The Effect of Blended Learning vs. Classroom Learning Techniques on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing

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Abstract
The present study was intended to investigate the impact of blended and classroom teaching methods on Iranian EFL learners' writing. To this end, a group of 29 upper intermediate and advanced EFL learners were randomly placed in 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, participants' first piece of writing was regarded as the pretest and their last one was the posttest. The results of the independent-samples t-tests showed that participants of the Blended Learning group significantly outperformed the ones in the Classroom Learning group in their writing performances. 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 and that doing research in this field can be a promising area for those interested.

Keywords: blended learning, classroom learning, EFL writing, CALL, feedback

Technology has brought a drastic change in education. Technological innovations are expanding the range of possible solutions that can improve teaching and learning inputs, processes, and outcomes. Information and communication technologies offer a possibility to apply new learning and teaching practices. Language teaching and learning has been optimized by the application of computers and other technological advances, such as the internet and virtual learning (Beatty, 2003; Crook, 1994; Shang, 2007). Generally speaking, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) demonstrates a number of qualities to enrich EFL and ESL. These features include language functions (Beatty, 2003; Chang, 2005; Crook, 1994), greater levels of participation (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998), less anxiety (Kessler, 2010; Ritter, 1993), and more motivation and interest and greater autonomy (Chang, 2005; Kessler & Bikowski, 2010; Leakey & Ranchoux, 2006; Vinther, 2011).

Similarly, when it comes to writing in an EFL context, learners usually face greater challenges, which can be attributed to a lack of language skills, culture-specific behavior, and difficulty in interpreting hedged and indirect language (Baker & Bricker, 2010; Bell & Elledge, 2008; Jalilifar, 2010; Wold, 2011). This can be frustrating for EFL/ESL writing instructors as well as learners. Hence, as argued in Wold (2011), an effective instructional design model appropriate for online foreign language writing courses has not been found and designers of such a model should adopt models which use a combination of traditional teaching methods and

techniques as well as techniques from CALL. In other words, resorting to merely traditional or completely online methods might not lead to desirable results.

Keeping one eye on traditional face-to-face learning benefits and another on e-learning advantages has paved the way to the emergence of "blended learning" (Thorne, 2003). In this sense, blending learning aims at combining the advantages of both face-to-face and e-learning environments. In practice, blending learning offers the possibility to benefit from the supportive classroom direct interaction and the flexibility of online learning. Hopper (2003) stated that blended courses proved to be more effective than fully online courses as it can create a positive relationship between face-to-face and online environments. Moreover, Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004) highlighted the positive effects of combining face-toface and online instruction on learning outcomes, lowering attrition rates, and learners' satisfaction. Garrison and Kanuta (2004) remarked that blended learning has the power to promote deep learning. According to Stacey and Gerbic (2008), the advantages of blended learning have been backing its central position in higher education.

Blended learning, as defined by Thorne (2003, p. 2), ―blends online learning with more traditional methods of learning and development‖. Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer (2005) referred to blended learning as ―the purposeful arrangement of media, methods and ways of organizing learning situations through combining traditional media and methods withe-learning elements and possibilities‖ (pp. 179-180). As claimed by Neumeier (2005), blended learning consists of six parameters: (1) mode, (2) model of integration, (3) distribution of learning content and objectives, (4) language teaching methods, (5) involvement of learning subjects (students, tutors, and teachers), and (6) location. Among these six parameters, the two major modes are face-to-face and CALL. The mode which guides learners and where they often spend most of the time is called the lead mode; sequencing and negotiation of content is also done in the lead mode. The face-to-face phases are often obligatory while some online activities may not be (Neumeier, 2005). Giving learners this flexibility assumes that students are autonomous and will be responsible for their own learning (Grgurović, 2011).

Recently a lot of studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of implementing blended learning on students' performance but few studies have ventured into how students' writing skill improves. Many researchers found that designing a blended course improves students' scores and that the students showed positive attitude towards the implementation of such a blend, (Boyle, 2003; Dowling, 2003; Dziuban, 2004). O'Toole and Absalom (2003) contended that uploading material online positively affects the achievement level of the students. They found that the students who read the online material in addition to the in-class lecture had better performance in a quiz than those who only depended on the inclass traditional lecture. Researchers as Singh (2003) found that the students' participating in a blended course performed 10% better than those enrolled in a section taught in the traditional approach.

