Teaching Tertiary EFL Writing in a Blended Mode

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Abstract: Writing in English has always been demanding for the Chinese college students. It is also an important research subject for the EFL teaching and learning in China. With the traditional English writing teaching mode of vocational colleges, teaching only occurs in the classroom. However, with limited face-to-face contact hours, instructors are not able to optimize the use of teaching resources. Learner autonomy is not well developed. Consequently, learners' writing competence is not developed as desired. This paper applies the blended teaching mode of online and face-to-face teaching to English writing in a college context and explore how it benefits English writing teaching in higher vocational colleges via empirical research.

Keywords: Blended learning, Tertiary EFL Writing, Vocational College English Education

1. Introduction

In the four basic skills in foreign language- listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing competence is the weakest among the foreign language learners. IELTS official website shows the IELTS test takers performance in 2017 statistics as follows. The average scores of all the test takers globally (academic) in listening, reading, writing and speaking are 6.57, 6.37, 5.86 and 6.35 respectively. Table 1 shows the IELTS writing scores of the test takers with different first language backgrounds. The score of Chinese test takers is 5.41, ranking the third from the bottom in the world. How to improve foreign language writing ability of Chinese students is an urgent task in teaching English as a foreign language in China.

Table 1 IELTS Test Takers Performance in 2017

First Language	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall
Arabic	5.63	5.37	5.06	5.88	5.55
Uzbek	5.57	5.56	5.23	5.55	5.54

Chinese	5.97	6.15	5.41	5.46	5.81
Japanese	5.9	6.09	5.41	5.59	5.81
Korean	6.2	6.21	5.46	5.79	5.98
Polish	7.36	7.25	6.29	6.99	7.03
English	7.21	6.71	6.35	7.14	6.92
Igbo	6.6	6.27	6.47	7.09	6.67
German	7.8	7.55	6.62	7.39	7.41

2. The Status Quo of English Writing Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

Vocational college students usually exhibit an inconsistent ability to express their ideas clearly in an organized pattern or with sufficient supporting details, inconsistent competency in word use containing commonly used words and word phrases, frequent errors in word selection, word forms, and spelling often obscure meaning. They show inconsistent control of sentence use with some evidence of control of simple sentences. Their ability to use coordinate sentences and subordinate clauses may be inconsistent. Their essays also have many errors in grammatical forms. Commas and periods may be used to mark sentence boundaries but there are many errors.

On the other hand, in terms of EFL writing teaching pedagogy, teachers mainly use production-oriented approach and process approach. The production-oriented approach is based on the behaviorism, which holds that the teaching process is the process in which teachers prompt stimuli and students make responses. This approach focuses on the finished product, which makes the writing process a mechanical input and output process. In class, the teacher analyzes the merits of model essays and the errors of the student essays. Teachers spend a lot of time and energy correcting essays after class, and it usually takes much time for the students to get their feedback. Students only care about the score of their essays, and the same mistakes may recur. Apparently, such a teaching approach is time consuming and inefficient, so it cannot cater to the student needs. In addition to product-oriented teaching approach, process writing approach is also commonly used in writing classes. The theoretical basis of process writing approach is the communication theory, which focuses on students' writing process and writing ability. Students' writing is a cycle of discovery, exploration and correction. In this process, teachers' guidance runs through the whole process, and students can get more targeted guidance. However, for a large class, it is difficult for teachers to give guidance to each student and effectively promote the development of students' language ability.

3. Blended Teaching

In the traditional EFL writing class in China, teachers mainly teach face to face, with less use of technology. Ellis (2001) stated the advantages and limitations of online teaching and face-to-face teaching as shown in Table 2 （Hew, & Cheung, 2014). Cheung & Hew (2011) found that with the development of modern science and technology, blended teaching mode combining online teaching and face-to-face teaching has become a trend in more and more schools and educational institutions. Norberg Dziuban & Moskal (2011) also proposed that blended teaching will become the "new norm" of higher education, or the "new traditional model".

Table 2 A Summary of Some Key Strengths and Limitations the Online and Off-line Learning Modes (Adapted from Ellis 2001; Foo 2014)

Mode of learning		Strengths	Limitation
Online learning	Asynchronous session (e.g., discussion forum or boards)	• Increased time for learners to reflect • Helps introverted students to learn without feeling embarrassed • Allows individuals to participate at own time and pace	• Requires self-discipline on the part of learners • Heavy additional work load on the part of the instructors
	Synchronous session (e.g., chats, audio conferencing, video conferencing)	• Allows immediate interaction • Allows individuals participate at location of convenience	• Difficult to ask question and get it answered particularly when chats are rapid and filled with many voices
	Online content delivery (e.g., text, video, audio, animation)	• Allows learners to follow content at own time and pace • Learning content can be easily replicated and distributed to all learners	• Possible interrupted or choppy delivery due to traffic congestion • Additional work load on the part of the instructors to prepare the online resources
Offline learning	Face-to-face session	• Provides immediacy of conversation (e.g., immediacy of response, interactivity) • Allows participants to read face-to-face nuances such as body language • Space to build interpersonal relationship	• Limited scope for learner discussion due to time constraints • Difficult for introverted learners to speak up for fear of embarrassment • Requires effort and time to travel to a fixed location

