Teaching writing skills in EFL classes with blending learning

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Blended learning Writing skills K-12 COVID-19 Research Article	Blended learning has become an emerging trend in the field of education and has caught the attention and interest of many researchers as a new approach to encourage students in their learning process, especially during COVID-19 disruption. Blended learning is also known as 'hybrid learning', 'mixed-learning or 'flipped learning' in the literature. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of blended learning for improving EFL students', from the eleventh grade, English writing skills and the student's perception of the blended learning environment at a high school. In this study, a mixed-research method was used. The quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire, pre-test, and post-test writing scores written by 92 participants, and the qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 8 volunteer participants. Data were analyzed with SPSS t-tests and content analyses. The research findings showed that blended learning had a significant effect in improving participants' writing skills. Participants significantly outperformed in writing exams. The participants had a positive attitude and perspective towards using blended learning in EFL classes. The limitations of blended learning highlighted by the minority of the participants were the burden of the online activities and lack of internet or mobile device accessibility. Further research on blended learning models in EFL classes in the K-12 context is highly recommended.

1. Introduction

Skills in language teaching settings are divided into four areas, those are writing, speaking, reading, and listening. Among them reading and listening are called receptive skills; writing and speaking are called productive skills. Writing is one of the slowest improved productive skills among these skills in the K12 context. "Writing is considered as the most difficult skill for learners"(Thi & Anh, 2019, p. 75). It needs special attention(Olshtain, 2001).

In English foreign language (EFL) classes, two approaches: product-oriented and process-oriented approaches are implemented into practice. The first one focuses on quantity rather than quality(Nunan, 1991). The second one focuses on quality but both teachers and learners need time to follow the process-oriented writing approach which requires a few stages like brainstorming, planning, writing drafts, revising, etc. In EFL classes in Turkey at high school levels, English hours for writing activities do not accommodate

the whole steps of the process-oriented writing approach. In this context, blended learning practices meet the needs of teachers and learners. It offers teachers much more flexibility than face-to-face classes since barriers to attendance arising from time or location constraints either are removed or reduced(Brysch, 2020).

What blended learning means keeps its ambiguity, but it is possible to define briefly "the combination of face-to-face instruction with online learning"(Alexander et al., 2019; C. G. Graham & Allen, 2011). Blended and hybrid course models will change the future of postsecondary teaching and learning settings(EDUCAUSE, 2021). Increasingly, more high school teachers are providing instruction using blended learning. This provides benefits to students such as having more time flexibility in their learning as well as the ability to work through assignments at their own pace (Oliver & Kellogg, 2015).

2. Literature

"The use of the term blended learning has become a buzzword among educators and trainers in the last several years. By nature, both the terms hybrid and blended imply a mixing or combining of *something*. It is that *something* that people do not always agree upon" (Lamb, 2001, p.173). However, there is a definition that has been popularized "students with some control over time, place, path, and/or pace"(Horn & Staker, 2015, p. 35). "Agreement seems widespread that BL integrates face-to-face and online learning"(C. R. Graham, 2019). Some studies underline special terms 'personalized learning', 'best features of classroom interaction' differentiated instruction' and 'student-centered instruction(Boelens et al., 2018; INACOL, 2011).

Flexibility, "access, and improved pedagogy" could be considered regarding in counting the advantages of blended learning(Graham & Robison, 2007). Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the "right" learning technologies to match the "right" personal learning style to transfer the "right" to the "right" person at the "right" time(Singh & Reed, 2001, p. 2). Learners have different needs especially in EFL classes, in blended learning models, teachers have time to work with small groups "while other students work at their own pace, utilizing tools that fit their learning style" (Alijani et al., 2014, p. 126). Table 1 presents blended learning organizational levels. It is divided into four levels: Activity level blend, course level blend, program level blend, and institutional level blend (Bonk and Graham, 2006).

Table 1

Blended Learning Organizational Levels

Activity Level Blend	Course Level Blend	Program Level Blend	Institutional Level Blend
An instructional activity has an online and face-to-face component.	A course that involves students in both online and face-to-face activities.	A program that allows or requires a mix of both on-campus and online course for program completion.	Institutional blending requirements or support for blended learning options.

