Enhancing Iraqi EFL Learners' Writing Proficiency via Blended Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine whether students who received face-to-face instruction and those who receive blended learning differed significantly in their writing accuracy. Seventy Iraqi EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level took part in the study for this reason. According to their Oxford Placement Test (OPT) results, they were between 18 to 32 years old, shared an L1 (Arabic), and were equally proficient in English. A control group (n = 35) and an experimental group (n = 35) were randomly allocated to them. Using a blended learning approach, the experimental group learned how to write a one-paragraph essay, whereas the control group received the same instruction in-person using a traditional teacher-centered method. Pre-test and post-test data were gathered, and paired sample t-tests and independent analysis were used to do the statistics. The outcomes demonstrated that, following the implementation of the blended learning technique, the mixed group did significantly better than the control group. Additionally, the results showed that students in the control group, who were taught via the traditional face-to-face teacher-centered method, made a slight improvement. The results have some ramifications for policymakers, EFL instructors, and content creators.

Keywords: Iraqi EFL, Writing Accuracy, Blended Learning, and Conventional Classroom.

تحسين كفاءة الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية من خلال التعلم المدمج للطلبة العراقيين متعلميْ اللغة الإنكليزية لغةً أجنبيةً

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المستخلص

كان الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد ما إذا كان الطلاب الذين تلقوا تعليماً وجهاً لوجه الذين تلقوا التعليم المدمج يختلفون بشكل كبير في دقة كتابتهم. فقد شارك ٧٠ متعلما من للطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية من المستوى المتوسط في هذه الدراسة. ووفقًا لنتائج اختبار أكسفورد لتحديد المستوى (OPT)، تراوحت أعمارهم بين ١٨و٣٢ عامًا، وكان المتعلمون لديهم على المستوى نفسه في كفاءة اللغة الإنجليزية. وجرى توزيعهم على المجموعتين الضابطة والتجريبية بالتساوي وبشكل عشوائي. تعلمت المجموعة التجريبية باستخدام منهج التعليم المدمج كيفية كتابة مقال من فقرة واحدة، بينما تلقت المجموعة الضابطة نفس التعليمات

حضورياً باستخدام طريقة تقليدية تركز على المعلم. وجمع بيانات ما قبل الاختبار وما بعده، واستُخدمت الاختبارات التائية للعينات المقترنة والتحليل المستقل لإجراء الإحصاء. وأظهرت النتائج أنه بعد تطبيق أسلوب التعلم المدمج، كان أداء المجموعة التجريبية أفضل بفارق معنوي عن المجموعة الضابطة. وأظهرت النتائج أن طلاب المجموعة الضابطة، الذين تلقوا تعليمهم بالطريقة التقليدية وجهاً لوجه، قد حققوا تحسناً طفيفاً. لهذه النتائج فوائد لصانعي السياسات، ومدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية، ومنشئي المحتوى.

الكلمات الدالة: متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبية، دقة الكتابة، التعلم المدمج، والفصول الدراسية التقليدية.

1. Introduction

A relatively recent online innovation, blended learning has recently been featured in books and scientific papers, in conferences for professionals, in corporate culture, and on college and university campuses worldwide. With an emphasis on computer-based technology, blended learning combines traditional on-campus and online learning environments [1]. In a2002 poll, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) identified blended learning as one of the top ten trends in the knowledge economy [2]. Repurposing content for different delivery formats will become essential, according to Finn [2], both from the perspective of content development and as a means of satisfying the educational requirements of a wide range of learners. For instance, professional organizations are adopting blended learning to educate their members while reducing wasted office resources, travel expenses, and time spent away from family [3,p. 26-32].

Another crucial component of the idea is the integration of blended learning into the classroom. Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal state that the majority of online learning initiatives have "focused primarily on off-campus student populations"[4, p. 17-37]. Conversely, blended learning is a campus program targeted at regular students. While online technology is "blending" into in-person classrooms, Brigham Young University (BYU) is one example of an institution that offers online courses to institutions off campus [5,p.1-21][6p.6].

The blurring of the lines between traditional, on-campus classes and online or distributed learning is referred to as "hybridization" of the institution [7].The combination of resident and online instruction is "the single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today," according to Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University.

