended learning approach, essay writing in EFL and perception.
- Designing a blended learning attitudinal questionnaire to identify the students' perceptiveness to the blended learning course.
- Designing an essay writing test and computing its validity and reliability.
- Surveying the views of the experts and the jury members regarding the designed instruments.
- Administering a version of Oxford Placement Test in order to manifest the participants' homogeneity in terms of language proficiency level. Out of all available students, a number of 60 male students were selected as their scores were homogenous. The participants were classified into two groups. In the first group,

Blended learning was used as the supplement for class instruction; and in the second group, traditional instruction was used.

-Administering the pre-test before treatment to all the groups to recognize their performance and mastery of the basic writing skills of English. They were all required to write a five paragraph argumentative essay on an assigned topic. The writing performance of the learners was rated according to Weir's (1990) rating scale by two ratters to ensure the reliability of scoring. A t-test was run on the participants' scores in writing performances, and since there was no significant difference in their writings, the participants were considered homogeneous.

- Administering the blended learning to the experimental group. During the treatment, which lasted for two months, three hours a week, the learners in two groups took writing lessons in the classroom. The difference, however, was in their out-of-class activities. In the experimental group, blended learning was explained about, and the way they can be used to help learners be successful language learners was discussed and the way they were to be used for the present research purposes was talked about. The instruction combines an offline class, where students meet in a conventional classroom, with an online class where students interact with others using E-tools, such as e-mail, BBs, Wikis, blogs and chatting programs taking into account the recursive process of writing and writing activities as well as instruction. For the control group, the course was taught based on traditional classroom teaching methods, and materials, instructions, and feedback were presented in classroom.

- Administering the post writing test after treatment to all the groups to identify the effect of the independent variable (blended learning approach) on the dependent variable (essay writing skills). The post-test consisted of an essay that the students had never seen nor practiced in class or in the online course. The essay topic was concrete and within the students' background knowledge. The test instructions specified the essay length and essay components that were taught and practiced during the course such topic sentence, types and number of supporting ideas, use of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, conjunctions and cohesive ties...etc.

The topics for the pre-test and post-test were: 1) describe one of the most memorable experiences you have had; 2) describe your favorite restaurant; and 3) describe your favourite hobby, respectively. They were scored by the researcher and a professor in the English department of a Qassim university using the same rubric.

- Distributing the blended learning questionnaire after treatment to the experimental group participants to investigate their perception and attitudes towards the use of blended learning in essay writing.
- Interviewing ten students of the experimental group. The interviews were conducted at the end of the treatment (week 8) as semi-structured interviews in English. The interviews were all voice-recorded and notes were taken during the interviews.
- Comparing the pre to post results of the essay writing test.
- Performing pertinent statistical analysis of the data to test the hypotheses.
- Presenting results and discussions.

3.9 Data Analysis

Data analysis in the current study was conducted as follows.

- After conducting the experiment, data was obtained through the research instruments (pre- and post-tests) from both groups (experimental and control). Data was also collected from the experimental group through the questionnaires and interviews
- Study data was analysed statistically using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science, version 21) software, popularly used for quantitative data analysis.
- 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 administered to obtain the mean difference between both groups' pre and posttest 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 pre- and post-test results of the experimental and control groups were analysed.
- Finally, the study analysed the experimental group's responses on the questionnaire expressing its attitude toward using blogs to learning English writing.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the effectiveness of using blended learning approach to develop English writing skills for English major students at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. Two 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 and find the statistical differences. Furthermore, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were designed to elicit students' attitudes towards using blended learning approach in English essay writing and to provide an in-depth picture. The results of the test are presented first, and then they are followed by the results of the questionnaire and the interview.

4.1 Findings related to the first research question

Pre\ Post-test

In order to test the research hypotheses which leads to answer the first research question "What is the effectiveness of the blended learning approach on developing Saudi EFL students' essay writing skills?", the pre\post-tests were designed by the researcher to determine whether or not there was any significant difference in students' writing achievement after using blended learning to improve EFL essay writing. The findings of the pre\post-test will be presented below.

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

The pre-test is aimed to assess the level of the two groups before conducting the experiment. The pre-test of both groups was conducted within the same day. 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 same English course using the traditional face to face

