

Enhancing Writing Skills for Second-year English Majors through a Moodle-based Blended Writing Course: An Action Research at Hue University of Foreign Languages

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ABSTRACT

In the boom era of technology and information, computer and the Internet have had an essential effect on every aspect of human life, especially in education. The advances in technology and developments in teaching and learning methodologies have presented new circumstances for more effective implementation of learning programs. Beside the traditional face-to-face classroom, the technology development has led to the birth of a new learning environment that is blended learning in which students partly participate in the traditional face-to-face class and partly join an online session as a compulsory part of their course. Through this kind of learning, what students learn online will support what they learn face-to-face in class, and vice versa. In this paper, the researcher is going to share her own experience in implementing a Moodle-based blended EFL writing course designed for second-year English majors at Hue University of Foreign Languages. The main content of the paper will be devoted to present the findings of her research on how the Moodle-based blended EFL writing course enhanced students' writing performance and what factors of the blended course contributed to students' writing enhancement. The paper also aims at indicating what difficulties students encountered when taking part in this blended course and what could be done to help students overcome these difficulties.

Key words: EFL writing course, blended learning, Moodle

Introduction

Beside the traditional face-to-face classroom where teachers directly control the lesson and students' progress in learning, the technology development has led the educators towards a new approach to teaching and learning which is "called as hybrid or blended learning" (Rogers, 2001, p.11). Authors like Thorne (2003), Rovai and Jordan (2004) and Neumeier (2005) define blended learning as a mixture of online learning or web-based training with face-to-face communication and more traditional methods of learning and teaching. Nowadays, blended learning has become one of the strategies adopted by some EFL/ESL experts and institutions. According to Stalker and Horn (2012), one common feature of blended learning is that because a course takes place partly online and partly in face-to-face classroom, what students learn online will support what they learn face-to-face in class, and vice versa. Thus, it can be claimed that the main goal of blending the learning environments is to find a harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003).

Theoretical Background

What is Blended Learning?

The concept of blended learning has been addressed by many authors and it has a various range of meanings. Driscoll (2002) provides the broadest definition of all authors since she defines blended learning as a combination of instructional methods or pedagogical approaches. Authors like Rovai and Jordan (2004), and Thorne (2003), however, define blended learning as a mixture of online learning or web-based training with face-to-face communication and more traditional methods of learning and teaching.

Neumeier (2005) defines blended learning as a combination of face-to-face and computer assisted learning in a single teaching and learning environment. To Sharma and Barrett, the term blended learning is applicable to a variety of teaching and learning situations and implies a broad range of combinations with regard to face-to-face and computer-mediated teaching and learning. According to Sharma (2010), blended learning has attracted different definitions and stances. The term blend has been used to refer to the mix of teaching modes, but also to the combination of technologies (email, phone, web, etc), methodologies (presentation-practice-production, etc.), and probably in the future, real and virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life).

Benefits of Blended Learning

Although some authors contend that there might be nothing new about blended learning, institutions that use blended approaches, as Neumeier (2005) observes, base their practices on the idea that both face-to-face interaction and online methods have inherent advantages, and therefore are beneficial for teachers and learners. According to Tayebinik and Puteh (2012), blended instruction offers teachers the possibility to spend more time with learners in both small groups and individually, and to create a flexible and active learning environment that has the

potential to change students' experiences and outcomes. Reasons for using blended instruction include: "improved pedagogy, easy access to knowledge, more interaction among learners, personal presence, cost effectiveness, and ease of revision of learning content" (Tayebinik & Puteh, 2012, p. 28).

The most important aim of a blended learning design is thus to create a learning environment that combines the best of both models and that works as a whole and to find "the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning for the individual learning subjects, contexts and objectives" (Neumeier, 2005, p. 165). Blended learning seeks to generate a coherent and harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction by taking into account learners' and teachers' aptitudes and attitudes. Blended learning therefore remains an important concept in language teaching as "its overall focus is concerned with the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience" (Sharma, 2010, p. 457).

What is Moodle?

The word Moodle is originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. Moodle was created by Martin Dougiamas, a former WebCT administrator at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia, who has graduate degrees in Computer Science and Education (Wu, 2008). The system is based on the concepts of social constructivism which tries to offer both educators and students a platform for online interaction and collaboration (Tang, 2013).

Key features of Moodle

Moodle is a template-based CMS to which content must be added by teachers or students. Moodle's navigating interface is user-friendly and intuitive, which makes language instructors, who usually do not have much computer literacy, feel comfortable using Moodle in their classes. According to Wu's review on Moodle (2008), Moodle platform has some important features that can be suitable to design a blended course. Firstly, students' activities are recorded online so that teachers can check later what students have done on the Moodle platform. From these automatic log reports, teachers know not only when students have completed or uploaded an assignment, but also how much time they spent on an assigned task or quiz. In addition, teachers can fully control the deadline and timeframes for assignments, quizzes, forums, chats and so on. Moreover, the flexible and powerful function of course management makes it pretty easy for teachers to offer a new course, hide an existing course, copy and modify existing course materials, and transfer currently enrolled students to another new class, etc. For each course, teachers can upload files to folders that teachers can create, rename, move, modify, or delete. Teachers can easily access those files even if they do not use their own computers. Additionally, Moodle also offers a good range of assessment strategies which teachers can use to design many kinds of quizzes to evaluate students' learning outcomes as well as encourage peer assessment

among students. One more important feature of Moodle is that it provides useful tools such as Wikis, forums, chats, blogs, and workshops so that teachers can apply different formats of social interaction and collaboration to their teaching.