According to research, mixed learning can be even more beneficial for EFL students than a solely online or face-to-face learning environment [8][9,p.30]. Compared to those in a fully traditional learning environment, EFL students in blended learning environments finished their English language proficiency more quickly [8]. According to a meta-analysis By Means. et al. [9,p.35] "blended approaches have been more effective than instruction offered entirely in face-to-face mode, and purely online learning has been equivalent to face-to-face instruction in effectiveness" .

Writing in English has long been a major obstacle for ESL/EFL students, according to an earlier study [10,p.450-473], and it is recognized as a challenging endeavor [11,p.229-241]. To create an outstanding essay, one must possess a number of unique qualifications, such as vocabulary, syntax, and the capacity to structure sentences in an efficient manner. According to Ramasamy, and Abdul Aziz [12,p.2266], "lack of

specific competence such as accurate use of syntax, conventions, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling" is another common writing worry among ESL/EFL students. Students in these situations get disinterested, which gradually demotivates them from writing. Thus, the incapacity to produce component writers for ESL/EFL learners is a result of teachers' lack of pedagogical expertise in writing as well as their failure to choose a suitable teaching method for writing [13,p.619-626].

Similar to this, EFL students' unfavorable attitudes toward writing are a result of the expectations and difficulty of writing, which hinders their development and leads to subpar writing. Consequently, it is recommended to **adopt interactive online environments** where ESL/EFL learners can develop writing skills through continuous feedback from instructors and fellow students, **while also facilitating** collaborative knowledge-sharing via online discussions.

Additionally, contemporary technology are excellent tools for developing students' writing abilities in a number of ways, such as helping them see the opportunities for more effective teamwork and communicating their emotions to a larger audience. Consequently, they will become proficient writers with the aid of technology and a mixed learning approach. Therefore, more research is needed to determine how blended learning affects each of the competences that are commonly assessed in English language programs. In order to close this gap, the current study examined whether students' writing accuracy varied based on whether they attended normal on-campus classes or blended learning.

2. Literature Review

Some research examined the relative efficacy of blended learning and traditional (in-person) classrooms. In order to determine which tactics are more effective and which are better than others in terms of implementation, [14,p.1-14], for instance, contrasted a group of students that received education through blended learning with a group that received instruction through face-to-face instruction. The results showed that students saw blended learning practices as more relevant than face-to-face learning activities because they were more dynamic. Additionally, because they included more collaborative work among students, participation, threaded discussions, games, and other engaging and useful features to help them study for tests and improve their language proficiency overall, some of the online practices had a better impact and result for students.

These results corroborate [15,p.35] claim that for a blended learning course to be successful, it must be tailored to the attitudes, beliefs, and requirements of the students. Additionally, it must be meant to be current, relevant, and useful. Finally, Rao asserts that a successful blended learning process is facilitated by the following: "Blended learning is changing in its implementation mechanism and covers a number of interesting and imaginative ways in which course design, learning activity styles, and the information environment are changing"[15,p.35].

Not every study has focused on blended learning's effectiveness. According to [16] Harrington (2010), imposed individualism is becoming more common in writing classrooms, and she looks into the consequences and problems it may have or cause in other areas. She goes on to say that the majority of academic writing courses are tailored

because of things like voice, textual ownership, peer review, and critical thinking. This makes it difficult for English language learners who are used to more harmony and teamwork than individuality in their home cultures.

According to Harrington, forced individualism is even more pronounced in blended learning since students spend less time in person, complete assignments alone while seated in front of a screen, and have less opportunities for peer evaluation and group projects. It is a problem that needs to be taken into account while designing mixed learning environments.

Numerous research [17][18,p.72-82] have examined the advantages of blended learning on EFL writing. These studies demonstrated how effective blended learning is at assisting ESL students in achieving successful writing outcomes. For example, [18] examined how well blended learning helped Saudi female students improve their written English communication abilities. According to study, blended learning improves student-to-student communication while lowering stress levels in English writing classes. In a related study, [19,p.208-221] used an experimental design to examine the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching English writing skills at Palestinian universities. The results show that blended learning significantly helps students improve their writing abilities.