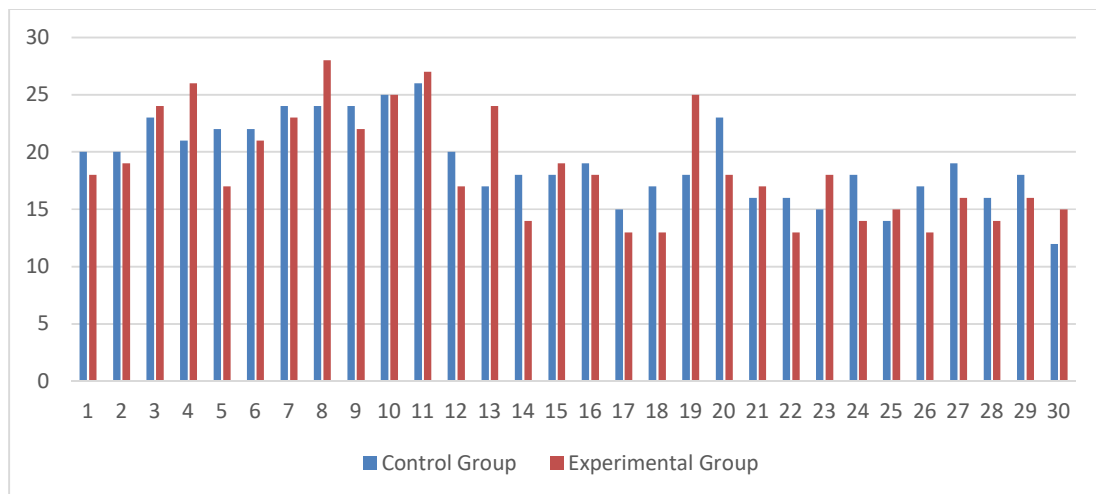
classes) and the experimental group (those who study the English course using blended learning) in the pre-test" prior to the treatment, an independent sample t-test was used. This was done to ensure that the results after the treatment would not be due to the differences between the mean scores of the groups before conducting the treatment (See Table 1). The findings showed that the mean score of the control group was 19.23 with a standard deviation of 3.549, and the mean of the experimental group was 18.73 with a standard deviation of 4.653. Table 1 presents a comparison of pre-test results for the experimental and control groups.

Table 1: Pre-test means scores of overall writing performance

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	30	19.23	3.549	58	.468	.102
Experimental Group	30	18.73	4.653			

Figure (2)

Comparison of Pre-test Results for the Experimental and Control groups



The results indicate that the two groups are statistically equivalent. Clearly, it indicates that the participants of both groups were homogeneous regarding

their level of writing performance before starting the experiment. These findings affirm the first hypothesis which assumes that there is no significant difference between means of scores obtained by the experimental group and the control group in terms of their overall writing performance in the pre-test which means the two classes started at similar levels of writing proficiency. Therefore, the first research hypothesis is confirmed.

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

The differences between the pre-test results and the post-test results for each group are shown in details in the next tables (2) and (3). Because the two groups had two different treatments in the experiment, there was a clear development from the experimental group students in their overall writing performance.

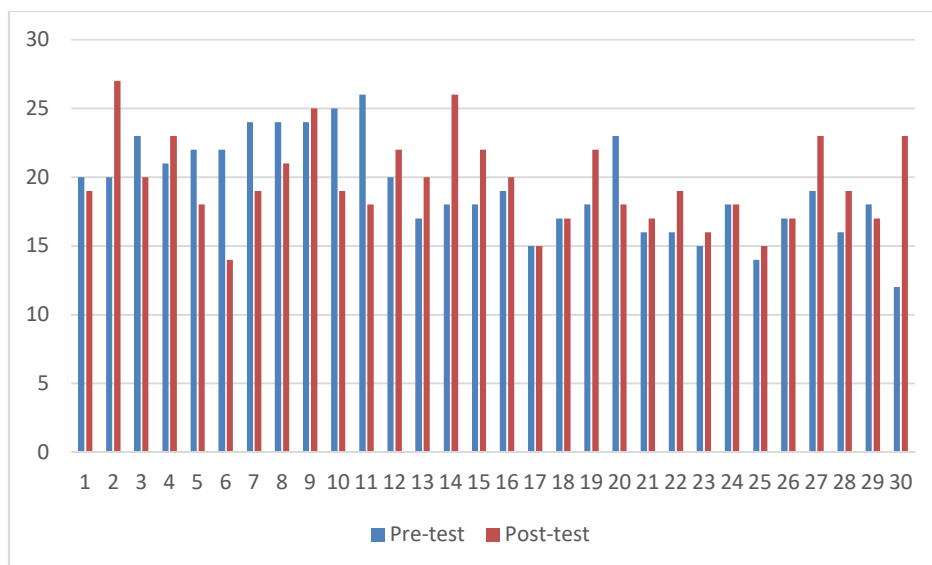
To test whether "there is any statistically significant difference at ($P < .05$) level between the mean gain scores of the students of the control group (those who study the English course using the traditional face-to-face classes) in pre and post-test", a paired T-test Score was conducted and the data shows that there was no significant difference in the pre- and post-test. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of pre and post-test writing overall performance for the control group. Figure (3) will show the students' total scores in the pre- and post-test for the control group.

Table 2: Pre and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance of the control group.

Control Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Pre-test	30	19.23	3.549	29	-.495-	.624
Post-test	30	19.63	3.243			

Figure (3)

Comparison of Pre- and Post-test Results for Control Group



The mean of scores of the control group in the post-test was 19.63 whereas it was 19.23 in the pre-test. The t value (-.495-) revealed no significant difference between means of scores of the control group on the pre-test and post-test basis. This assures that there was no improvement in the students' overall writing performance in the control group. This is due to the use of the traditional method of teaching inside the classroom where students haven't sufficient opportunities for practicing English writing. These findings affirm the second hypothesis which assumes that there is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of overall writing performance for the control group. Therefore, the second research hypothesis is accepted.

