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The blended learning: English majors' perception of its effects on their writing skills

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ABSTRACT

With the ever-increasing development of technology, online teaching is more readily accepted as a viable component in teaching and learning, and blended learning, the combining of online and face-to-face learning, is becoming commonplace in many higher education institutions. Definitely, challenges cannot be denied; however, it has been suggested and deployed globally including Vietnam. To some extent, both teachers and students present their positive points of view on this learning approach. However, there are a huge number of students expressing their lack of understanding the blended learning, which negatively affects their attitudes towards deployment of this learning approach as well as particular reference to motivation and interest. This paper is to assess the English majors' perceptions on blended learning environment at tertiary level, which especially affects their learning the writing skills.

Results of the study are absolutely helpful for the author to understand the students' perceptions of the effects on the blended learning; then, she can give some suggestions to enhance the learning of writing skills in the light of the blended learning.

Keywords: *academic writing skills, attitude, blended learning, perception*

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, teaching-learning approaches and methodologies have drawn much attention of researchers, professors, leaders, teachers, and even learners working on educational field over the years. Results of a variety of research on this topic have been highly appreciated as well as successfully applied in different educational settings.

Among those, the blended learning is an approach which has been applied for the teaching and learning English in most universities in different countries in the world for its numerous benefits so far. Vietnam is absolutely not an exception. A lot of colleges and universities throughout the country implement this approach in their educational contexts including the teaching and learning of the academic writing skills for English majors.

This paper; therefore, argues that the blended learning (BL) environment can meet the students' demands in term of learning and improving their writing skills in English academically. Actually, this approach exposes the fact of various behaviors and attitudes of students generally, and English majors particularly. A lot of them show their concerns and interests in this way of learning, which combines both traditional classroom lessons and the ones that are given over the Internet. They agree with the idea that this is a very flexible approach, which can bring them a great deal of comfort in term of switched learning environments and free atmosphere for discussions. Thanks to support of online classes, they feel easy to express their thoughts, opinions or raise questions without any hesitation, which are definitely advantageous for them. However, there are students expressing their worries and even refusals when requested to implement this approach. Different reasons about this problem have been presented for further discussions and explanations, but findings still make it controversial among them. Therefore, in the paper, the writer expects to identify students' perceptions of effects on the blended learning towards their learning the academic writing skills and also to uncover the relevant causes; then, several suggestions are introduced for serious considerations and appropriate solutions to the problem.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The blended learning

The blended learning is an approach to learning that combines face-to-face and online learning experience. Ideally, each (both online and off) will complement the other by using its particular strength. In another word, blended learning is a mix of old and new as much as it is a mix of physical and digital learning. For this point, Wikipedia offers a definition that says "Blended learning is an approach to education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods. It requires the physical presence of both teacher and student, with some elements of student control over time, place, path, or place." So, it can be seen that this approach can help bringing traditional physical classes with elements of virtual education together. It closely involves in e-learning, encouraging personalization of the e-learning experience by combining the best aspects of in-person teaching with technology-based eLearning methods, and also "self-paced courses which are available to watch or listen to on your own time and at your own pace, with no deadlines or expiration date" (Pallavi, 2020).

The models of blended learning environment have been suggested in three main ways by Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis (2006) and other authors. These are:

1. Transmissive pedagogy model which incorporates the provision of supplementary online resources for learning programmes conducted along predominantly traditional lines with institutionally supported virtual learning environments (VLEs). Actual teaching and learning follows the traditional face-to-face modes of lectures and seminars, but provide extra support to the students through placing lecture notes on the web.

2. Transformative model facilitates extensive utilization of ICT tools beyond VLEs to enhance and alter students' mode of interaction, studying and learning and it is underpinned by radical course redesign. It transforms teaching and learning environment from where learners are just recipients of knowledge to where learners are actively involved in the construction of knowledge through dynamic interactions. This type of blend promotes intellectual activity that is practically impossible without the use of technology (Graham, 2006). The transformative model is currently on the ascendancy in higher education and is often developed from the application of the principles of constructive alignment where assessment strategies are constructively aligned with the learning objectives of the course (Biggs, 2003).

