

The Effectiveness of Blended Learning in Enhancing Academic Writing Skills of English Language Students at Iraqi Universities

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Abstract

This research aimed to uncover the impact of using the blended learning approach on developing academic writing skills among English language students at the undergraduate level. To achieve this goal, the researcher adopted the quasi-experimental method by applying a pre-test and post-test on two groups: an experimental group that studied according to blended learning, and a control group that studied using the traditional method. The results of the pre-test showed that the two groups were equivalent in their level of academic writing skills before the experiment. As for the results of the post-test, they revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups in the total score of academic writing skills as well as in all sub-skills, and these differences were in favor of the experimental group. The results indicated that blended learning contributed significantly to improving the organization of ideas, the use of sources and references, writing fluency, stylistic flexibility, and originality. The study concludes that blended learning is one of the effective strategies in developing academic writing skills among university students..

Keywords: Blended Learning, Academic Writing, Writing Skills, English Language Teaching Methods, University Education

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ظك ك

هدف هذا البحث إلى الكشف عن تأثير استخدام أسلوب التعلم المدمج في تطوير مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الجامعية. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، اعتمد الباحث المنهج البحثي شبه التجريبي من خلال تطبيق اختبار قبلي واختبار بعدي طبق على مجموعتين: المجموعة الأولى تجريبية درست وفقاً لأسلوب التعلم المدمج، والمجموعة الثانية كانت ضابطة درست باستخدام المنهج التقليدي. أظهرت نتائج الاختبار القبلي أن المجموعتين متكافئتان في مستوى مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية قبل التجربة. أما نتائج الاختبار النهائي، فقد كشفت عن وجود فرق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين المجموعتين في المجموع الكلي لمهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية وكذلك في جميع المهارات الفرعية، ولصالح المجموعة التجريبية. وكانت النتائج تشير إلى أن التعلم المدمج ساهم بشكل كبير في تحسين تنظيم الأفكار، واستخدام المصادر والمراجع، وطلاقة الكتابة، والمرونة الأسلوبية، والأصالة. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن التعلم المدمج هو إحدى الاستراتيجيات الفعالة في تطوير مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلاب الجامعات.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a pivotal shift in higher education models globally. Integrating technology into the educational process has become an urgent necessity, as blended learning stands out as one of the most prominent educational models that combines the advantages of traditional face-to-face education and online learning. This leads to providing a learning environment characterized by flexibility and adaptability to the individual requirements of learners (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

This model is distinguished by its ability to overcome the spatial and temporal constraints and obstacles that impede traditional education, while maintaining personal and direct communication between both the teacher and the pupil or student.

In Iraq, the educational process faces many challenges, including high student density, limited resources, and fragile technological infrastructure in some educational institutions.

Academic writing skills in English are among the most prominent obstacles and challenges facing the English language in Iraqi universities.

Hyland (2016) believes that academic writing is a particular challenge for those studying English as a foreign language due to its methodological and linguistic complexities. In the Iraqi context, students face additional challenges, including weak grammatical foundations, limited academic vocabulary, and difficulties in organizing ideas and opinions systematically.

In this research, we will explore the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing the academic writing skills of English language students in Iraqi universities through three comprehensive sections.

1.1. Research Problem

A large number of students in the English department at Iraqi universities suffer from a clear and evident weakness in academic writing skills, including:

- Organizing ideas in a sequential and logical manner. (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).
- Using academic references and sources correctly and properly.
- Smooth, easy expression and writing fluency.
- Producing creative and original ideas within academic texts.

1.2. Research Importance

The importance of the research is embodied on multiple levels and dimensions, including:

1. Academic Importance: The research contributes to developing the proficiency of students' academic writing outcomes and outputs, which leads to raising and increasing the level of scientific articles and research production.
2. Educational Importance: It presents a practical model for implementing blended learning strategies in university English language programs.
3. Scientific Importance: It presents practical recommendations and suggestions for teachers regarding the best methods for using blended learning to support and enhance academic writing skills.
4. Future Importance: The research contributes to preparing a database that can be utilized to develop and improve academic writing skills and e-learning in Iraqi universities.

1.3. Research Objective

The aim and objective of the research is to:

- Conduct a study on the impact of blended learning on the academic writing skills of Iraqi university students.
- Measure the impact of blended learning on the sub-dimensions of writing skills, which are:
 1. Organization of ideas.
 2. Use of references and sources.
 3. Writing fluency.
 4. Flexible style.
 5. Original writing.