On the other hand, the third hypothesis assumes that there is no significant improvement in the experimental class' pretest and post-test scores. To compare

the experimental class' pre and post test scores, a paired T-test was conducted and the data analysis shows that there was a significant improvement in students' scores in favor of the post-test, as the significance value was 0.000, i.e. less than 0.05. It can be seen from the tables that there is a considerable difference between the mean scores of pretest and posttest. Specifically, students' mean score improved from about 18.73 in the pretest to more than 34.80 in the post-test. From this finding, it can be concluded that students' performance in writing was generally improved under the impact of the blended writing course. This shows that the excessive exposure to the online material leads to an improvement in students' writing abilities. The research has proven that online communication increases when the course content is uploaded online (Johnson, 2002). This could be another factor why students' results in the post-tests of the experimental group were significantly better than in the pre-tests. Results of the paired T-test reported in Table (3) show a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the experimental group.

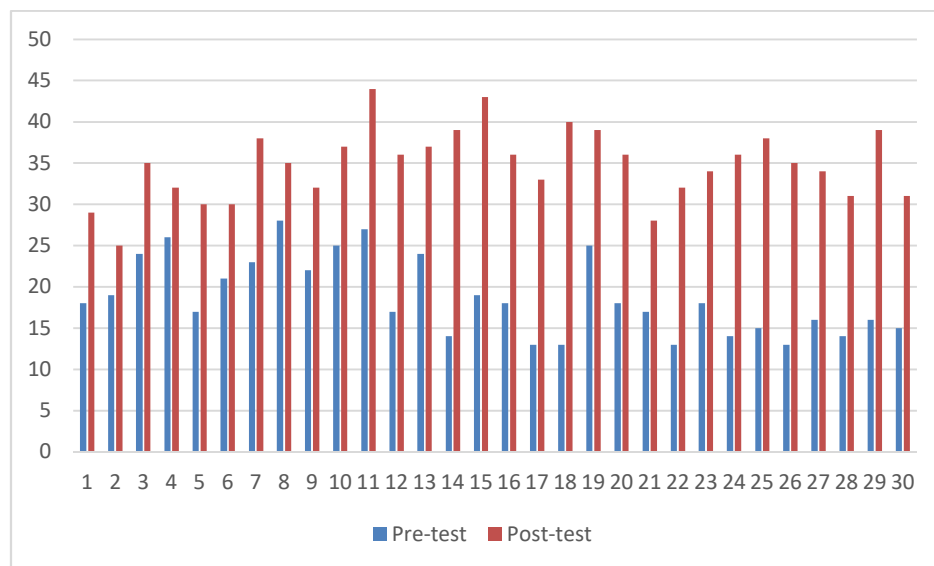
Figure (4) will show the students' total scores in the pre- and post-test for the experimental group.

Table 3: Pre and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance of the experimental group.

Experimental Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Pre-test	30	18.73	4.653	29	-15.264-	.000
Post-test	30	34.80	4.342			

Figure (4)

Comparison of Pre- and Post-test Results for Experimental Group



These remarkably high gains shown by the subjects of the experimental group on a pre-test and post-test comparison indicate that the experimental group' performance in essay writing has significantly improved as a result of using a combination of online writing instruction and traditional in-class writing instruction. These findings confirm the hypothesis that there is significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of overall writing performance for the experimental group and this difference is in favor of the post-test. Therefore, the third hypothesis is confirmed.

4.4 Results related to comparison of the post-test mean scores of the control and experimental groups

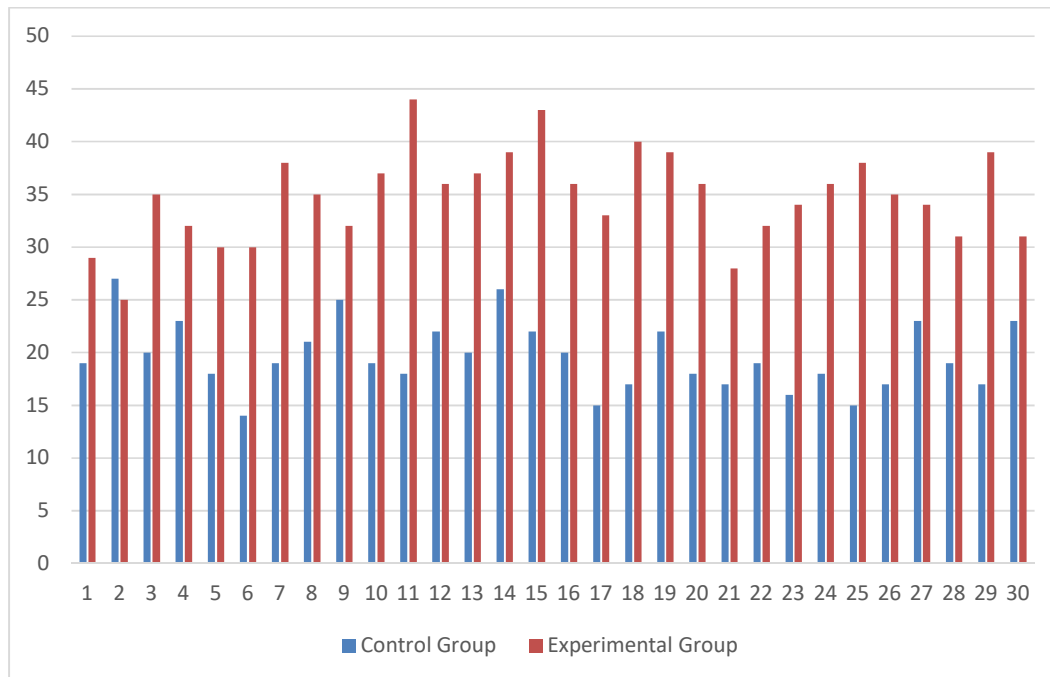
To test whether "there is any statistically significant difference at ($P < .05$) level between the mean gain scores of the students of the experimental group (those who study the English course using blended learning) and of the students of the control group (those who study the same English course using the traditional face-to-face classes) in the post-test", an independent-samples t-test was utilized. The post-test means score of control group was 19.63 while for the experimental group was 34.80. These results indicate that the experimental group performed better than the control group in terms of their post writing scores. The reason for this high performance of the experimental group is due to the effect of using blended learning approach in teaching essay writing skills. These results, also, affirm the hypothesis which assumes that there is significant difference between means of scores obtained by the experimental and the control groups in terms of their overall writing performance in the post-test. Based on this, the fourth hypothesis is confirmed. Table 10 shows the mean scores for the control and experimental groups in the post-test. Figure 5 presents the raw scores of the students in the post-test.

