Incorporating Blended Learning into ESL Writing Classrooms: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the issues and challenges faced by the learners when blended learning is being incorporated into ESL writing classrooms. Blended learning makes use of features from the traditional classroom which are further incorporated into lessons with the help of technology.It combines independent learning with valuable face-to-face interaction with a facilitator. This study highlights on 39 students from different semesters who attended the academic writing course in a public university in Malaysia. The instrument used is a survey containing 4 sections; demographic profile, learners' reasons, perceived difficulties in writing and learners' perception on blended learning in general. The findings from this study revealed that teachers with low proficiency and lack in knowledge demotivate the learners during their writing lessons. The non-careful use of punctuations has impeded the learners writing. The implication of this study is that blended learning can be incorporated into ESL writing classes as long as teachers are trained and knowledgeable to use technology in their lessons.

Keywords: Blended learning, ESL writing, Issues, Challenges.

Highlights of this paper

- Blended learning combines independent leaning with valuable face-to-face interaction with a facilitator.
- This study looks at the perception of learners towards learning writing thorugh belnded learning.
- The findings from this study revealed that teachers with low proficiency and lack in knowledge demotivate the learners during their writing lessons.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although a certain number of studies in the ESL learning contexts may have discussed on how blended learning had been incorporated into ESL classrooms, this paper hopes to highlight on its challenges and issues on writing and blended learning. As the world evolved and advanced into a new era of web-based technology, education should embrace this evolution and should start to incorporate other mixed technological pedagogical approaches in its methods to suit to the current generation of learners. This paper hopes to shed some lights on teaching through incorporating blended learning in its classes through a study conducted in one of the public universities in Malaysia.

Blended learning has been defined by Bersin (2004) as a blend of diverse "training media" to produce an optimal training program involving technologies, activities, and types of events for a particular group of audience. With that definition, we can say that this method utilizes all possible approaches to be incorporated into the learning process. Blended learning surely allows language practice to evolve with time and how this has actually changed the learning environment of today's students when it comes to writing skill. According to Rozeboom (2017) students who participated in blended learning performed better, are able to utilise their resources, can collaborate with other students, and take more ownership of their learning.

1.1. Background of Study

As previously discussed by Yunus *et al.* (2013) they stated that there is an abundant of resources and materials over the Internet that are beneficial to language activities such as online forum and chatroom. Blended learning is a method that makes use of features and traditional class can be further blended into the advancement of today's technology. Therefore, the use of blended learning should be seen as a powerful tool to influence language learners and help them to do better in English writing class.

As blended learning is being widely used in universities in Malaysia, researchers will investigate how blended learning is perceived by students who have a few blended learning sessions throughout their semester of learning English. The focus of this study is limited to a public university in Malaysia whom respondents come from different semester of study period. Data were collected using questionnaires to address on significance of learners' reasons, writing difficulties and blended learning as well as how they perceived their writing difficulties and its influence to their perception in ESL writing.

1.2. Statement of Problem

Writing is one of the skills taught to ESL students and sometimes this skill can be rather challenging especially to Malaysian students. Prior to their studies in university, most Malaysian students spent around eleven to thirteen years learning English at schools (Hiew, 2012). Despite the many years spent to learning English, researchers like Kabilan *et al.* (2010) felt that the standard of English among these students have deteriorated. Malaysian students are quite weak in English and she specifically highlighted that the writing skill is more prominent than other skills. This issue has plagued educators and researchers in Malaysia for many years and this study would like to see how

learners perceive their writing difficulties and how this difficulty will be impacted when blended learning is being incorporated in teaching writing.