3. A holistic model of technology use to support learning. This is a newer characterization of blended learning where most learners do not distinguish between learning with or without technology. Faculty facilitates learning by using the learners' own technologies such as mobile phones, online communities and instant messaging to support the students' learning at any place and at any time. These models are also identified in the similar way by Nguyen Hoang Trang (2018). Moreover, she mentioned the very worthy experience related to the equipment necessary for learning online.

In fact, these models definitely display lots of advantages and disadvantages of the blended learning for both teachers and students (Phạm, 2021). Regarding this, Eoghan Quigley (2019) presented some benefits for learners, including:

- Blended learning offers the learner convenience and flexibility; they have the ability to control their learning pace and learn remotely.
- Academic research suggests that blended learning gives learners a more comprehensive understanding of the course content.
- Because blended learning allows learners to interact with instructors and fellow learners, social learning is supported.

However, not all students can identify and take these advantages. They stay on their own beliefs, so their thoughts of blended learning are not the same during the whole course. Brenda (2017) mentioned some elements that directly affect students on blending learning in his research on online EFL lessons. Satisfaction is a particular case, which can either motivate or demotivate students' learning in the way they are guided and encouraged by teachers. He also emphasized that perception is extremely important to students' behaviors and practice, which is closely related to their achievements.

2.2. The writing skills

The writing skills is one of the four basic language skills (skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing), which can be defined as the formal writing style used in colleges and universities. It's what students are expected to produce for classes and what professors and academic researchers use to write scholarly materials.

Process Writing

Process Writing is an approach to teaching writing that allows the teacher and the students to go through the process of producing a text together. In process writing, students have the chance to think about what they are going to write, produce drafts, revise, edit, and give and receive feedback on their work before coming up with the final version of the text.

According to Andreia Zakime (2018), writing is a “productive” skill and the stages of a writing lesson differ from that of receptive skills, like reading. A typical process writing lesson usually includes the phases of pre-writing, writing, and revising as followed:

Pre-writing

In this stage, learners are asked to come up with ideas and plan what they are going to write. This stage might include:

- Brainstorming ideas
- Planning
- Organizing
- Selecting ideas

Learners can - and should - work collaboratively during this stage. They can use techniques such as creating lists, mind maps and charts in order to brainstorm and select the ideas they'd like to include in their texts. This can be done in or outside the classroom.

Writing

In this stage, learners compose the first draft of their texts. As students will be given the chance to revise and edit their texts later, accuracy of language, punctuation and vocabulary is not essential at this point. Composing the text can be done individually

or collaboratively - learners can be given the chance to choose, according to their preference.

Revising

This is when learners have the opportunity to look back at their texts and reorganize ideas, add, change or remove sentences and adapt their choice of words to make sure the ideas are being conveyed clearly. Feedback has an essential role in this stage. It can be provided by the teacher or by peers: learners can exchange drafts and comment on each other's work.

Assessment obviously differs from various pieces of writing, which meets different requirements of a particular level. Some examples can be taken from the mentioned points such as rich ideas, good lexical resources, correct grammar and structures, coherence and cohesion, ... Therefore, to improve the writing skills, learners need to focus on a lot of related criteria, which they cannot actually train themselves but need guidance or instructions from teachers.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research questions

1. What is the English majors' perception at tertiary level on the blended learning for writing skills?
2. What are suggestions to improve their writing skills?

3.2. Research method

A questionnaire of English majors' perception skills on blended learning (BL) towards writing skills is selected as samples for conducting the study.