Currently, there are various definitions of blended learning. Ross and Gage (2006) and Cucciare (2008) define blended learning as a collection of multiple learning methods or technologies, such as experimental training, face-to-face teaching, reading tasks, course assignments, free progress, cooperation, online and teacher-guided practical activities, etc. More scholars hold that this definition is too broad and that it is more appropriate to define blended teaching as the combination of online and face-to-face. (Graham 2006, Young, 2002, Staker 2011)

Research conducted by the US department of education found that, on the whole, blended teaching is more effective and efficient than face-to-face teaching (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones 2010). We search the keyword "English writing in Blended Mode" on www.cnki.net from 2014 till now and find a total of 43 related papers, among which five articles are about higher vocational English teaching. Fu (2018) and Zhang (2018) discuss about the application of blended teaching mode in English writing. Qin (2018) and Wu Ya (2018) mainly conduct the teaching reform by using an essay marking website www.pigai.org. This paper intends to explore the role of blended teaching mode in English writing teaching in higher vocational colleges through empirical research.

4. Experiment

4.1 Research Hypothesis

In this paper, the research hypothesis is that the blended teaching mode is effective in Teaching Tertiary EFL Writing.

4.2 Subjects

The author selected a total of 68 students from two parallel classes of 2015 cohort majoring in Business English at a vocational college of an application-oriented undergraduate college in China. The students are divided into experimental group (35 students) and control group (33 students). Two groups of students take English writing as an elective course in the third semester.

4.3 Method

Both the control group and experimental group adopt *Great Writing 3: the From Great Paragraphs to Great Essays* as a textbook. At the beginning of the semester, the two groups were pretested, and the students completed a 250-word written essay within 50 minutes. The essays were reviewed by three English teachers according to the overall scoring method, and the average score was taken as the final score.

Table 3. Group Statistics

VAR00001		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
V1	1.00	33	78.3485	4.24905	.73967
	2.00	35	79.4714	3.07012	.51894

Table 4. Independent Samples Test

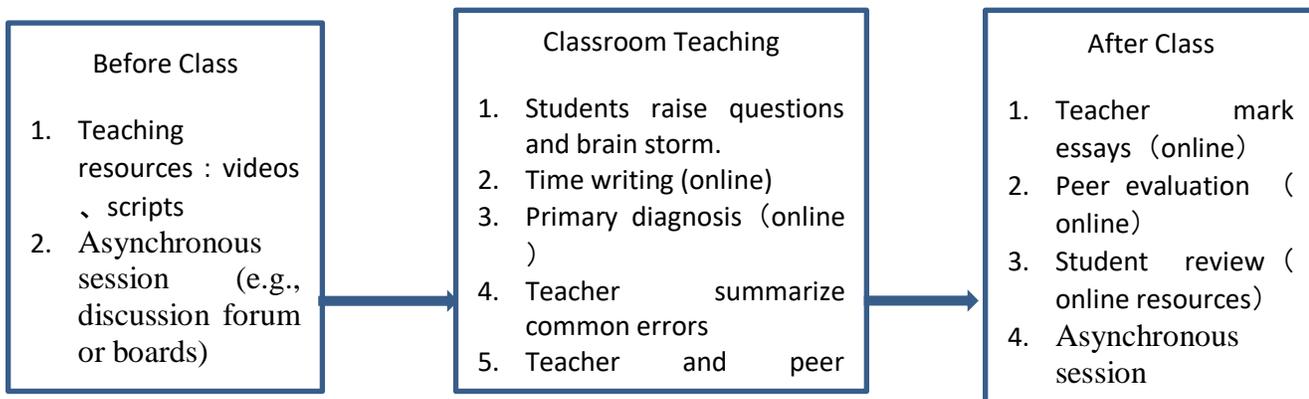|		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
V1	Equal variances assumed	.553	.460	-1.255	66	.214	-1.12294	.89512	-2.91011	.66422
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.243	58.024	.219	-1.12294	.90355	-2.93159	.68570

The independent sample t-test analysis was conducted with SPSS19.0, as shown in Table 4, the F test sig>0.05, the hypothesis variance of the two samples was equal, and the p>0.05, so there was no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in the pre-test writing ability at the beginning of the semester.