1.3. Research Questions

This study is done to answer the following questions;

1. Is there any significant difference between learners' reasons, writing difficulties and blended learning across semesters?
2. How do learners' reasons influence their perception of ESL writing?
3. How do perceived writing difficulties influence their perception of ESL writing?
4. How do learners perceive blended learning in ESL writing?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This section discusses the theoretical frame work of the study,

2.2. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework of the study. This study looks into the issues and challenges in implementing blended learning in the writing classroom.
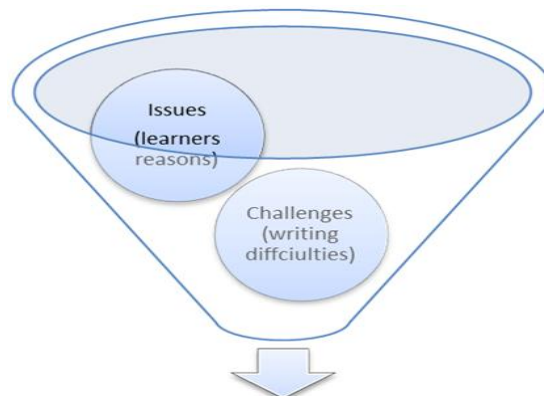

Figure-1. Blended learning in writing classroom.
Source: Rahmat (2011) and Rahmat *et al.* (2017).

2.2.1. Issues in Learners' Reasons

When it comes classroom activities, learners would have many reasons for either liking or not liking learning. According to Rahmat (2011) there are two main issues when it comes to learners' reasons. The first issue is caused by the learners themselves and these include their use of the first language in the learning of English as a second language. The next reason is the students claim there are not many opportunities to practice their target language. The next reason is many of the writers had previous experience of writing in their first language.

In addition to the learners' reasons, there are also some reasons caused by the teachers. This includes the teacher's low proficiency in the use of the target language. Next, some learners claimed that the teachers' teaching method was not good. The teachers were also blamed for showing lack of interest in teaching writing. Finally, the learners felt that the teacher did not give enough writing practice.

2.2.2. Challenges in Learning ESL Writing

Writers face many challenges in their writing process. These challenges can be categorised into their perceived difficulties. The study by Rahmat *et al.* (2017) looked into the perceived difficulties that writers face when they wrote. The punctuation, language, and writing skills. The study revealed that writers faced problems in using punctuations such as full-stops, question marks, and exclamation marks. Writers may also be confused with the use of commas, colon and semi colon. They may also have problems with the use of questions and dialogues.

Next, writers may also find language use challenging. Among some of the challenges are in the use of appropriate language, the use of synonyms and antonyms. Writers may also face problems if they translate their sentences from their first language. They may face problems with prepositions, articles, tenses and also word order. Finally, writers were also reported to find writing skills challenging. They may face problems summarising, paraphrasing, using in-text and end-of-text citations. In addition to that, some writers may have problems writing their introduction and conclusion.

2.3. Past Studies

2.3.1. Past Study in Blended Learning

Page *et al.* (2017) carried a comparative cross-sectional study in several universities in Australia. The study looked at the perception of first year students on blended learning. A survey was carried out and it consisted of a range of questions relating to the demographics of the survey participants, asking students to rank the value of the learning resources provided and a number of Likert items (5-point scale) intended to elicit students' perceptions of their learning experience in the subject. Two specific attitudes were assessed by the Likert items: student perception of blended and online learning and student perception of the value of the weekly online quizzes. First year preferred lectures, they liked workshops, pre-workshop quizzes, blended learning ranked least.

2.3.2. Past Study in Blended Learning in ESL Classroom

The case study conducted by Nazarenko (2015) explored the experience of implementing a blended approach to a university lecture course for students in foreign language teaching methodology at the Faculty of Foreign of Area Studies at Moscow State University. The attempt of the instructor to experiment with blended learning enabled the developers of the course to get an idea of their students' subjective response to the challenges of blended learning. Findings revealed that students were positive about the use of blended learning in their foreign language classroom.

2.3.3. Past Study in Blended Learning and Learning Writing

The study by Mabuan and Ebron (2016) explored the viability of using email to facilitate topical discussions via email for ESL writing classes. 198 students were chosen from a university in Manila. E-mail thread discussions ranged from personal to societal issues were analysed. Data was taken from students' reflections, interviews, survey and focus group discussions showed that using e-mails in the classrooms helped to develop students' interest and confidence in writing. This helped to develop their technological and social skills. They also developed their autonomy. Their attitude towards learning English has also changed.