However, other researchers as Carroll (2003), in a contrastive study tested the differences in learning outcomes when two courses are taught. One course was taught using the traditional way and the other was supplemented with online instruction. The results revealed that there were no significant differences in the outcomes; rather, there were equal learning outcomes for students in the two sections. Cameron (2003), added students' motivation to learn increases when the material is varied as in using interactive learning tools such as simulations and static graphics in an online environment. Reasons (2005), designed a business course in three ways: face to face, blended, and fully online. The researchers found that the students enrolled in the online course performed better than the students enrolling in other sections even though the pedagogical teaching approach was the same. The strengths of blended language learning, in this survey, have

been identified. First of all, it is said to provide a more individualized learning experience and more personalized learning support. Similarly, it supports and encourages independent and collaborative learning which increases student engagement in learning. Additionally, it accommodates a variety of learning styles and provides a place to practice the target language beyond the classroom. Plus, blended language learning provides a less stressful practice environment for the target language and provides flexible study, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners'needs. Last but not least, it helps students develop valuable and necessary twenty-first century learning skills.

Many teachers use these tools to enhance their students'learning. For example, word processing software is used to experiment with collaborative writing, self-assessment, and peer assessment. Students are encouraged to use instant messaging to practice conversation skills and forums for discussion on topics of interest. The Internet is used for research on class projects. Some students have their own blogs to practice writing and engage with an audience. Blogs are being used to create learner diaries to foster reflective practices and help develop skills and strategies that are vital to successful independent learners.

Background

Along with the introduction of computers into classrooms, CALL has been widely used in various fields to facilitate the teaching and learning of different aspects of foreign languages, among which the persuasive applications include word processing, games, corpus linguistics, computer-mediated communication, www resources, adapting other materials for CALL, and personal digital assistants (Bahrani, 2011; Chang, Chang, Chen & Liou, 2008; Fidaoui, Bahous & Bacha, 2010; Liou, Yang & Chang, 2011; Romeo, 2008). These studies have predominantly revealed that CALL motivates learners and facilities learning. For example, Bush and Crotty (1991) compared videodisc instruction with traditional instruction and concluded that the use of videodisc exercises made practice inherently more meaningful than traditional text-based exercises. Montali and Lewandowski (1996) found that poor readers not only felt more successful with bimodal presentation, but were more successful in terms of comprehending content.

The use of technology has also long been introduced to complement traditional writing classes (Chang et al., 2008; Fidaoui et al., 2010; Goldberg, Russell, & Cook, 2003; Liou et al., 2011; Shang, 2007). For example, Chang et al. (2008) developed an online collocation aid for EFL writers in Taiwan, aiming at detecting and correcting learners'miscollocations attributable to L1 interference. Relevant correct collocation as feedback messages was suggested according to the translation equivalents between learner's L1 and L2. The system utilized natural language processing (NLP) techniques to segment sentences in order to extract V-N collocations in given texts, and to derive a list of candidate English verbs that shared the same Chinese translations via consulting electronic bilingual dictionaries. After combining nouns with these derived candidate verbs as V-N pairs, the system made use of a reference corpus to exclude the inappropriate V-N pairs and singled out the proper collocations. The results showed that the system could effectively pinpoint the miscollocations and provide the learner with adequate collocations that the learner intended to write but misused and that this online assistant facilitated EFL learner-writers collocation use. Shang (2007) examined the overall effect of using email on the improvement of writing performance in aspects of syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy and lexical density and investigated the relation between the number of email exchanges and writing performance. Data collected from 40 non-traditional EFL students enrolled in an intermediate reading class at a university in Taiwan showed that students made improvements on syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy, that exchanging email messages with their peers

at least four times might have a greater overall improvement on their writing performance, and that the email approach was a positive strategy that helped improve students _foreign language learning and attitudes towards English. Thus the researcher suggested designing an effective email task to enhance foreign language writing development and attitudes.

Even so, as argued in Wold (2011), an effective instructional design model appropriate for online foreign language writing courses have not been found and designers of such a model should teach writing needs and should teach using a blended learning format instead of solely using an online learning format. It should be the same with traditional foreign language writing courses, because blended learning have been found to offer a process-oriented environment for collaboration, communication, confidence building, and better attitudes towards writing that does not exist when working exclusively online (ChihHua, 2008; Clark & Olson, 2010; Colakoglu & Akdemir, 2010).