Additionally, focus group interviews were used by [17]to examine how EFL students felt about blended learning in an English writing course. Research indicates that blended learning helps students improve their written communication abilities, sense of self, and motivation to master English writing. The sharing of textual knowledge and the accessibility of a wide range of reading materials through online platforms enable this advancement. [20,p.123-162]examined how students' academic reading and writing abilities might be enhanced through blended learning. This study included action research, which involved surveying, interviewing, and observing classes. Blended learning was perceived by the participants as an innovative and cooperative approach to enhance their writing and reading skills.

Only a small percentage of the numerous studies on blended reading have considered Iraqi students' writing proficiency. To close this gap, the current study examines the efficacy of blended learning in an Iraqi English program to determine whether students' writing accuracy varied based on whether they attended normal on-campus classes or blended learning.

Since the effectiveness of the course depends on how students view and experience it, the desire and acceptance of learners to participate in the blended learning course is crucial to the current research. At a Turkish public university,[21,p.100-112] assessed the opinions of instructors and language learners on the implementation of MyELT, an online learning platform used to provide a blended learning course.

Following 20 hours of in-person instruction, MyELT gives students the opportunity to work at home on additional vocabulary and pronunciation practice tasks to hone their language skills. Overall, the results showed that students thought the MyELT system was easy to use. Descriptive data and average grade scores showed that students' reading, listening, and grammar improved; nevertheless, interviews with students revealed that they struggled to master vocabulary and writing abilities when they were taught online. The fact that some students had limited access to the internet and the

application, which affected their propensity for online tests and quizzes, also contributed to a negative attitude.

In order to investigate students' attitudes and perceptions regarding blended learning, [22,p.61-68]conducted interviews with 162 university students of different language competence levels. In this study, students' attitudes about blended learning were surveyed in order to gather quantitative data. According to the study's findings, students generally chose blended learning courses over traditional classroom instruction that took place in person. Nonetheless, they preferred taking English exams on paper as opposed to computers. There was disagreement among the students on whether to turn in their English homework in person or online. Students' attitudes toward digital and infographics in the classroom were generally positive in an EFL context.

Students' perceptions of the shortcomings they found during the blended learning course were also a part of [23]Martn research, which used qualitative data from interviews to gather information about students' and instructors' opinions about the available tools and their use. These findings were supported by quantitative data from tests taken during the academic year to monitor students' development.

Although there were some concerns about the accessibility of mobile and computer devices and a lack of technological expertise with certain of the used learning packages, overall, the aforementioned publications showed positive learner views toward blended learning. Additionally, students cited the teachers' delayed responses in online forums and the difficulty of asking questions of their teachers compared to in-person classes as significant limitations. Future research should take these important factors into consideration.

3.Research Question

Are there any significant differences in learners' writing accuracy between students of in-person and blended learning?

4.Methodology

4.1 Participants

Seventy EFL students who were enrolled in academic writing classes at an Iraqi institution provided the data. Participants were chosen for this study based on their capacity and willingness to contribute pertinent data. According to their Oxford Placement Test (OPT) results, they were between the ages of 18 and 32, shared an L1 (Arabic), and were equally proficient in English. A control group (n=35)and an experimental group (n=35) were each given a set of individuals.

4.2 Tools: Oxford Placement Exam

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT)was employed to determine whether intermediate students were homogenous. The 200 multiple-choice questions on the OPT were broken down into two categories: grammar and listening. In the 100-question listening portion, participants must select two words with the same pronunciation they hear. Additionally, the grammar section contained 100 questions that concentrate on frequent verb tenses and sentence structure. Typically, participants had sixty minutes to finish the test.

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4.3 Pre-test and Post-test

Pre- and post-tests were used to collect data for this investigation. Before and after blended learning, the students' writing proficiency was assessed using these two tools. The pre-test and post-test were given to the students 30 minutes each to complete. Another individual examined the instruments to see if legitimate results could be achieved in order to guarantee the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data[24,p.59-82] [25]. A "one paragraph" essay on a specific subject was part of the test. After six weeks, students were given a post-test on the same subject as the pre-test to see how much both groups had improved in their accuracy of English writing.