2.Theoretical Framework

2.1. Definition of Blended Learning

Blended learning is considered a natural evolution of e-learning; it does not cancel out e-learning nor traditional learning, but rather integrates them (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Blended learning is one of the modern approaches based on maximizing the benefit from information technology applications in designing new educational situations that blend teaching inside classrooms and teaching online, and activating the use of Active Learning strategies, Peer-to-Peer learning, and learner-centered learning strategies; this is due to its characteristic of combining the advantages of e-learning in its various forms with the advantages of face-to-face education in classrooms under the supervision and guidance of the teacher (Graham, 2013).

Blended learning employs e-learning tools based on computers and their networks in theoretical and practical lessons that take place in real classrooms, where the teacher meets with his students face-to-face at the same time (Means et al., 2013).

Blended learning is the combination of several patterns of e-learning with traditional face-to-face learning and self-learning, and the best method of blending is the one that combines several methods to obtain the highest productivity at the lowest cost (Bonk & Graham, 2012).

Khan (2003) defines blended learning as: "an innovative method for providing a well-designed interaction centered around the learner, and making education available to anyone, anywhere, and anytime, by taking advantage of the features of various digital technologies and their resources that work alongside other forms of appropriate educational materials to provide an open and flexible educational environment."

Blended learning is also defined as: "learning that blends the characteristics of both traditional classroom education and online learning in an integrated model, making the most of the latest technologies available for each" (Milneim, 2006).

2.2. Levels of Blended Learning

There are several levels of blended learning, classified according to its nature, the degree of integration between its components, and the degree of complexity, as outlined by (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) as follows:

1. Composite Level: Linking between information delivery tools and learning content. An example is the dual-component model, which is achieved by using e-learning sources and tools, followed by learning in the classroom using dialogue, discussion, and lecture methods. There is also a tri-component model, which involves assessing the students' learning level through feedback, then correcting student learning through conventional teaching methods and techniques, and then using e-learning to enrich and reinforce the learning process.
2. Integrated Level: Integration between various elements of e-learning. An example is the integration between three components, such as integrating available information sources, continuous discussion groups, and the direct evaluation process, all conducted online.
3. Collaborative Level: Integration between the teacher and learning groups inside the classroom, or collaborative learning groups via the Internet, whether the teacher is traditional or electronic. Examples of this level include integrating the traditional roles of teacher and learner with the electronic teacher via the Internet, or integrating the traditional roles of teacher and learner inside the classroom with collaborative learning groups via the Internet.
4. Extension and Propagation Level: Integration between traditional learning inside the traditional classroom and offline e-learning resources, such as email, electronic media, computerized software, and mobile devices.

2.3. Success Factors in Implementing Blended Learning

Literature has indicated a number of success factors specific to blended learning, among these factors are the following (Vaughan, 2007):

1. Regularly evaluating institutional practices and publishing results, in addition to the necessity for blended learning models to respond to local institutional needs.
2. The necessity for blended learning models to respond to the needs of teachers and the readiness of students.
3. The heavy workloads of students must be taken into consideration when applying blended learning.
4. Training students to take responsibility for their learning, in addition to developing time management skills.
5. Blended learning requires the continuous professional development of teachers.

Regarding the role of the teacher and learner in the context of blended learning, the teacher plays a central role in providing an organized learning environment that ensures student participation in the learning process. Marsh (2012) indicated that the role of the teacher in learner-centered learning is as follows: (Guiding students in their learning process, managing student activities, guiding the student learning process, helping students develop their language skills, helping students take responsibility for their learning, also helping to facilitate the integration process, and encouraging self-learning and collaborative learning, and facilitates online learning by communicating with students through discussion forums, for example).

Marsh (2012) also indicated that the role of students in learner-centered learning is as follows: (Students engage effectively in the learning process, students do not rely on the teacher all the time for their learning, students communicate with each other in small groups, students evaluate each other's work, students collaborate with each

other, students learn from their peers, students help each other in the learning process).

2.4. Advantages of Blended Learning

There are many advantages to blended learning; this is because it combines the advantages of traditional learning (face-to-face learning) and e-learning. Harb (2013) pointed to these advantages, including the following: (Easy access to knowledge sources, social interaction among all parties of the educational situation, cost-effectiveness, ease of reviewing content, increased interaction between teacher and students, increased student participation in the educational process, flexibility in teaching and the learning environment, and motivating students through interaction and collaboration, providing opportunities for self-learning, accommodating individual differences among students, helping students develop the learning skills necessary for living in the 21st century, helping students become independent in learning, increasing student learning outcomes and reducing material costs, overcoming the problem of crowded/ congested classrooms).