Empirical studies on blended learning in language classes fall into comparison (Barr, Leakey, & Ranchoux, 2005; Chenoweth & Murday, 2003; Chenoweth, Green & Youngs, 2001; Scida &Saury, 2006) and non-comparison studies (Bañados, 2006; Grgurović, 2011; Stracke, 2007). The former examines the effectiveness of blended learning by comparing blended instruction (face-to-face together with CALL instruction) with traditional instruction (face-to-face without CALL instruction); and the latter investigates blended learning program design and implementation, and attitudes towards blended learning held by teachers and students. The blended learning classes in all the studies combined two modes: faceto-face in the classroom and CALL in the computer lab or student home via CALL programs, learning management systems (LMS), and the web, sometimes in conjunction with computer-mediated communication tools. Some studies made use of CALL technology features to set deadlines for exercises so students would complete them in a timely manner (Scida & Saury, 2006). Some studies showed that the learners improved their proficiency in a language skill (usually speaking and reading) because they could practice it both in the CALL mode and face-to-face mode (Bañados, 2006; Barr et al., 2005). Some studies revealed that students needed more support from the instructor in addition to a more detailed schedule of assignments and deadlines (Chenoweth et al., 2006).

The present study was primarily intended to investigate the impact of traditional and blended teaching methods on Iranian EFL learners' writing. As one of the few studies on the topic, the study, more specifically, was aimed to examine the role blended learning plays in Iranian EFL learners' writing performance in general. In addition, the study tried to compare two methods of teaching writing, namely traditional and blended to see, first of all, which one is more preferred in an Iranian context, and which one results in better writing among Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, based on what mentioned above the following research question can be posed:

1. Is there any significant difference between traditional and blended EFL writing teaching methods?
2. Which of the two EFL writing teaching methods (traditional and blended) results in better writing performance?

Methodology
Participants

Participants of the study were Iranian EFL learners who were learning English in a language institutes in Isfahan. Both male and female learners participated in the study. Attempts were made to include an equal number of each gender, so that the gender of participants could be

controlled. In order to choose participants, a placement test was used to select a homogeneous group of upper-intermediate and advanced learners (n=29), who were randomly assigned into two groups, an experimental group (Blended Learning) and a control group (Classroom Learning).

The Blended Learning group (n=14) received traditional teaching methods of writing plus learning via the web. The control group, Classroom Learning, (n=15) was taught based on the traditional teaching methods of writing and received the materials, instructions, and feedback through traditional classroom methods.

Instruments

Oxford Placement Test (Allen, 2004), which is 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. In addition to the placement test, the textbook used during the course was Zemach and Rumisek's (2003), ―Academic writing: From paragraph to essay‖. The book consists of 12 units. In units 1-7 students become familiar with the structure and types of paragraphs. Units 8-12 familiarize learners with the organization and features of essays. In addition to the textbook, a blog was designed through which students were supposed to get parts of their materials and instructions. It is imperative to point out that the content of the blog was in correspondence with that of the book. Participants in the experimental group had to check their materials and receive their feedback through this page. Finally, Brown and Bailey's (1985) categorical scoring instrument, which is a kind of rating scale to evaluate students' writing skills, was used to rate students' writing performances.

Procedure

After placing participants in the experimental and control groups, the former received the instruction through traditional teaching methods of writing in the classroom, but the materials (main and extra) as well as feedback were presented through the net. For the control group, the course was taught based on traditional classroom teaching methods, and materials, instructions, and feedback were presented in classroom. In order to collect data, students'first piece of writing was taken as the pretest and their last piece as the posttest. All students in the experiment received the treatment in seven sessions. After the assignments were collected, five of the assignments were given to three raters and after checking for the inter-rater reliability, one of the raters continued the scoring based on Brown and Bailey's rating scale.

Results

In order to answer the research questions, two independent samples t-tests were conducted for both the pretest and posttest, with the treatment in each group as the independent variable and the writing scores as the dependent variable. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics concerning the results of the pretest.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest*

	Group	N	Mean	Std.deviation	Std.error mean
Pre-test	**Experimental**	15	12.53	2.20	.57
	Control	14	11.36	2.41	.64

Looking at the mean scores of the two groups, it can be seen that there does not seem to be a highly, if any, significant difference between the performance of the participants of the two groups in the pretest. However, an independent samples t-test was run to see if there was any statistically significant difference between the performances of the participants of each group. Table 2 presents the results of the t-test.

Table 2. *Independent Samples t test for the Pretest*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig.	Mean differences	Std.error	Lower	upper
BL Pretest	**Equal variances assumed**	.50	.49	1.38	27	.18	1.18	.86	-.58	2.93
	Equal variances not assumed			1.37	26.32	.18	1.18	.86	-.59	2.94

The results clearly shows that there was no significant difference between the performance of participants of the experimental group (M = 12.53, SD = 2.20) and that of the control group (M = 11.36, SD = 2.41) at the beginning of the treatment indicating they were quite homogeneous in this respect.