4.4 Procedure

The blended learning strategy made use of the WhatsApp app. Meta Platforms is the owner of the American freeware service WhatsApp Messenger. It allows users to exchange documents, photos, and user locations in addition to making audio and video chats and sending text and voice messages. This app can be accessed from desktop PCs as well as Android and iOS devices. The experimental group used it to conduct virtual classes.

The 70 intermediate Iraqi EFL students were divided into two groups at random: a control group(n=35) and an experimental group (n=35).To ensure participant homogeneity, the students were first given the Oxford Placement Test (OPT)[24]. To ascertain the students' performance before to the treatment, a pre-test was then administered.

The experimental group was then taught how to write a one-paragraph essay utilizing a blended learning strategy, whereas the control group received the same instruction using a traditional teacher-centered approach in person. For six weeks, each group received instruction using the traditional method and the blended learning technique, respectively. Ten weeks were allotted for each semester, which was sufficient time for an experimental investigation. The blended learning strategy made use of the WhatsApp app. For six weeks, each group received instruction using the traditional method and the blended learning technique, respectively. Ten weeks were allotted for each semester, which was sufficient time for an experimental investigation. The blended learning strategy made use of the WhatsApp app. Throughout the week, this application was used to check students' homework and for various sessions. Additionally, students can ask for assistance there if they need it or have any issues. After the sixth week, a post-test was administered to both student groups to see if their accuracy in writing in English had increased.

5.Results and Discussion

The study examines how the experimental and control groups differed in their writing accuracy. Table 1 presents the findings of independent t-tests for the pre-test. It is evident that the experimental group's mean is 17.70 with a standard deviation of 6.32, while the control group's mean is 18.25 with a standard deviation of 7.45. The independent t-test results indicates that the two groups' pre-test performance do not differ significantly ($t = 0.085$; $p =.880$). The results show that at the start of the study, the writing abilities of the two groups are comparable.

Table 1. Students' Scores in Pre-test for both Groups

Pre-test	N	Mean	SD	T	P
Experimental Group	35	17.70	6.32	0.085	.880
Control Group	35	18.25	7.45		

p<.05

The results of independent t-test for the post-test scores are shown in Table 2. According to the table, the mean is 26.14, and SD is 6.55 for experimental group and the mean is 20.74, and SD is 7.45 for the control group. Results of independent T-test show that there is a significant difference (t = 3.148; p =.010) between the performances of the two groups in the post-test. It shows that blended learning in the writing class are more efficient and fruitful than only face-to-face learning.

Table 2. Students' Scores in Post-test for both Groups

Post-test	N	Mean	SD	T	P
Experimental Group	35	26.14	6.55	3.148	.010
Control Group	35	20.74	7.45		

p<.05

The study's results show that blended learning significantly increases the writing accuracy of Iraqi EFL students at the selected university. Although the control group's pre-test mean was higher than the experimental group's, the difference was not statistically significant. However, after employing the blended learning approach, the experimental group fared noticeably better than the control group.

The findings also showed that students in the control group, who were taught using the traditional teacher-centered approach, made a slight improvement. However, a few factors that can affect the students' writing skills were identified. These included a lack of classroom activities, a high level of inhibitions, and restricted self-regulated learning. These findings are consistent with other studies [26,p.23-34][27,p.97-118], blended learning improves students' writing by using a variety of instruments to generate in-depth dialogue. In particular, studies [26][27] show that the blended learning approach may improve various facets of English writing. For example, [28, p.254-266] study shown that language learners may improve their writing skills in terms of topic sentence, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization by employing a blended learning approach. Similarly, earlier studies have shown that the blended learning approach improved language learners' linguistic competencies [29,p.1-20], argumentative essay writing [27], organization, grammar, planning, and development of writing ideas [11],interest, communication competence, and self-confidence in learning English writing [30].

Furthermore, the blended learning approach is crucial for enhancing students' writing skills, but it requires a lot of effort from institutions, teachers, and students [31]. This is because it can be challenging to successfully execute the blended learning strategy due to issues like inadequate staff training, learners with low technology abilities, high internet fees, inconsistent connectivity, and administrative issues. Additionally, as

blended learning might not be suitable for students from varied backgrounds, pupils need to be closely monitored [32,p.28-31]. Making the move from secondary school to a university, particularly in this study's situation, can be challenging for first-year students.