Note. Adapted from the study by Bonk and Graham, 2006.

There are four core recognized models of blended learning according to the Clayton Christensen Institute although there are many more blended learning models: These are Rotation, Flex, Enriched Virtual, and A

La Carte. The Rotation model includes four sub-models: Station Rotation, Lab Rotation, Flipped Classroom, and Individual Rotation as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Blended Learning Models

BRICK-AND-MORTAR		ONLINE LEARNING	
	BLENDED LEARNING		
1.Rotation Model	2.Flex Model	3.A La Carte Model	4.Enriched Virtual Model
• Station Rotation • Lab Rotation • Flipped Classrom • Individual Rotation			

Note. Adapted from the study by Horn and Staker (2014).

"More research is needed to identify quantity and quality factors of blended designs that impact achievement and success rates (Graham, 2019, p. 15). The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of blended learning for improving EFL learners' English writing skills and the students' perception towards blended learning environment at a high school. This study aims to answer the research questions below:

1) Does blended learning affect participants' writing skills success?

2) What are the perceptions of participants towards blended learning environment?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Model/Design

The present study was conducted with a mixed research method. Mixed methods research deliberately includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods into one study *(Creswell & Clark, 2011)*. "In a convergent parallel design entails that the researcher concurrently conducts the quantitative and qualitative elements in the same phase of the research process, weighs the methods equally, analyses the two components independently, and interprets the results together"*(Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 80).*

3.2. Data Collecting Tools

The research data were collected with a pre-post writing exam score, an online questionnaire, and face- to -face interviews. An online questionnaire including five closed-ended questions was used to get information about the participants. The online questionnaire and interview questions were developed by the researchers and approved by an expert in the field. Pre/post writing exams were scored and reviewed by two experienced English teachers using a writing assessment scale and subscales.

3.3. Sampling or Study Group

The participants of this study were classes of the 11th grade of a state high school during the 2019-2020 academic year fall semester in Turkey. The study group of pre-post writing exams included 92 participants. The online questionnaire sent to the participants to get demographic information and blended learning. The results are given below. During the semi-structured face-to-face interviews, only eight volunteering

participants were involved due to ethical concerns. Their age ranged from 16-19. The participants had English lessons as a mandatory course in the school. The participants had weekly four English lesson hours.

The purpose of the online questionnaire including five closed questions is to get information about the participants. The results of the study are presented in descriptive statistics. Participants were asked in question one "Have you ever experienced online learning?" In this study, 92% participants responded that that they did not have any experiences about online learning shown in Figure 1.
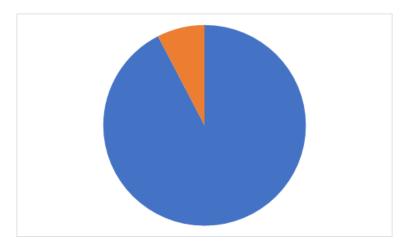

Fig. 1. *Online Learning Experiences*

As seen in Figure 2 participants were asked in the question two "What is your computer literacy level?" According to the responses from 92 participants, 48, 9 % of them were good, 20, 7% were very good, 19, 6% were weak and 10, 9% were excellent in computer literacy.
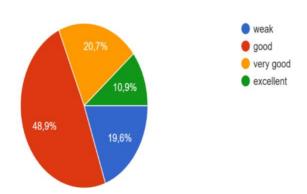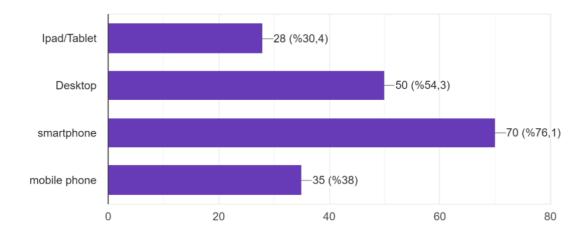

Fig. 2. Computer Literacy Rate

Participants are asked in the question three focuses on belongings: Which technology or mobile technologies do you have? The result shows that 76, 1 of the participants have smartphones. Some participants have got more than one of the technologies. 54,3% of participants had desktop, 38% had mobile phones and 30,4% had iPad/ tablet. The result displays that some participants have more than one technology equipment (See Figure 3). Results indicate that participants would not have any mobile devices if they were asked to follow blended learning environment and smartphones would be used popularly in the study.