Thus, it can be inferred that any possible difference in the performance of the participants in the posttest would be the result of the efficacy or inefficiency of the treatment.

After the treatment was conducted, the results were subjected to another independent samples t-test to see if exposing students to blended learning resulted in better writing performances. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics of the posttest for both experimental and control groups.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for the Posttest*

	Group	N	Mean	Std.deviation	Std.error mean
posttest	**Experimental**	15	17.67	1.45	.37
	Control	14	15.43	1.50	.40

As Table 3 shows, it can be inferred that both groups had very significant improvement in the posttest. In other words, comparing the mean scores of the two groups in the pretest, (M = 12.53, SD = 2.20) for the experimental group and (M = 11.36, SD = 2.41) for the control group, with the ones in the posttest, (M = 17.67, SD = 1.45) for the experimental group and (M = 15.43, SD = 1.50) for the control group, it is apparent that both groups had better performances after the treatment in each group. However, to identify if blended teaching had any statistically significant difference in the experimental group, it was essential to run an independent-samples t-test. Table 4 presents the results of the test.

Table 4. *Independent Samples t test for the posttest*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		F	Sig.	T	t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
					Df	Sig.	Mean differences	Std.error	Lower	upper
BL Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.000	.97	4.08	27	.000	2.24	.55	1.11	3.36
	Equal variances not assumed			1.08	26.68	.000	2.24	.55	1.11	3.37

Table 4 shows that there was a highly significant difference in writing scores for the experimental group (M = 17.67, SD = 1.45) and the ones for the control group (M = 15.43, SD = 1.50); t (27) = 4.08, p < .001. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment was effective and the results gave a positive answer to the first research question. In other words, there was a significant difference between the traditional teaching method of writing and blended learning. However, as long as the second research question is concerned, it seems that results favored a blended teaching method of writing.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, several conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the results of the study clearly showed that the mere application of technology and removing the physical classroom cannot result in the most ideal learning situation for second/foreign language learners. However, it is completely possible to integrate traditional classroom and modern technology to enhance learners' performance in any of the skills and sub-skills, especially writing.

The results of the study are completely in line with previous research on blended learning and computer-assisted language learning. Many of such studies have revealed positive influences of blended learning on student performance (Ladyshewsky, 2004; Motteram, 2006); student participation and motivation (DeGeorge-Walker & Keeffe, 2010; Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011; Ugur, Akkoyunlu & Kurbanoglu, 2011), increased access and flexibility (Macedo-Rouet, Ney, Charles & Lallich-Boidin, 2009), cost-effectiveness (Herman & Banister, 2007); and more active and deeper learning (Bonk, Kim & Zeng, 2006; Cooner, 2010) in comparison with traditional classes (Donnely, 2010; Woltering, Herrler, Spitzer & Spreckelsen, 2009).

As Marsh (2012) indicates online learning/teaching environments can provide different ways of learning and the construction of a potentially richer learning environment which provides fresh approaches to learning, and allows for different learning styles, as well as greater diversification in and greater access to learning. Such learning environments should supplement or complement traditional faceto-face learning environments or, on the other hand, may provide a complete learning package that requires little face-to-face contact. No doubt, all teaching in the very near future will be supported by more or less digital- or net-based flexible solutions in the educational organization.

In addition, several line of research can be suggested. First, second language researchers are encouraged to use blended learning to examine the effects of corrective feedback. Previous

research on using email and the ‗Review' section of MS Office to provide input for second language writers (Shiri & Ameri-Golestan, 2013) and to give corrective feedback on IELTS Writing Task 1 (Ameri-Golestan, 2012) has shown that the application of technology, such as the internet and certain software does result in better performance in students' writing. Another line of research that can be supported by blended learning is raising language learners' consciousness with regard to the rhetorical structure of different types of writing, such as descriptive, expository, and argumentative, among others. Finally, the impact of uptake can be scrutinized using blended learning. Language learners can receive the materials, instruction, and feedback in the classroom, but they can receive extra materials related to the type of correction they received in the class through the internet and send their corrected writing as uptake to the teacher.

Like any other research, the study was not without limitations. Sometimes participants had problems receiving the material through the blog and the researchers had to mail them individually and sometimes emails failed. This caused the process of data collection to last longer than the researchers expected.

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