Table 4. Post-test means scores of overall writing performance

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	T-test	Sig.
Control Group	30	19.63	3.243	58	-15.328-	.156
Experimental Group	30	34.80	4.342			

Figure (5)

Comparison of Post-test Results for the Experimental and Control groups



From the figure above, it can be seen that the performance of the experimental students in the post-test was higher than that of the control students. The differences between the two groups in the post-test scores were clear. These differences were directly in favor of the experimental group. This suggests that blended learning was effective in improving students' writing abilities in general. This could be due to the fact that students' motivation to learn increases when they are given the same material in different ways using technology and simulation, (Cameron, 2003). Moreover, the significant difference in the writing scores might be attributed to the teachers' employment of more writing tasks since all the online tasks are additional ones related to the same topics discussed in class. As a result, the students were given more activities and this could be one of the reasons why the experimental group significantly improved writing performance (Adas and Ayda Bakir, 2013).

5. Findings related to the second research question

In addressing the second research question, "What are the students' perspectives toward using blended learning approach in EFL essay writing?", the researcher used two tools (questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) to provide an in-depth picture of student perceptions about the use of blended learning in EFL writing classes.

5.1 Questionnaire

In order to answer the second question of the research, (i.e., What are the Saudi students' perceptions and attitudes towards using the blended learning approach in teaching English writing courses?, the questionnaire was used to explore student perceptions of this technology mediation. Questionnaires were distributed to the experimental group participants at the end of the treatment. Students were asked to rate the questions as "agree, uncertain or disagree". The results were analysed in terms of frequency and percentage to find out the student perceptions of the blended learning approach in teaching essay writing.

5.1.1 Students' experience of online learning in EFL writing classes

In regard to the use of blended learning in studying English courses before starting the treatment, all of the participating reported that they had never used it. In addition to this, 90% of the participants answered that they have not used online learning in EFL writing classes, showing that students have not experience of using online learning in EFL writing classes as seen in Table 5.

The collected data showed that the majority of the participants (93.3%) have no experience in studying English through online learning. The results also highlighted that the vast majority of the participants (93.3 % and 96.7%) have their own personal computers and have access to internet at their homes. The collected data also indicated that a high number of the participants (90%) asserted the unavailability of internet in their classrooms, and 93.3% of the respondents asserted the lack of computer usage in their writing classes.

Table 5: Students' Experience of Online Learning in EFL Writing Classes

No.	Items	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	I have experience in studying English courses through online learning.					30	100
2	I have used online learning in EFL writing classes.			3	10	27	90
3	I have a personal computer of my own at home.	28	93.3			2	6.7
4	I have access to Internet at home.	29	96.7			1	3.3
5	I use computers in writing classes.	2	6.7			28	93.3
6	Access to internet is available in the classroom.	3	10			27	90

5.1.2 Learners' Perspectives on the use of blended learning approach in teaching EFL essay writing course

The students' perspectives on blended learning are positive in all areas as seen in the results provided in Table 6. After the end of the treatment, it seems that the students found blended learning to be useful (60%), easy and convenient (80%), enjoyable (80%), interesting (86.7%), and helpful (90%) for improvement. In other words, it shows that the students think that blended learning is practical in improving EFL writing. The respondents wrote that their English was also greatly improved by learning how to write academic English (more) competently. They maintained that the blended learning enabled them to maximize their interaction and gain from each other and the teacher. The table below showed that 80% of students agreed that the blended learning approach motivates them to write more in collaborative learning activities. These findings concur with the results of Ahmed (2016) and Geta and Olango (2016), and Bahrani (2011) who claimed that blended learning enhanced student motivation. In the same vein, Zareekbatani (2015) who indicated that the the blended learning approach was motivating and empowering for EFL students.