2.5. Challenges of Blended Learning

Although blended learning has many advantages, there are a number of challenges that hinder its implementation, including (Vandermolen, 2010): (Some students feel intimidated by using computers, frustration and anxiety that may result from interacting with others, which negatively affect the learning process, various difficulties in assessment, monitoring, and classroom management, blended learning requires students to exert more effort in the learning process, lack of sufficient time to implement this type of learning, blended learning requires providing more support, not guaranteeing students' ability to use technology successfully, many students' belief that traditional teaching methods are better than blended learning).

Blended learning means using face-to-face learning enhanced by the Internet and modern technology in education and teaching; whether inside or outside the classroom, and this integration is done by the teacher. However, e-learning systems are not immune to criticism; due to the absence of the role of human interaction between the parties of the educational situation, which negatively affects learning outcomes (Lim & Morris, 2009), making blended learning somewhat distinguished.

2.6. The Role of Blended Learning in Developing Academic Writing

In recent years, blended learning has emerged as an effective educational approach in enhancing the academic writing skills of English language students. A survey of the blended learning system between 2013 and 2023 showed that this method was an effective tool for improving English writing skills, as students showed noticeable improvement and provided positive feedback on this method (Qi, Nuraqilah Nadjwa, & Sazalli, 2024). This is confirmed by applied research in Malaysia, which adopted a quasi-experimental approach, where researchers observed that students in the group taught via blended learning achieved significantly better writing results compared to the group that relied on the traditional method (Hassan, Abdul Rahman, & Azmi, 2021). Similar results emerged in an academic writing environment where blended learning models received high satisfaction from students, who reported that it provided them with greater flexibility, better access to resources, and faster interaction with courses (Alwasilah, 2024).

3. Practical Framework

3.1. Research Methodology

The researcher relied on the analytical descriptive methodology, which allows for the following:

- Discussing the reality of academic writing skills among Iraqi university students.

- Identifying and measuring the impact of blended learning on writing skills, whether overall or sub–skills.
- Using data collection tools and means and statistical analysis to test the hypotheses.

3.2. Research Limits

- Spatial Limits: Iraqi universities (Baghdad, Al–Mustansiriya University, Kufa, Basra)
- Temporal Limits: The academic year 2024–2025
- Human Limits: Iraqi university students in the English department
- Subject Limits: The effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing the academic writing skills of English language students in Iraqi universities.

3.3. Research Population

The research population consisted of undergraduate students at Iraqi universities: University of Baghdad, Al–Mustansiriya University, University of Kufa, and University of Basra.

3.4. Research Sample

The research sample consisted of (56) male and female students (30 male students and 26 female students) in the English department who were randomly selected to represent the research population.

3.5. Research Instrument

An interview and a written test were used with (56) male and female students to collect data. A test consisting of (5) questions on academic writing was prepared to explore problems related to their writing skills.

Validity of the Instrument

To verify the validity of the instrument, the researcher relied on face validity by presenting its initial form to a committee of experts and specialists in the field of English language and its teaching methods. The researcher adopted a percentage of (80%) or more of the arbitrators' opinions as a criterion for the validity of a question.

Reliability of the Instrument

A reliable instrument is one that gives the same or similar results upon repeated application. The researcher relied on the test–retest method on a group consisting of 30 male and 26 female students who were excluded from the final application of the interview.

Application of the Instrument

The researcher distributed the questions of the final written test to the members of the main sample included in the study after excluding the members of the exploratory sample and the reliability sample. The researcher adopted the method of direct delivery and receipt to ensure no responses were lost.

Results:

Table (1) Specifications Table for the Academic Writing Ability Test

Writing Skill	Purpose of the Skill	Number of Questions	Score per Question	Time per Question (minutes)	Total Time (minutes)
Organizing Ideas	Measures the ability to plan and coordinate ideas and formulate a coherent text	5	6	2.4	12
Using Sources	Measures the ability to cite references and quotations according to academic frameworks	5	6	2.4	12
Writing Fluency	Measures the ability to produce coherent and fluent texts free of major errors	5	6	2.4	12
Stylistic Flexibility	Measures the ability to employ diverse methods of expressing ideas	5	6	2.4	12
Originality	Measures the ability to generate new ideas and formulate them in an innovative way within an academic context	5	6	2.4	12

The researcher took the following steps:

1. Calculate the mean raw scores for the tests (M).
2. Calculate the standard deviations of the raw test scores (SD).
3. Calculate the (F) value to determine homogeneity between the two groups.