Fig. 3. *Participants' Technology and Mobile Technologies Rate*

The question four focuses if the participants had access to the internet. Responses from the participants are showing that 97, 8% had access to the internet (See Figure 4).
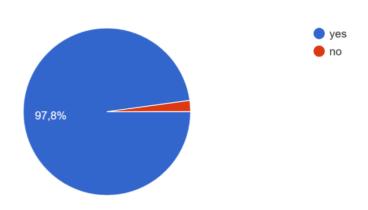

Fig. 4. *Internet Access Rate*

The participants were asked in question five, "Where do you access to the internet for e-learning?" According to the responses from 91 participants 75, 8% prefer to use at home, 17,6% of them prefer to use at school, 2% at canteen/ cafe and 4,4% of participants responded others (See Figure 5).
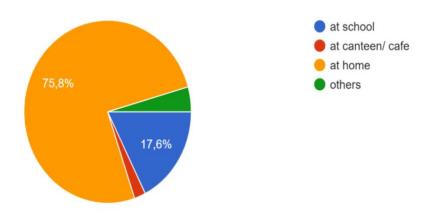
Fig. 5. *Internet Using Place*

3.1. Data Analysis

Participants pre and post writing exams were scored by two scorers and scores were analyzed with SPSS paired samples t-test. All inferences were set at an alpha of ≤ 0.05 using SPSS. From among the 92 participants, who had filled out the questionnaire and participated in pre-and-post writing tests, eight took part in the follow-up semi-structured interview based on their own willingness. Each face-to-face interview session, lasting for 10-20 minutes was recorded for later content and thematic analyses. Different coding numbers were given to the participants and approved by an expert in the field.

3.2. Validity and Reliability

The anonymity of the questionnaire survey was guaranteed to acquire more reliable survey results. Direct participant quotes from face-to-face interviews are presented to improve the study's reliability. Pre/post writing exam papers were scored and reviewed by two scorers using a writing assessment scale.

3.3. Research Procedures

The current study was conducted with the 11th grade students were in a state school in Istanbul in the fall semester of 2019-2020. Participants were given a pre-writing exam and asked to write an essay about 'their future jobs including an introduction paragraph, body paragraphs and a concluding paragraph. Their writing exams were scored according to the writing assessment scale. The score results were used as a need analysis for what students in need in writing courses. Pre-writing exam scores data was recorded for each student. The blended learning environment based on the rotation model was designed and implemented for eight

weeks and a module was designed for off-class writing activities entitled writing an essay in English including six lessons and were open till the post-test writing were completed**.** These were:

1. How to write a sentence in English

2. How to write a well-organized paragraph

3. How to write an essay in English

4. Essay types in English

5. Essay outlines in English

6. Use of mechanics such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

The participants were informed how to use the online platforms and what they would do in traditional face-to-face classes. For the current study, these platforms; ed.ted.com, google docs, google drive, padlet, eba, and WhatsApp were used. In traditional face-to-face classes, only one-lesson-hour was separated for writing activities per a week. At the end of the eighth week participants were asked to write an essay about their 'the future jobs' again as a post-writing exam. Each paper was scored according to the writing assessment scale and subscales. The rotation model of blended learning at the activity level was implemented in current study.

4. Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study were analyzed based on research questions and are given below. The current study before and after the blended writing class, a writing practice exam was applied to the participants. Participants' pre-writing exam scores and post-writing exam scores were tested and compared (See results of tests given in Table 3).