Students' confidence, capacity for autonomous learning, and engagement in interactive class activities may all be enhanced by the implementation of blended learning in English writing classrooms [18]. This is because interactive learning strategies, such as group projects, discussions, and presentations, would boost student interest and advance academic and social learning objectives. Nonetheless, the Iraqi government needs to consider any challenges that could result from the full implementation of the mixed learning approach.

The actions taken must ensure that students are prepared for the shift. It is necessary to consider the needs and preferences of the students, the teachers' experience, the resources and materials, and the type of courses.

The future may easily look back on the final quarter of the twentieth century in awe of education's ability to endure in its traditional shape and procedures while the rest of the world changed, claim Stallard and [33, p.vii]. Even though this book was published in 2001, twenty years ago, the identical problem can potentially come up today. Blended learning is one way that EFL programs can keep up to date and consider developments in global technology. [34] noted, however, that the optimal approach to blended learning is still being determined.

Furthermore, blended learning can be used as a tool to enhance the acquisition of knowledge that is already covered in the traditional curriculum, so long as the students possess at least a basic comprehension of digital literacy skills. Research indicates that EFL students perform best on evaluations administered in integrated learning environments [25]. Therefore, the conventional component of learning is important and shouldn't be undervalued or overlooked as part of blended learning.

Smartphones are now a free resource that students can use to their full potential. Mobile devices can be used to implement a variety of blended learning methodologies, and "depending on the context and situation, there are many ways to teach and learn (both formally and informally)" [35,p.7].[35]"Mobile learning offers another opportunity to increase teaching and learning effectiveness." As stated by[35], Accordingly, "mobile technologies can give today's learners a more sustainable and practical means to augment their learning experience if designed properly and integrated into the course in a purposeful manner, especially since today's learners are increasingly accustomed to using mobile technologies as a normal part of their lives".

6.Conclusion

Governments, educators, institutions, and other groups must work together to adopt the blended learning paradigm, which has essentially been proven to be successful. This is because the blended learning environment is full with challenges, such as poor staff training, limited technological competency among learners, high internet expenses, erratic connectivity, and administrative issues. Curriculum designers should modify educational programs for blended learning to address the challenges of

blended learning among EFL learners, particularly in the Iraqi context, with the help of suitable online resources and extra training for the English teaching staff.

This goal will be achieved by cooperation with specialized training centers, such as the English Language Center. Additionally, students need to be given opportunities for sufficient self-learning mindset training in order to improve their blended learning capacities, and teachers need to be cognizant of the needs and skills of their students.

The study's findings might clarify how the blended learning approach improves EFL students' writing skills. Blended learning has been demonstrated to be a viable, creative, and useful new alternative for both teachers and students by providing an engaging educational environment and an enjoyable learning experience. The findings of this study could help governments, educators, and other relevant stakeholders decide on the most effective method for teaching and evaluating English writing in higher education. When developing English curriculum, particularly for higher education, the study provides valuable information that can be used. However, this quasi-experimental study is limited to EFL students at a particular university. The usage of blended learning by Iraqi higher education instructors may be the subject of future research.

7.Recommendation

1. **Adopt Blended Learning for Writing:** Actively integrate online components (discussion forums, digital peer review, grammar apps, multimedia resources) with face-to-face writing instruction to enhance accuracy.
2. **Focus on Key Areas:** Design blended activities specifically targeting weaknesses identified in the control group (e.g., grammar, punctuation, organization, idea development) and leverage tools shown effective.
3. **Promote Interaction & Autonomy:** Structure blended tasks to encourage online discussions (in-depth dialogue), collaborative writing, and self-regulated learning to reduce inhibitions and build confidence.
4. **Leverage Mobile Learning:** Utilize students' smartphones purposefully for micro-learning tasks (vocabulary, grammar drills, short peer feedback), discussion participation, or accessing resources outside class.
5. **Balance is Key:** Ensure the blend meaningfully enhances traditional methods; don't undervalue essential face-to-face interaction and direct instruction, especially for foundational skills.

CONFLICT OF IN TERESTS
There are no conflicts of interest

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