4. Calculate the (T) value for the significance of differences between independent means with equal numbers.

The statistical processing, which involved calculating the differences between the mean scores of the control group (traditional learning) and the experimental group (blended learning) in the pre-test of academic writing, shows the following:

1. Regarding the total test score, there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups, indicating their equivalence at the starting point.
2. Regarding the sub-scores for writing skills (organizing ideas, using sources, fluency, stylistic flexibility, originality), all differences were not statistically significant at the (0.05) significance level, confirming the pre-experiment equivalence between the two groups.

Table (2) Differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test of academic writing (Total Score).

n=56

Group	m	sd	f	t	Significance
Control	16.81	6.81	1.53	0.75	Not Significant
Experimental	18.11	8.11			

Upon checking the critical t-value at degrees of freedom $(n-1) = 55$, the critical t-value at the 0.05 significance level was found to be 1.659. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the value is not statistically significant, and there are no differences between the two groups in the pre-test for the total score.

Table (3) Differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test for the skill of Organizing Ideas.

n=56

Group	m	sd	f	t	Significance
Control	5.31	2.81	2.05	0.27	Not Significant
Experimental	5.11	3.91			

Upon checking the critical t-value at degrees of freedom $2(n-1) = 110$, the critical t-value at the 0.05 significance level was found to be 1.650. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the value is not statistically significant, and there are no differences between the two groups in the pre-test for the skill of organizing ideas.

Table (4) Differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test for the skill of Using Sources

n=56

Group	m	sd	f	t	Significance
Control	5.61	2.81	1.53	0.12	Not Significant
Experimental	5.71	3.51			

Upon checking the critical t-value at degrees of freedom $2(n-1) = 110$, the critical t-value at the 0.05 significance level was found to be 1.650. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the value is not statistically significant, and there are no differences between the two groups in the pre-test for the skill of using sources.

Table (5) Differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test for the skill of Writing Fluency

n=56

Group	m	sd	f	T	Significance
Control	2.01	2.02	1.12	0.21	Not Significant
Experimental	2.31	2.21			

Upon checking the critical t-value at degrees of freedom $2(n-1) = 110$, the critical t-value at the 0.05 significance level was found to be 1.650. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the value is not statistically significant, and there are no differences between the two groups in the pre-test for the skill of writing fluency.

Table (6) Differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test for the skill of Stylistic Flexibility.

n=56

Group	m	sd	f	T	Significance
Control	2.81	2.61	1.04	0.35	Not Significant
Experimental	3.01	2.61			

Upon checking the critical t-value at degrees of freedom $2(n-1) = 110$, the critical t-value at the 0.05 significance level was found to be 1.650. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the value is not statistically significant, and there are no differences between the two groups in the pre-test for the skill of stylistic flexibility.

Table (7) Differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test for the skill of Originality in Academic Writing

n=56

Group	m	sd	f	T	Significance
Control	1.21	2.01	1.65	1.51	Not Significant
Experimental	2.01	2.21			

Upon checking the critical t-value at degrees of freedom $2(n-1) = 110$, the critical t-value at the 0.05 significance level was found to be 1.650. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the value is not statistically significant, and there are no differences between the two groups in the pre-test for the skill of originality in academic writing.

The statistical processing, which involved calculating the differences between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test of scientific thinking ability, shows the following:

1. Regarding the total test score, the t -value was equal to 0.75, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, thus the two groups are equal at the starting point, which indicates their equivalence.

2. Regarding the sub-scores of the test's five levels, the differences were as follows:

a. For Problem Sensitivity ability, the t -value was equal to 0.27, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, thus the two groups are equal at the starting point regarding Problem Sensitivity ability.

b. For Elaboration and Completion ability, the t -value was equal to 0.12, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, thus the two groups are equal at the starting point regarding Elaboration and Completion ability.

c. For Ideational Fluency ability, the t -value was equal to 0.21, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, thus the two groups are equal at the starting point regarding Ideational Fluency ability.

d. For Spontaneous Flexibility ability, the t -value was equal to 0.35, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, thus the two groups are equal at the starting point regarding Spontaneous Flexibility ability.

e. For Originality ability, the t -value was equal to 1.51, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, thus the two groups are equal at the starting point regarding Originality ability.