As for applying BL to advanced writing course, 80% of the experiment group students found it easy and convenient. These findings, together with those of and Chandra and Fisher (2009), signal that students generally find it easy and convenient to access online learning materials that are part of a blended learning environment. Consequently, using blended learning with essay writing students can provide a learning environment with good student access to their in-class and online learning materials.

Table: 6 Learners’ Perspectives on blended learning in EFL essay writing

No.	Items	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
7	I find that applying BL to advanced writing course is useful.	18	60	2	6.7	10	33.3
8	Blended learning facilitates accessibility of my writing instructor at my preferred time.	20	66.7	3	10	7	23.3
9	11. Blended learning enables me to access writing lessons online when I fail to attend my class.	26	86.7	2	6.7	2	6.7
10	12. Blended learning motivates me to write more in collaborative learning activities.	23	76.7	4	13.3	3	10
11	14. In blended learning I have the freedom to ask my teacher what I do not understand.	28	93.3			2	6.7
12	17. Blended learning enriches interaction between students and writing teacher.	21	70	3	10	6	20
13	19. Blended learning made the writing course more interesting.	26	86.7	2	6.7	2	6.7
14	23. I find that applying blended learning in essay writing is Time-saving.	25	83.3	3	10	2	6.7

15	24. I enjoy essay writing in this blended Learning environment.	24	80	2	6.7	4	
16	I find that applying blended learning to advanced writing course is helpful.	27	90			3	10
17	I find that applying BL to advanced writing course is Easy and convenient.	24	80			6	20
18	Blended learning provided sufficient opportunities for writing practice.	22	73.3	2	6.7	6	20
19	Blended learning helps me improve my overall Writing skills.	28	93.3			2	6.7
20	Blended learning makes me better writer because I can revise and edit more easily.	24	80	1	3.3	5	16.7
21	I can communicate with other students in this subject electronically (email, chats, blogs, wikis etc).	23	76.7	1	3.3	6	20
22	Blended learning helps me identify punctuation and spelling mistakes.	28	93.3			2	6.7
23	Blended learning helps me get more feedback on my writings.	27	90			3	10
24	Blended learning decreases my fear of writing.	21	70	3	10	6	20
25	I preferred the English writing course to be taught through Blended learning approach.	27	90	1	3.3	2	6.7
26	I would like to use the blended learning in learning other English courses.	26	86.7	1	3.3	3	10

More than two thirds of the respondents (70%) reported that learners interacted with their teacher out of class timings via e-mail, Facebook and kakoo in blended-learning system. Two thirds of the students (66.7%) think that the blended learning makes their instructor more available at other times. 86.7% of students say that blended learning enables me to access lessons online when they fail to attend any class. This result is in harmony with Ahmed (2016) and Pacheco Salazar (2016) who also observed that web-based academic courses enhanced not only peer interaction but also students' interaction with their instructors. They add that one of the advantages of the blended learning was in the flexibility of communication and interactions with instructors.

Regarding whether blended learning saves time or not, the results highlight positive responses where our participants (83.3%) agreed. This explains that blended learning saves time as the students do not have to travel to campus and can complete their blended learning from anywhere (House et al., 2007). High percentages of students (95%) valued blended learning because it helps them to use time effectively. Learners expressed that up to date announcements not only familiarize them with cancellation of or changes in schedule regarding classes, tests, discussions or assignments but also saves their time. Otherwise it is taxing for learners to come to university only to find that the class is cancelled.

This finding highlights the point that learners are more satisfied with BL as it facilitated learning English language skills by transforming their learning environment into collaborative, interactive, and enthusiastic. In addition, this reveals the presence of better communication between teachers and students, and provision of time convenience for students to do their tasks.

Regarding the students' perceptions of the blended learning approach, the students' responses showed that blended learning encouraged them to write more (80%), revise and edit more easily (80%), identify spelling and punctuation mistakes (93.3%) and finally getting more teacher's feedback (90%). Moreover, 93.3% of them agreed that blended learning helped them improve their writing skills. This finding is consistent with the results of Geta and Olango (2016) Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum (2016) and Mabuan and Ebron (2016) where

students' performance in writing had improved when web-based instruction was added to the traditional instruction.

As seen in table, two thirds of the students (66.7%) agreed that blended learning was more conducive to me than face-to-face learning. This finding was in consistent with that of Yoon & Lee (2010) who found that the students in his study preferred blended learning to face -to- face instruction.

Regarding their interaction with each other, many participants (80%) can communicate with each other in this subject electronically (email, chats, blogs, wikis etc). This finding is different from that reached by Chandra and Fisher (2009) who found that the high school students in their study preferred to communicate with their teachers face -to- face and thus rated questionnaire items on electronic communication lower.