Another study was conducted by Yunus *et al.* (2013) to investigate the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing skills in Malaysian secondary schools. This study focused on the data collected from four English teachers in a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur who were interviewed by the researcher from selected secondary schools from five areas in Malaysia. This study revealed that the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing was very low.

Advantages of using ICT were reported to attract students' attention. ICT also facilitated students' learning process, helped to improve students' vocabulary and promoted meaningful learning. Disadvantages found included the difficult class control, distraction and the students' tendency to use short forms in their writing. The study also found that teachers were generally weak in managing problems and planning activities involving the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing.

A study was conducted by Anderson *et al.* (2015) to look into the relationship between writing and learning. Data was collected from 80 institutions -in particular 41,616 and the students were distributed from different semesters of studies. The instrument used was a 26-item questionnaire. Findings revealed that students from different semesters had different expectations of writing tasks and this expectation was reflected in the way they perceived the difficulty of writing activities. Students in the later semester were exposed to more writing began to face more writing problems as the semester progressed. Next, the results also revealed that the approaches to learning among learners from different semesters differed. This affected the way they respond to learning tasks and situations. Learners in the advanced semesters would perceive learning as less problematic compared to the ones in the earlier semesters.

3. METHODOLOGY

This pilot study is done to find out the issues and challenges of blended learning in ESL writing classroom. This quantitative study is done on a population of students who attended the academic writing course in a public university in Malaysia. Purposive sampling was done to obtain samples of 39 students from different semesters. The instrument used is a survey containing 4 sections; the first section is the demographic profile, section B looks into the learners' reasons, section C looks at perceived difficulties in writing and section D looks at learners' perception on blended learning in general. Data is analysed using SPSS version 23.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

A Cronbach alpha was done on the instrument Table 1 on 46 items. Results revealed internal consistency of .828 and .847 for standardised items. The following sections present the findings of this study based on the research questions.

Table-1. Cronbach alpha for instrument

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.828	0.847	46

Answer to Research Question 1:

1. Is there any significant difference between learners' reasons, writing difficulties and blended learning across semesters?

4.1.1. Learners' Reasons

A one-way ANOVA between groups was performed to explore whether there is a difference in learners' reasons on students from different semester. Results showed comparison of four different semesters which are 2, 3, 4, and 6. The mean statistic score by students semester composition presented in Table 2. Students in the 6th semester were reported to have the highest mean (30.67).

Table-2. Mean statistic score by semester.

Sem	n	Mean	SD
2	8	27.25	3.25
3	15	27.70	4.30
4	6	28.76	3.09
6	10	30.67	4.49
Total	39	28.52	4.08

Table-3. One-way ANOVA on learners' reasons by semester

Source	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	70.659	3	23.553	1.464	.241
Within groups	562.979	35	16.085		
Total	633.638	38			

The one way ANOVA result in Table 3 indicates that there was no statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in the mean difficulties for learners' reasons for the four semester, $F_{(3, 35)} = 1.46$, p = .241. The effect size calculated using eta squared, was 0.11. This indicates that there is medium difference in mean difficulties in learner's reasons between groups.

4.1.2. Writing Difficulties

A one-way ANOVA between groups was performed to explore whether there is a difference in writing difficulties on students from different semester. Students compared by four different semester which is 2, 3, 4, and 6. The mean statistic score by students semester composition presented in Table 4. Interestingly, students in semester 4 (103.17) were reported to have higher mean than the final semester (101-25). This could be the fact that students in many semesters began their final year projects in that semester thus be faced with many writing tasks in that semester. This finding is in accordance with the study by Anderson *et al.* (2015) who also found students later in the semester reported facing more writing difficulties than their peers in the earlier semesters.

Table-4. Mean statistic score by semester(Sem).

Sem	n	Mean	SD
2	8	90.51	15.75
3	14	87.71	12.84
4	6	103.17	14.11
6	10	101.25	8.20
Total	38	94.30	13.91

Table-5. One-way ANOVA on difficulties in perceived difficulties by semester.