3.3. Samples and participants

83 students majoring in English at Banking University Ho Chi Minh City (BUH) 78 English majors from HCMC University of Education (HCMUE) are the priority for selection as samples of the study. They are currently taking the academic writing course instructed by the author; thus, they are eager to express their opinions on the topic.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Distribution of students according to gender

161 students from the two universities are kindly requested to give responses to the questionnaire of the study. Among them, 61 girls and 22 boys from BUH and 52 females over 78 of total participated, which takes 70% and nearly 30% respectively as shown in the figure 1 below:

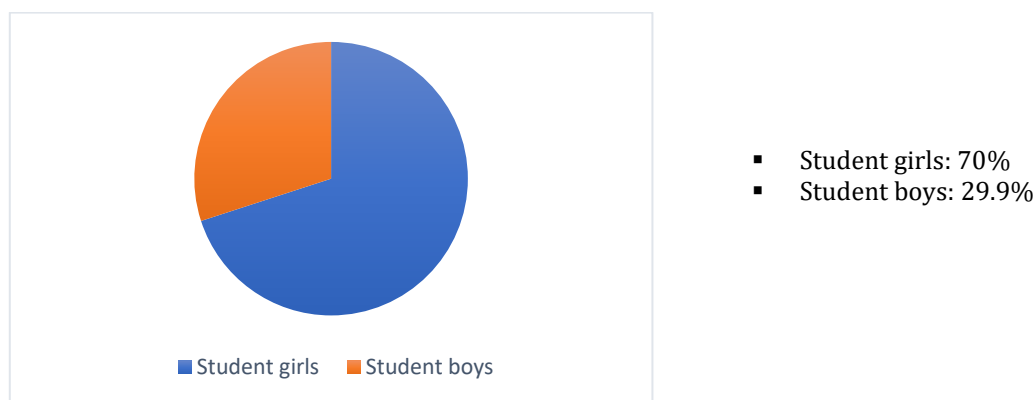


Figure 1. Gender

4.2. Blended learning is more interesting than traditional classroom environment

TABLE 1. Students' interest in bended learning

Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree	Disagree	
BUH	38	23	11	7	4	83
HCMEU	37	20	10	5	6	78
TOTAL	75	43	21	12	10	161

Results from the table give the information of students' interest in BL, which demonstrates the fact that nearly all of them (118 out of 161) agree to be involved in BL either strongly (75/161) or a bit less (43/161). This shows a lot of students are extremely excited with the BL, which can bring them benefits to some extent, especially in term of spiritual motivation.

4.3. Blended learning is effective for learning the writing skills

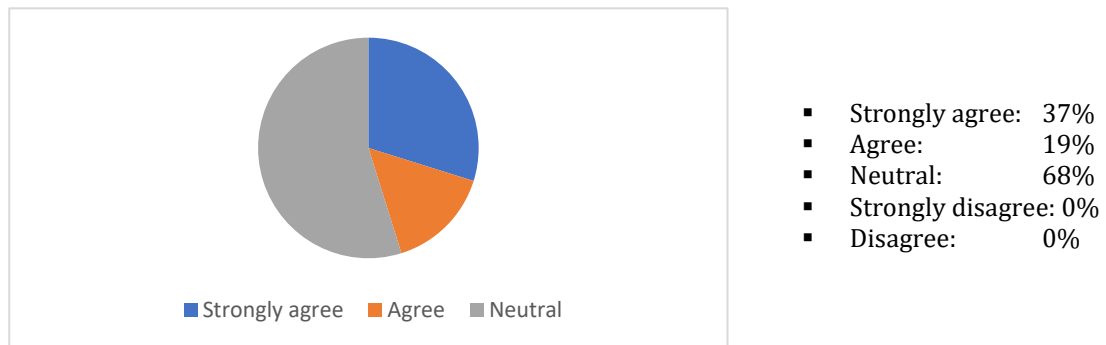


Figure 2. Students' perception of BL for writing skills in term of efficiency

Undoubtedly, a lot of students are not sure of the efficiency of BL towards learning the writing skills, but they believe BL can be beneficial for them more or less. Thus, 68% of them express their uncertainty of its efficiency, and none of them think that BL is not ineffective.