Likewise, 21 out of the 30 students (40%) in their survey referred to losing their fear of writing and becoming more self-confident when using the blended learning approach. This can partly be due to freedom that the blended learning process allowed EFL writers, which enabled them to make choices in a non-threatening advisory – not evaluative – environment. This finding is also in harmony with Zareekbatani (2015) who confirmed the same perception that on grounds of the blended learning approach, which did not punish mistakes, the students felt less inhibited and more able to improve their work gradually. This highlights the powerful effect of the blended learning environment on student behavioural reactions and as a result learning outcomes. That the blended learning did not punish learners' writing mistakes subconsciously assisted the students to shift their focus from performance to learning and mastery where there is no room to worry about failure (Yoon, 2011).

Twenty eight out of thirty students (93.3%) indicated that' in blended learning they have the freedom to ask their teacher what they do not understand. Although the students themselves did not directly comment on the value of being able to ask questions through the blended learning, it is notable from their actions that the blended learning design did enable the possibility to freely ask

questions, express concerns, or seek advice. This finding has been reached by Cha (2015) who confirmed that high percentage of his students showed their satisfaction with the blended learning approach which enables them to ask their teacher for clarification and for advice.

27 out of 30 students (90%) preferred the English writing course to be taught through blended learning approach. This finding has been confirmed by Cha (2013) who stated that the participants preferred the English writing course to be managed through blended learning activities.

Many students (86.7%) would like to use the blended learning in learning other English courses. In short, the participants were quite satisfied with blended learning approach. Based on their less motivating learning attitudes in the English writing classes, these results could be considered as a good sign to promote their English writing in a more effective blended learning environment in the future.

As can be seen from Table 4, the students in the experimental group had favourable attitudes towards enhancing their writing skills through blended learning. Most students thought that this approach should be a supplement to in-class teaching. In addition, there was a favourable response relating to motivational aspects delivered through the use of technology. It motivated the students to study by themselves. It also helped them better understand the lesson because the supplementary lessons covered similar content. Moreover, students felt that this approach could both facilitate and enhance their learning experience. It helped them develop their writing skills.

Students have generally expressed positive views about their experience of blended learning, which reflects the findings of other literature (Ahmed, 2016; Yoon and Lee, 2010; So and Lee, 2013). Furthermore, This finding was also consistent with the previous research results, in which there was a mutual relationship of influence between students' attitude and their achievement in writing (Ahmed, 2016; Alebaikan, 2010). It also supported the hypothesis that the more favorable perception students held about blended writing, the more students improved their writing performance.

5.1.3 Negative impressions of BL for writing courses from students' perception

In an attempt to explore the EFL students' perceptions of the limitations of the blended learning experience, ten statements were allotted to address this component. A quick look at Table 7 indicates that there are some negative impressions towards blended learning for English courses from the viewpoints of students. The responses of the informants about negative expressions of blended learning are slow internet connectivity (70%), teachers don't reply to emails (26.7%), and lack of face to face interactions (26.7%). Moreover, the instructions aren't easy to follow (30%), frustrating to use (26.7%). In addition, the negative points as to make social isolation (23.3%), the materials of BL aren't well organized (30%). Also the other drawbacks of negative expressions are wasting of time (30%), lead students to cheating and other unethical practices (26.7%). This finding is congruent with that reached by Cha (2013) who stated that blended learning has been said to encourage student laziness since it makes it easy for them to take short cuts and not put effort into their writing; they often 'copy and paste' and download material from the internet without acknowledging sources. Furthermore, he reveals that the use of the blended learning approach encourages students' absenteeism and reduces face-to-face interaction between lecturers and students.

Another passivity of blended learning approach which was agreed by 76.7% of students was that the pressure and load of work on the teacher can reduce his efficiency. This finding was consistent with that of Zareekbatani (2015) who stated that one student made a sympathetic comment regarding the teacher's workload in the provision of e-feedback for students in different classes: *'My only concern about this feedback method is that the pressure and load of work on the teacher, which in the long run can reduce his/her efficiency'*.

This finding shows the students' negative expressions with blended learning are more time consuming than traditional courses because of using communication via email or discussion board need more time than conducting face to face class. Other drawbacks of BL are slow internet connectivity, frustrating to use, face to face interaction and social isolation. This reflects also instructions' of BL aren't

easy to follow and difficult to do. These findings concur with that of Stracke's study (2007) study which indicated that students left the blended learning course they were attending for three main reasons:

- 'a perceived lack of support and connection/complementarity between the f2f and computer-assisted components of the "blend"
- a perceived lack of usage of the paper medium for reading and writing,
- and the rejection of the computer as a medium of language learning'.

Table: 7 Drawbacks of Blended Learning

No.	Items	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
27	Blended learning lacks face to face interactions.	8	26.7	9	30	13	43.3
28	Slow internet connectivity is a problem for BL	21	70	2	6.7	7	23.3
29	My teachers do not reply my emails quickly.	8	26.7	2	6.7	20	66.6
30	BL materials aren't well organized.	9	30	9	30	12	40
31	The instructor isn't on time for all activities.	6	20	9	30	15	50
32	BL is frustrating to use.	8	26.7	12	40	10	33.3
33	BL is a waste of time.	9	30	6	20	15	50
34	BL can lead students to cheating and to other unethical practices.	8	26.7	10	33.3	12	40
35	BL instructions aren't easy to follow.	9	30	12	40	9	30
36	BL makes me socially isolated.	7	23.3	12	40	11	36.7
37	The pressure and load of work on the teacher can reduce his efficiency.	23	76.7			7	23.3

In general, the questionnaire findings are in harmony with the results of several studies which have examined students' perception of blended learning when writing in English. For example, Miyazoe and Anderson (2010, 2012), Larsen (2012), So and Lee (2013), and Ho and Savignon, (2013) had used mixed

methodology procedure to explore ESL/EFL students' perception towards the effectiveness of using the blended learning approach in improving their writing skill at various academic levels. These studies concluded that students mostly have positive perception towards the usefulness of blended learning in improving their writing.