Source	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	1678.454	3	559.485	3.471	.027
Within groups	5480.553	34	161.193		
Total	7159.007	37			

The one way ANOVA result in Table 5 indicates that there was a statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in the mean difficulties in writing difficulties for the four semester, $F_{(3, 34)} = 3.471$, p = .027. The effect size calculated using eta squared, was 0.23. This indicates that there is large difference in mean difficulties in writing between groups.

Table-6. Mean different values for pairwise comparison.

Semester	Semester 2	Semester 3	Semester 4	Semester 6
Semester 2	0.00	2.80	12.66	10.74
Semester 3		0.00	15.46	13.54
Semester 4			0.00	1.92
Semester 5				0.00

* *p*< 0.05, ** *p*< 0.01.

A Post-Hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test was performed to determine the mean difference between the pairs. The mean score for students from semester 2 (*M*=90.51; *SD*=15.75), semester 3 (*M*=87.71; *SD*=12.84), semester 4 (*M*=103.17; *SD*=14.11), and semester 6 (*M*=101.25; *SD*=8.20. The result as shown in Table 6 indicated that there was no significantly different on the writing difficulties for the four semesters.

4.1.3. Blended Learning

A one-way ANOVA between groups was performed to explore whether there is a difference in blended learning on students from different semester. Students compared by four different semester which is 2, 3, 4, and 6. The mean statistic score by students semester composition presented in Table 7. Students in the earlier semesters (Semester 2 –31.31; semester 3-32.43) had higher mean scores compared to students in the later semesters, showing the younger learners preferred independent learning more compared to the older one. This study is not in accordance with the study by Page *et al.* (2017) who reported that younger learners preferred more face-to-face learning. This could reflect on the nature of blended learning activities that the students were exposed to. The high mean scores could indicate the students using/enjoying the activities prepared by their respective lecturers.

Table-7. Mean statistic score by semester.

Sem	n	Mean	SD
2	8	31.31	9.53
3	15	32.43	5.09
4	6	25.58	7.74
6	10	27.65	9.41
Total	39	29.92	7.89

Table-8. One-way ANOVA on blended learning by semester.

Source	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	274.634	3	91.545	1.530	.224
Within groups	2093.635	35	59.818		
Total	2368.269	38			

The one way ANOVA result in Table 8 indicates that there was no statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in the mean difficulties in blended learning for the four semesters, F (3, 35) = 1.53, p = .224. The effect size calculated using eta squared, was 0.12. This indicates that there is medium difference in mean blended learning between groups.

Answer to Research Question 2:

2. How do learners' reasons influence their perception of ESL writing?
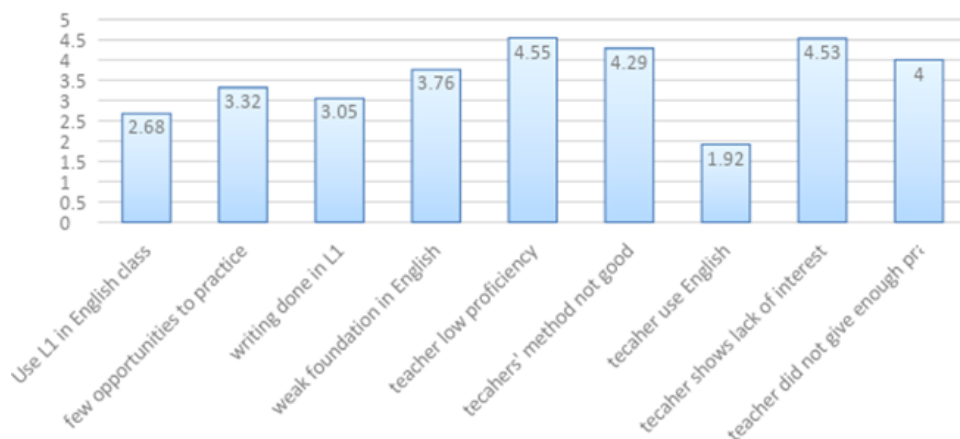
Figure-2. Mean score for learners' reasons.