From the previous results, it is confirmed that there are no statistically significant differences between the members of the control and experimental groups in the pre-test of scientific thinking ability for the total score and its sub-level scores, indicating the equivalence of the two groups at the beginning of the study.

After analyzing the results of the pre-test conducted to measure the students' level in academic writing skills before applying the experiment, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups, which reflects the equivalence of the two groups in their pre-test level. Thus, it became possible to move to analyzing the results of the post-test to determine the impact of applying the blended learning approach on developing the academic writing skills of the experimental group members compared to the control group:

Table (8): Post-test Results for the Total Score of Academic Writing Skills

	N	M	SD	F	t	Sig
Control (Traditional)	30	65.4	6.80	1.12	4.25	0.000
Experimental (Blended)	30	74.8	6.45			

From the above, we find that there are statistically significant differences at the (0.05) level in favor of the experimental group

Table (9): Post-test Results for the Sub-skills of Academic Writing

Skill	Group	N	M	SD	F	t	Sig.
Organizing Ideas	Control	30	13.2	2.10	1.05	3.85	0.001
	Experimental	30	15.7	2.05			
Using Sources	Control	30	12.5	2.35	1.18	4.10	0.000
	Experimental	30	15.4	2.20			
Writing Fluency	Control	30	13.8	2.50	0.97	3.45	0.002
	Experimental	30	16.2	2.40			
Stylistic Flexibility	Control	30	12.9	2.15	1.02	3.75	0.001
	Experimental	30	15.6	2.05			
Originality	Control	30	13.0	2.25	1.08	3.95	0.000
	Experimental	30	15.9	2.10			

We see that the results showed statistically significant differences in all sub–skills in favor of the experimental group.

Discussion of Results:

The study results indicated the presence of statistically significant differences between the control group and the experimental group in the post–test for the final or total score of academic writing skills and also in all sub–skills, and these differences were in favor of the experimental group that studied according to the blended learning method.

The mean scores of the experimental group students in the post–test increased by nearly 9.4 points in the total score compared to the control group, which is a significant development illustrating the effectiveness of blended learning. Alongside a clear and evident development in the sub–skills as follows:

1. Organizing Ideas

The experimental group showed an improvement of +2.5 points compared to the control group.

This amount of improvement can be explained by the fact that blended learning integrates electronic resources and in–class activities. This allows students to plan their ideas in advance, review them repeatedly through online forums, and interact directly with the teacher to clarify concepts.

2. Using Sources

Students improved by +2.9 points.

The reason for this is the availability of digital libraries, scientific databases, and electronic citation tools, which help students cite references correctly and learn methods for supporting their ideas with academic sources.

3. Writing Fluency

The scores of the experimental group increased by +2.4 points. Blended learning allows students to write repeatedly and correct their

mistakes immediately, which increases their confidence in self-expression. This led to the production of fluid texts free of major errors.

4. Stylistic Flexibility

An improvement of +2.7 points was recorded.

Blended learning encouraged students to experiment with different writing styles and interact with their peers in online discussion groups. This contributed to developing the students' ability to express themselves using varied styles.

5. Originality and Creativity

An increase of +2.9 points was recorded.

The blended learning environment stimulated critical and creative thinking among students. It allows them to explore numerous ideas before formulating them in their own style, resulting in more innovative and original academic texts.

Based on this, it can be said that blended learning contributed significantly to increasing the students' level in academic writing, both in terms of detailed skills and the total score, compared to traditional methods.

Conclusions

Based on the results, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Blended learning clearly demonstrated greater effectiveness compared to traditional instruction in developing academic writing skills.
2. Improvement was observed in various aspects of academic writing. Students in the experimental group were able to achieve significant progress in: organizing and structuring ideas in a logical manner, using academic sources and references correctly, better writing fluency, applying diverse writing techniques, and producing innovative and authentic academic texts.
3. Blended learning showed flexibility that helped improve student autonomy and increase their self-confidence. Students were able to

review their work, interact with their peers and instructors, and apply critical thinking strategies, which was positively reflected in the quality of their writing.

4. Blended learning helps address a number of fundamental challenges faced by Iraqi universities, such as overcrowding, lack of resources, and weakness in the foundations and principles of academic writing among many students.

5. The results indicate the necessity of relying on blended learning as a permanent teaching method in English language programs at Iraqi universities, as it enhances academic writing skills and provides students with essential skills for academic success.

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