6. Interview Results

Toward the end of the treatment, semi-structured interviews were also conducted in English to better understand the participants' perspectives towards the use of blended learning in EFL Essay writing classes. The interview questions were directed to ten students from the experimental group after the study. In short, all the ten participants were interviewed at the end of the study in order to gather additional data and address issues not covered in the questionnaire.

6.1 FL students' challenges in writing before participating in the BL environment

In consideration of students' challenges in writing before participating in the BL instruction, the students' comments showed that students had encountered many challenges in their writing. These challenges were mainly represented by the micro and macro aspects of writing. For example, S1, and S6 arranged their writing challenges as the following:

Another interviewee stated that:

'In comparison to the first days of treatment I feel much more confident now. In that time I was afraid of writing an essay. I felt so insecure that I would rather not to write anything at all. But now I easily write everything, everywhere. I have not tried writing a real essay for university, but when I get the opportunity; I do not think I will suffer too much' (Student 9).

Student 6 in his interview:

'In the past, because I didn't know how to write, and how to manage my writing, I was a little bit scared of writing, because I didn't know from where should I start, and where should I finish it.

6.2 Students' perceptions of EFL essay writing classes after participating in the BL environment

On the subject of student perceptions of learning writing in a blended learning environment, the interviewees after the treatment commented that they found blended learning helps them improve their writing. This is clear in the comment mentioned by one of the experimental group participants. Student (6) stated that: *I feel now it is easier to me to write essay by learning writing using this learning method. So it is much easier now.*

Extracts showing a positive response include:

“I like the blended learning because it is simply accessible anytime and anywhere.”

“I like this blended learning method because I can access my lessons at any time. This makes me feel relaxed and enjoy learning.”

“I want the teacher to supplement blended learning in-class teaching because I can access when I want it.”

“I can review materials when I want and feel very comfortable doing the task at home.”

Finally, BL approach helped them feel more confident in their writing since they practiced it much and got linguistic, topical knowledge as well as knowledge related to the techniques of writing a good essay. This knowledge and the practice they did in the writing skill helped them be relaxed and more confident in their writing learning. Based on this, it is reasonable to conclude that the students had an overall positive experience with the blended learning environment. These findings are consistent with those of Yoon and Lee (2010), So (2015) and So and Lee (2012) who found that the use of blended learning had positive effects on learners' writing skills. This signals that the students had positive experiences of their ability to learn within a blended learning environment.

6.3 How do you see blended feedback when involving in the treatment?

When asked in the interviews, 'How do you see blended feedback when involving in the treatment?', all of the students stated that they enjoyed receiving feedback on their posts, whether from peers or solely from the tutor. They considered the feedback facility to be 'useful', 'a nice experience' and 'a great source of encouragement'.

As seen in the quote below, 'I found blended feedback sessions useful and 'I benefited from blended feedback sessions and 'Reading my group members' essays helped me improve my writing skills (interview 8).'

"The feedback helped me to correct my mistakes and so it's one way I can improve. I corrected and thought about why it was right."

"I thought that blended learning was enjoyable and would do it again. It taught me just as much as the other students and faster. I prefer to learn with technology."

6.4 Students' preference for a combination of online feedback and face-to-face feedback

In response to the question whether the students prefer a combination of online feedback and face-to-face feedback, most interviewees said they preferred a combination of face-to-face and computer-mediated peer review. They felt that the two feedback modes could be used to complement each other. One interviewee wrote, "I prefer a combination of the two because I can read the feedback from computer first and then ask my peer about some questions in my paper face-to-face."

Another student emphasized the importance of the combination of online feedback and face-to-face feedback, as noted in this quote: "A combination would be great. Doing online peer review first, then discuss [with peers] face-to-face. This would make the whole communication process easier and clearer."

5.5 Do you think that blended feedback has great impact on your essay writing?

As for the impact of blended feedback on their essay writing, many learners were pleased at the improvement of their essay writing, *as expressed by some students* bellow:

"I feel also happy because from my mistakes that I have made in my previous writing, I can improve my writing skill for my future. From this I can learn to make better essay."

'I am amazed at the improvement I have made' ... 'taking account of the great impacts of your feedback on my writing, I should say never have I made such satisfying progress in such a short time' ... 'Online feedback has definitely

increased my abilities. It motivates me to write more drafts, and more importantly, do all these at my convenience' ... (Student 1).

Systematic and consistent feedback is believed to be important in decreasing the number of errors. Thinking through mistakes and increased practice rate were also visible in the above comments.