Figure 2 shows learners' perceived reasons for not liking writing lessons. The highest mean was for "teachers' low proficiency" (4.55) and "teachers' lack of knowledge" (4.53). Learners seemed to blame their teachers attitude for their lack of motivation towards the writing class. This is also supported by Rahmat (2011) who reported that students lack of motivation may be caused by the teachers' lack of pedagogical skills in the classroom.

Answer to Research Question 3:

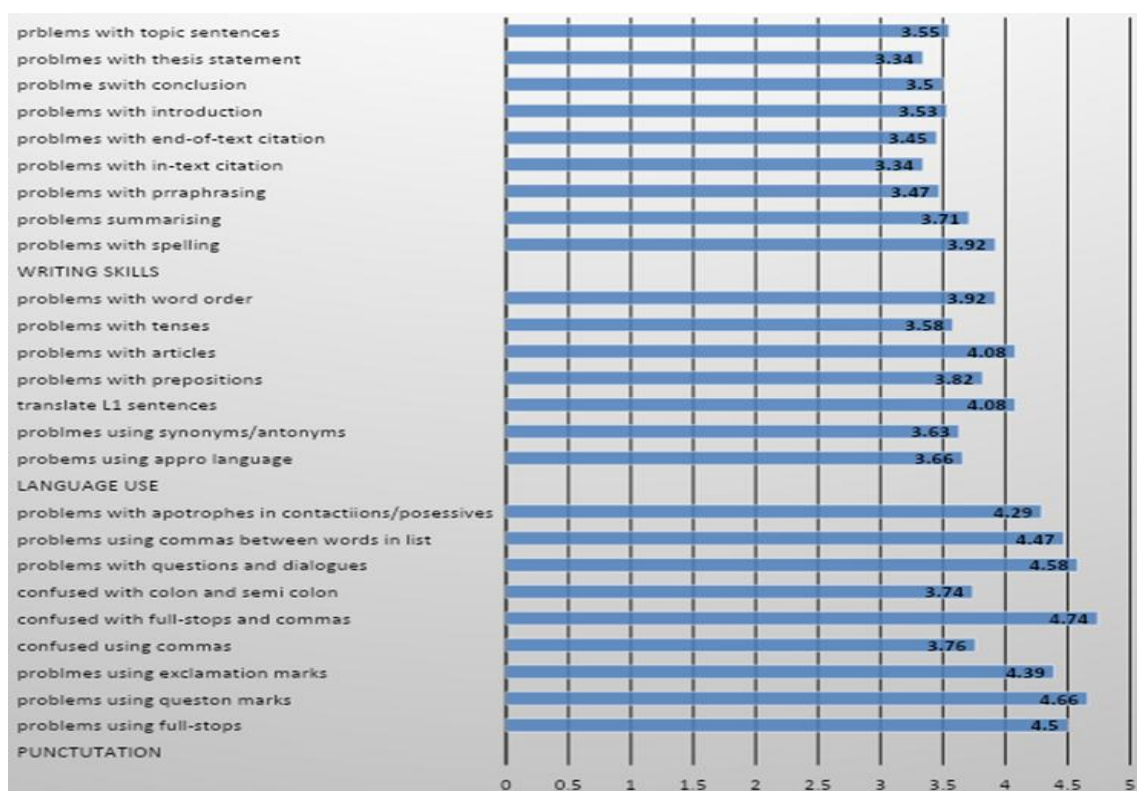3. How do perceived writing difficulties influence their perception of ESL writing?

Figure-3. Mean score for perceived diffciulties.

Figure 3 shows the findings for learners' perceived difficulties. Results reveal high mean scores for problems with punctuations- such as full-stops and commas (4.58), use of question marks (4.66). This finding is in accordance

with the study by Rahmat *et al.* (2017) who also reported punctuation as one of the perceived difficulties writers faced.