Table 3

Results of Pre and Post Writing Exams

		M	SD	N	SEM
Pair	Pre	39,3478	21,21602	92	2,21192
	Post	90,1087	8,22013	92	,85701

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A sample of 92 participants' data was analyzed. Both pre and post writing exam scores were analyzed by paired- samples t-test in SPSS. The output produced by SPSS is shown Table 4 and 5. The result from the analysis indicated that p- value less than .005 is printed as .000, therefore it is concluded that the difference was statistically significant.

Table 4

The Correlations of Pre and Post Writing Exams

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pre&post	92	,073	,490

Table 5

Paired Samples Test Results

		Paired Differences							
				Std Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the difference				
		M	SD		Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pre-post	-50,76087	22,1870	2,31318	-55,35571	-46,16603	-21,944	91	,000

The current study also investigated that the participants' perception towards blended learning environment at a high school. Semi-structured interviews were done, 8 participants were involved since they were volunteers. The responses coded and categorized into three themes.

Three main codes emerged as presented in Table 6. These are advantages (56,76 %), limitations (27%), and suggestions (16,2%) in terms of the blended learning environment. The findings of this study showed that the participants perception of the blended learning environment was highly positive.

Table 6

The Rate of Main Codes

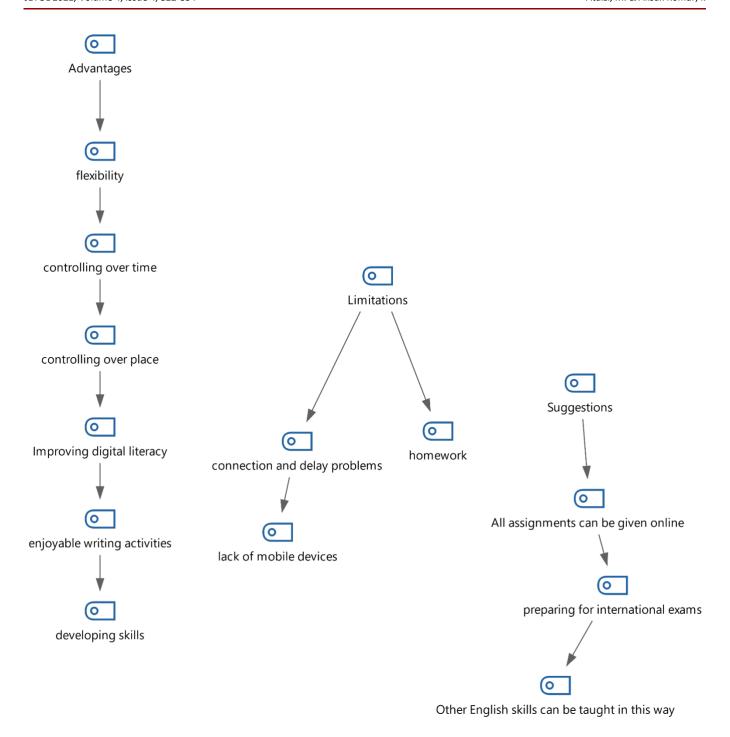|	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Suggestions	6	16,22	16,22
Limitations	10	27,03	27,03
Advantages	21	56,76	56,76
Total (valid)	37	100,00	100,00
Missing	0	0,00	-
Total (valid)	37	100,00	-

Fig. 6. *Codes Obtained from The Views of The Participants*

As presented in Figure 6, thirty-seven subcodes emerged when the participants reported their perception of the blended learning environment. The view of the respondents stated that the blended learning environment enables them to control their own time and place of study and improve their digital literacy, listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary positively as they use google docs, online forums, online enjoyable writing activities, and online peer-to-peer assessment. Another theme that emerged from the interview data is that blended learning environment offers learners flexibility. Flexibility offers students alternatives to decide how, where and when they learn. Below are a few of the quotes from the participants.

"… *writing papers using online platforms and see other papers and going on rewriting again and again whenever and wherever I want really helped me to improve my writing." (P1)*

"I think writing lessons are now enjoyable and interactive." (P3)

"It is very good because I can decide where to study." (P2)

"*I was really bad at writing in English. But now I think it is fun to write*." (P8)

"*I started to participate in writing activities. I really hated writing. To be honest, I always get help from my mother while doing my homework*." (P4)

"*You can learn and have chance to watch again and again at home if you do not understand the subject*" (P7)

"*Blended learning improved my language skills, not only writing skills*". (P6)

Some participants were stated the blended learnings' limitations, especially burden of the online activities and access to technology. Below are a few of the quotes from the participants.