6.6 How do you perceive your blended peer feedback?

Turning to the issue of blended peer feedback, many of the interviewees made positive comments about the benefits of blended peer feedback. Below is an example of a student's comment:

'I think it [peer feedback] would help us a lot. We can find new common mistakes and the ways to correct them. Moreover, it will give us new ideas and may be it encourages students to write more, giving them new energy and competences' (Student 5).

Through feedback, they are informed of and able to notice the weaknesses of their essays and how they can improve them.

5.7 How do you perceive blended teacher feedback?

So far it seems that, in consideration of the issue of how the students perceive their blended teacher feedback, all the participants value the importance of teacher blended-feedback. This is clear in the following quote:

'teacher blended-feedback is really important, my teacher gives me an incentive by using positive description which helps me to remain highly motivated. (Student 6).

6.8 Difficulties students encountered in the blended writing course

On the topic of difficulties students encountered in the blended writing course, the students made several comments during their interviews. According to views of the interviewees, it is clear that only a small number of students found it difficult to access the blended course. In addition, some interviewees admitted that giving and receiving feedback to their peers' writing were also uneasy for them. Students justified their opinion by specifying such difficulties related to peer feedback activities as their lack of confidence to give feedback to their classmates' writing, their limited time to give feedback to many peers' writing as well as the insufficient quantity of peer feedback to help improve their writing. Most noticeably, the majority of students who took part in the blended course agreed that they had some technical problems when participating in the blended course for the first time. These technical problems included students' lack of confidence about their technology skills, lack of necessary facilities, and need of more technical supports from teacher and so on.

7. Discussion

The present study found that students in the experimental group who were taught using the blended learning approach scored significantly higher than the control group students who were taught using traditional in-class writing instruction only. 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.

The responses from the questionnaire and interview regarding students' perceptions towards using the blended learning approach were wholly positive and are compatible with the findings of the post-test. The experimental group students felt interesting and confident in learning and practicing essay writing. The students' responses questionnaire and interview also indicated that the blended learning

course had a positive effect on their attitude towards the writing process. It enhanced their self-esteem, motivation and sense of achievement and improvement. The students enjoyed writing and were motivated to write. Online learning encouraged writing and exchange of ideas.. In addition, results showed that the students highly appreciated and benefited from the blended learning employed in the course in varying ways: it helped increase student-student and student-teacher interactions, reduce or even eliminate communication anxiety, motivate them to become (more) independent and autonomous learners, and enhance their academic English writing ability, and so on.

The researcher's claims that these differences in the students' writing may be attributed to the utilization of the blended learning approach are for the following reasons:

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.
2. The direct feedback given to students had an influence on motivating the students with different achievement levels.
3. The interaction and communication among students themselves and with teachers might influence students' writing positively.
4. Students might consider the blended learning approach as a new experience, so they exerted their efforts to learn using this method.
5. Therefore, students in the experimental group outperforming their counterparts in the control group may be because the former read a lot of relevant web materials for the purpose of communicating their ideas in writing, whereas the control group had a teacher-directed oral discussions held in a regular classroom.
6. Therefore, the increase in the scores shows that appropriate blending of online and offline resources and activities such as using BBS, chat program, instant messengers, and having face-to-face feedback session had positive effects in

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; Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum, 2016; Mabuan and Ebron, 2016; Sun, 2010; Simsek, 2009; Kitchakarn, 2010; Ahmed, 2016 and Kashani, Mahmud, and Kalajahi, 2013; Ladyshewsky, 2004; Motteram, 2006; Yoon and Lee, 2012). These studies indicated that using blended learning approach has a positive effect on teaching English writing skills and could enhance students' writing skills.

8. Conclusion

The present study was intended to investigate the impact of blended learning approach on Saudi EFL learners' essay writing and examine Saudi students' perceptiveness toward implementing blended learning approach to develop English essay writing. To this end, a group of 60 EFL learners were divided into two groups: an experimental group, namely Blended Learning and a control group, namely Classroom Learning after taking part in a placement test. 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, a mixed-method approach was applied with placement test, writing test, questionnaire, and interview used for triangulation. The researcher used different tools to provide an in-depth picture. The findings showed that there were statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in favour of the experimental group. Moreover, the analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews indicated that students in the experimental group had a positive attitude towards the use of blended learning in improving English writing after their involvement in the experiment. Data from the study showed that most students enjoyed writing tasks, drafting essays and working with peers

to brainstorm ideas and opinions for their feedback. 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.

9. Recommendations:

The use of blended writing instruction to improve the writing skills of poor EFL student is strongly recommended. It is also recommended that EFL instructors can be trained to use the internet and online instruction in teaching EFL to students from home as it requires no equipment and connectivity from campus and no scheduling. In Addition, use of web-based instruction should be extended to students in other levels and to other EFL courses and skills taught at campus such as speaking, listening, reading, spelling, grammar, vocabulary building and dictionary skills. It is also recommended that other researchers and instructors fully deliver whole writing courses and other ESL language courses online. The effect of fully delivered online language courses on less able EFL student achievement is still open for further investigation.

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