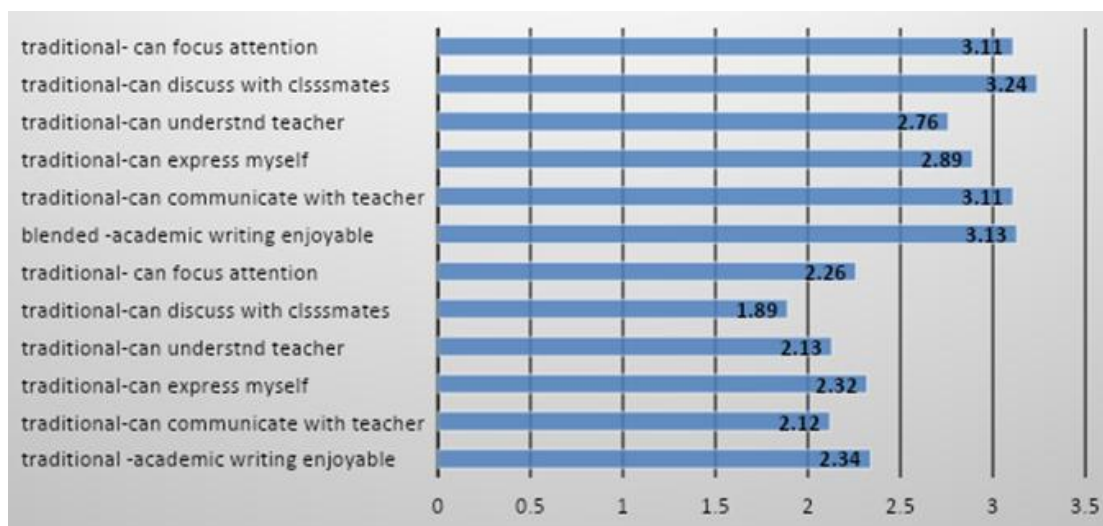4. How do learners perceive blended learning in ESL writing?

Figure-4. Mean score for perception of blended learning.

Figure 4 shows the findings for mean scores for mean scores of Blended Learning. The highest mean is for traditional -can focus attention (3.32) and traditional -can discuss with classmates (3.24). This finding is in accordance with the study by Anderson *et al.* (2015) who also reported learners in the earlier semesters preferred teacher and students' interaction as part of the classroom activity.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study focuses on how learners perceive their writing difficulties and also investigate if the difficulty will be impacted when blended learning is being incorporated in teaching writing. Clearly, this study is dealing with an intricate adaptive system that attributes to an emergent feature. Summing up to this study, it was found that learners blamed their writing teachers for demotivating them during writing activities. Writers also perceived that knowledge of punctuation is a hindrance in writing. In addition to that, learners are also in favour of having interaction in the classroom. Blended learning can be integrated into the ESL writing classes. However, the teachers need to be trained and they too should be knowledgeable to use technology in their lessons. Teachers should also have high proficiency of the target language and able to interact with the students either online or offline very well.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

This pedagogy changes many assumptions regarding the most effective way in supporting educational environment. Blended learning as stated by Dziuban *et al.* (2018) is a personal experience for the students; therefore, "it should not be surprising that much of what we have called blended learning is, in reality, blended teaching that reflects pedagogical arrangements". Teachers need to be creative and innovative in preparing writing activities and tasks for their blended classes. There will be challenges in implementing blended learning strategy in teaching

writing when compared to the traditional classroom based learning. There will be occurrence where students have difficulty disciplining themselves learning via e-learning option; therefore, there will be a need "to allow the students to work independently at their own pace, it is highly recommended that curiosity and authenticity should be provoked by different types of online tools" (Tosun, 2015). According to Khazaei and Dastjerdi (2011) before deciding on a certain pedagogical method, it is imperative to carry out a needs analysis.

5.3. Suggestion for Future Research

This study may be limited to specific subjects, place, skills, and duration. Nonetheless, it has highlighted the challenges that the learners perceived when the teaching of writing is implemented in the blended method. The obstacles and challenges are myriad. Future research should also be carried out on the teachers' perception in incorporating the teaching of the writing component the blended way, as the teachers are no longer "teaching" and they are now undertaking more diverse and challenging missions than ever.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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