Online content delivery (e.g., text, video, audio, animation)

The control group adopted the traditional face-to-face teaching mode (as shown in the figure below). The teacher divided the teaching process into three stages: before class, during class and after class.

Before class

1. theme
2. text

During class

1. Techer lecture
2. Analysis of model essays
3. Timed writing

After class

1. Teacher mark essays and summarize the errors.
2. Students review and preview.
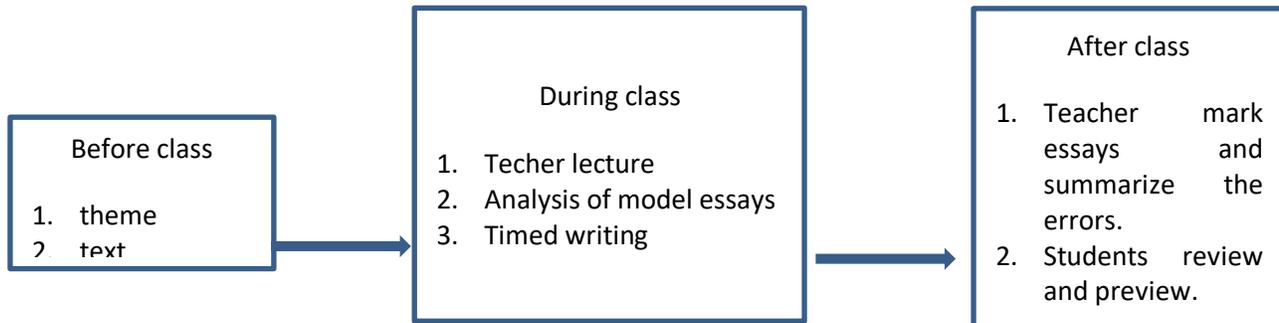
The experimental group adopted the blended teaching mode combining face-to-face teaching and online teaching (as shown in the figure below), and teachers still divided the teaching process into three stages: before class, during class and after class. Teachers mainly use the online teaching platform auxiliary teaching tool.

Before Class

1. Teaching resources：videos、scripts
2. Asynchronous session (e.g., discussion forum or boards)

Classroom Teaching

1. Students raise questions and brain storm.
2. Time writing (online)
3. Primary diagnosis（online）
4. Teacher summarize common errors
5. Teacher and peer

After Class

1. Teacher mark essays（online）
2. Peer evaluation（online）
3. Student review（online resources）
4. Asynchronous session

In the experimental group, 1) Students preview lessons according to their own time and pace. Teachers can also supervise students' learning according to online statistics. Teachers put forward questions online, students upload their understanding of the problems, and teachers collect and summarize the student answers. 2) Classroom teaching is transformed from lecture-based to discussion-based, from teacher-centered to student-centered. Students' essays can be collected immediately through online timed writing. Teachers will explain students' errors instead of using the prepared model essays. 3) After class, students evaluate their peer's essays modeling the diagnosis of the network and the teacher's lecture. Students submit their revised draft according to the feedback from the internet, the teacher and their peers. After class, students

can still review the lesson through the online teaching platform, leave and answer questions online.

4.4 Analysis of Experiment

The two classes were taught by the same teacher. After a semester of teaching, students sat in a final test. Within 50 minutes, they completed an essay of about 250 words, which was reviewed by three teachers according to the global scoring method, and the average value was taken as the final score.

Table 4. Group Statistics

VAR00001		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
V1	1.00	33	81.05	4.361	.759
	2.00	35	85.27	4.057	.686

Table 5. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
V1	Equal variances assumed	.096	.757	-4.140	66	.000	-4.226	1.021	-6.264	-2.188
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.131	64.874	.000	-4.226	1.023	-6.269	-2.183

Table 5 shows that the F test sig>0.05, the two samples assume the same variance, p<0.05, there is a significant difference in English writing ability between the experimental group and the control group, the difference between the experimental group and the control group is 4.226. At the beginning of the semester, when the writing abilities of the two groups are similar, the experimental group's English writing scores using the blended teaching mode are significantly higher than those of the control group.

By using the blended teaching mode, students use the online teaching resources according to their own page and learning style. Students are high motivated. For example, some students submit their revised essays more than 20 times. Traditional face-to-face teaching time is more used for teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. The classroom has been extended effectively, giving full play to the advantages of the online and face-to-face teaching mode.

5. Conclusion

The development of modern technology enables the blended teaching mode which combines face-to-face and online teaching. Blended teaching can not only improve the results of writing, but also pays attention to the process of writing. Teachers can not only play a leading and monitoring role in teaching, but also can cultivate students' learning initiative. Blended teaching provides a variety of more efficient interactive channels for both teachers and students. This paper proves that blended teaching is an effective approach to EFL writing teaching at higher vocational colleges.

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