4.4. Distribution of traditional classroom lessons and online ones according to the writing process

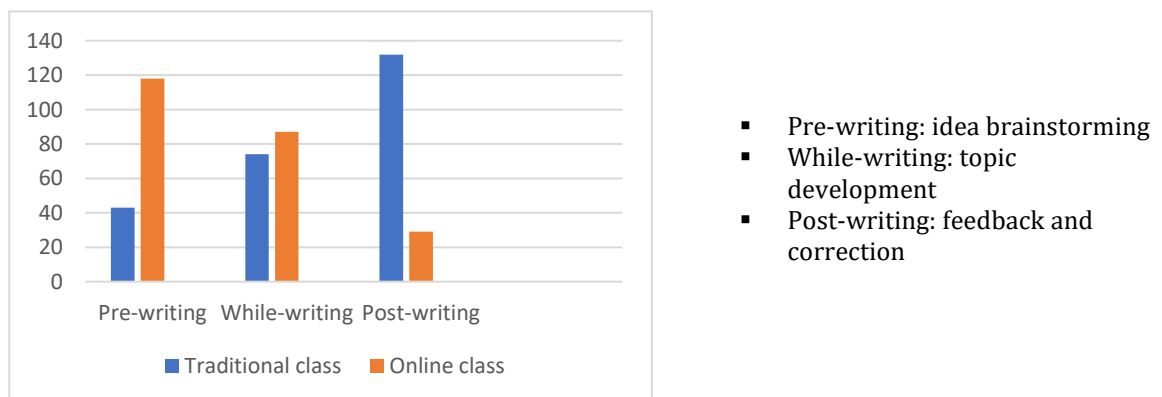


Figure 3. Students' expectation to traditional class and online class

Students are requested to state their opinions about their concerns about traditional classes and online classes. Surprisingly, they show their interests in both but differently at three steps of the writing process. While most of them (118 students) prefer learning online at the first step, which help them brainstorm and find out rich ideas to develop the topic of the writing, 80% of them (132/ 161) confirm that the traditional class or face-to-face class is absolutely effective for the last step, at which they can receive useful feedback from their friends sothat they can complete edition before submissions. Their writings are also corrected by teachers or their peers at this phase.

4.5. Worries of English majors about the blended learning for their learning writing skills

TABLE 2. Worries of English majors about BL for learning the writing skills

No	Problems	Total of students (161)
1	Lack of a computer accessed with the internet	56
2	Poor understanding of the online lessons	138
3	Less opportunities of feedback and correction	145
4	Limited knowledge of applying technology in learning	82
5	Bad motivation in online participation/ attendance	79

The table deploys the number of students worrying about their learning the writing skills in the blended learning environment. Almost of them (138/161) feel much worried about the online lessons which can challenge them in term of deep understanding. Additionally, criteria for a good piece of writing are very serious. Thus, they are quite sympathized because this may badly affect their final results. Besides, limited knowledge of implementing technology in learning is really problematic for a lot of students when they need to use it well to catch up the lessons. This can be tolerated for their different educational backgrounds which prove that many students do not have opportunities to approach the information technology, even the basic level. The most concerning problem for nearly 90% students (145/161) is that they lack the opportunity to get direct feedback and correction from teachers or friends, which definitely effects on their texts and especially on their writing improvement in a negative way.

5. Conclusion

The blended learning approach undoubtedly exposes both benefits and drawbacks which are relevant to learning the writing skills for English majors. However, most of students show their interests, satisfaction, and even support with this approach. Teachers also express their both concerns and worries about it. Therefore, careful consideration should be taken among the educational institutions, researchers, and teachers sothat the proportion of time between online and face-to-face sessions of the same subject can be balanced well and the best suitability of teaching and learning approach can be discovered for every subject at its appropriate level. Then, more effects and even

enjoyment on teaching and learning can be gained, which definitely contributes to the success of teaching and learning.

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