"Doing online activities are more difficult for me than writing on my notebook." (P7)

"You need internet and mobile devices. If you do not have them, it won't work." (P2)

"Connection problems and delay and slowness make me crazy". (P5)

"Homework, tasks, assignments are too heavy for me, and teacher can easily understand who has not done them" (P4)

Participants agreed that blended learning can be implemented in learning environments not only in EFL classes but also in other courses. The participants of this study had affirmative opinions about their experience and suggestions based on their own experiences. Below are a few of the quotes from the participants.

"*All lessons at school can be taught with the same method*." (P8)

"*Maybe this method can help me to prepare international English language exams." (P6)*

"*We can learn listening, reading online. I cannot hear well in the class because of large classes." (P7)*

"All teachers can give online homework. It is easy to get quick feedback." (P1)

"*Other skills in English can be learned like this from anytime from anywhere…*" (P2)

The findings of the study revealed that blended learning had a significant effect in improving students' writing skills. Participants significantly outperformed in writing exams. The findings of the current study resonate with previous studies that implementing a blended learning model in writing classes improves students' academic success (Adas & Bakir, 2013). For blended learning environment learning management systems or social networking platforms have been generally used such as Edmodo(Barrot, 2021; Charoenwet et al., 2016; Purnawarman et al., 2016), Moodle(Adas & Bakir, 2013; Lien, 2015). However, in this study ed.ted.com, google docs, padlet, eba, and WhatsApp were used. For these platforms,

participants mostly used their smartphones, therefore, it is crucial to think about which online platforms could be accessed easily with smartphones.

Another important finding from the study is the perceptions of participants towards the blended learning environment. In this study, participants have a positive attitude and perspective towards using blended learning in EFL classes at a high school, therefore, more students benefit from blended courses. It provides flexible access at anytime, anywhere, and enhances the learning environment beyond the traditional classroom and increased students' motivation and satisfaction in learning activities. This result is consistent with a similar study done by (Puspita et al., 2019).

In addition to these findings that face-to-face and online activities reinforce each other in blended learning. Students have time to spend on course material. Face-to-face time at school can be used more effectively. In the current study participants followed online activities whenever and wherever they wanted to learn. They used blended learning more efficiently also. As researchers(Alkhaleel, 2019; Anthony et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021) explored the perception of the efficient atmosphere of blended learning for learners.

It has many advantages to implement blended learning into teaching writing classes to enrich the learning process. However, participants also stated some valuable suggestions. These focused primarily on the technical problems such as internet connection problems and finding online activities as a big burden to overcome. The findings show that blended learning is suitable for teaching English writing skills in EFL classes at high schools. When implementing a blended learning environment for students at high schools, it may be significant not to overload them with many tasks, assignments, or activities but guide students who need help and give feedback to students while learning online.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study investigated the effect of blended learning for improving EFL learners' English writing skills and the students' perception towards blended learning environment particularly at a high school with the eleventh grades. In this study, the research findings showed that blended learning had a significant effect on improving participants' writing skills. Participants significantly outperformed in writing exams. The participants had a positive attitude and perspective towards using blended learning in EFL classes. The limitations of blended learning highlighted by the minority of the participants were burden of the online activities and lack of internet or mobile device accessibility. The study also provides significant information for instructors and practitioners in designing English curriculums.

The study has some limitations also. The research was carried out in Turkey for five weeks, with a total of 92 participants who took pre-post writing exams. The qualitative study is limited to a limited sample of eight EFL students. In the light of the study findings, the following suggestions were forwarded:

Similar studies in EFL classes in the education of K-12 provide many advantages for future research. More research would be useful to examine the effects of blended learning and different blended learning models practices. When implementing blended learning for students at high schools, it may be significant not to overload them with many tasks, assignments, or activities but guide students who need help.

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