Previous Studies Related to the Research

In the area of teaching ESL / EFL writing skills based on Moodle platform, there has been a number of studies taking the use of Moodle in ESL / EFL writing courses into consideration. Most of these researches show a positive effect of the online session on students' writing outcomes.

Nagatomo (2006) conducted an action research on motivating students to write more with Moodle in his own one-semester writing class of twenty-two English majors. The findings of the research show positive effects of using Moodle on students in terms of not only their regular participation in online writing homepage to discuss with their classmates and self-study but also their increasing writing performance.

In his article, Robertson (2008) examined how CMS (Classroom Management System) technologies can be woven into an established EFL writing curriculum built upon the constructivist notion of the author as communal learner and communicator. The goal of the article is to demonstrate, through specific examples, particular Moodle CMS features that support activities and approaches inherent in the "process approach" writing class. He also stated that through implementing Moodle's CMS technologies into the writing course, teachers benefit in the areas of organization, implementation, distribution, communication and assessment.

Sharing the same interest in using Moodle as an effective online environment to enhance students' writing skills, Wu (2008) reviewed the application of Moodle on an EFL collegiate writing course in Taiwan context. As he concluded, without doubt, Moodle is a powerful and user-friendly CMS, and it can effectively help English writing teachers organize their teaching materials, improve their means of communication, and retrieve their records of interaction with students when necessary.

Similarly, Suvorov (2010) proposed the use of Moodle for ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) writing classes because a typical Moodle course consists of a set of tools that allow the integration of a wide range of assignments, activities, and multimedia resources, electric delivery of teaching materials, synchronous and asynchronous teacher-student and student-student communication, and testing and assessment of students' work.

Most noticeably, Adas and Baki (2013) conducted a study on blended learning as a new approach to improve students' writing abilities. They also used Moodle as a platform to design online assignments and discussions for students. The findings from research indicate the benefits of integrating blended learning into traditional methods in developing writing abilities for second and third year undergraduates at a conventional university in Palestin.

Purposes of the research and research questions

In the case of this study, the researcher aimed to enhance students' writing skills through the combination of traditional face-to-face instructions and online support based on one of the most popular Classroom Management Systems, Moodle. Also, through this action research, the researcher would like to examine the effects of using Moodle to design a blended writing course on enhancing students' learning outcomes and writing performance. Moreover, during the implementation of this action research, it is hoped that the researcher can find out the problems that students may have when attending the blended writing course designed on Moodle base and what can be done to solve those problems so that the next courses can be improved.

For the above mentioned purposes, this action research was conducted with the aims to look for the answers for three following questions:

1. To what extent can the Moodle-based blended writing course enhance students' writing performance?
2. What factors of the Moodle-based blended writing course contribute to the enhancement of students' writing performance?
3. What difficulties may students encounter when taking part in the Moodle-based blended writing course? What are some possible solutions?

Research Methodology

Participants

This action research took place in the context of the researcher's own teaching practice with the participation of her students during the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. One class of forty-one students was chosen to implement the research. There were thirty-eight female students and only three male students in this class. These students are second-year English majors who learn English with different purposes such as becoming EFL teachers, translators, interpreters, tour guides and so on. At their second year of the campus life, these students' English proficiency was expected at upper-intermediate level or B2 according to Common European Framework of Reference.

Course Selection

The course chosen for this research was Writing 4 which is taught for English-major sophomores who have already finished the previous writing courses including Writing 1, Writing 2 and Writing 3. This thirty-period course is designed to be taught in 15 weeks of the second semester, which means students need to attend two forty-five-minute periods every week. As designed in the syllabus, the focus of Writing 4 course is on essay writing which instructs students to write different kinds of academic essays. In addition to that, there is time for revisions

and practice before the final exam. To serve the purpose of the research, students who participated in this blended writing course had to learn in both conventional classroom and online environment.

Online Treatment (Moodle)

In addition to the traditional in-class instruction, the experimental group participated in an online section designed on Moodle site which can be accessed easily by logging in the site *hucfl.hueuni.vn*. This Moodle platform had been established and put into use as a E-learning system for lecturers and students at Hue University of Foreign Languages. All the materials uploaded to the Moodle were related to the content of Writing 4 course which focuses on teaching English majors how to write different kinds of essays. The experimental group had a variety of ways to access to the online course through the Internet at home, in campus or wherever they find convenient.

Data Collection

A variety of data-collecting instruments were employed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data to serve the purpose of answering the research questions. First of all, there was a pre-test at the beginning of the course to assess students' writing skills before taking the blended course and a post-test at the end of the course to assess students' writing performance after taking the blended course. The comparison between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test provided a general overview on students' progress during the semester. Secondly, students' online writing assignments were also collected for qualitative analysis. Both writing tests and writing assignments were evaluated and marked based on the assessment rubrics to assure the objective results. The analysis of students' writing assignments showed the progress that students made week by week with the support of both online and offline instructions. Additionally, a questionnaire was delivered to students in order to collect the data about factors contributing to the enhancement of students' performance as well as difficulties they encountered during the course and some suggestions in order to improve the next blended courses. Besides, informal interviews were also employed to get more details and in-depth explanation to clarify students' responses in the questionnaires.

Data analysis

The SPSS 16.0 software was used to statistically analyze the quantitative data collected from pre- and post-tests as well as questionnaires. Students' scores collected from pre-test and post-test in writing were compared by using paired-sample t-test to examine if there were any differences in students' writing performance under the support of blended learning course using Moodle platform. Similarly, students' responses to questionnaires were also analyzed to reveal the findings. The qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews and the analysis of students' online writing portfolios were used to clarify and illustrate the results of the research.

Results of the study

Students' enhancement in writing performance after the Moodle-based blended writing course

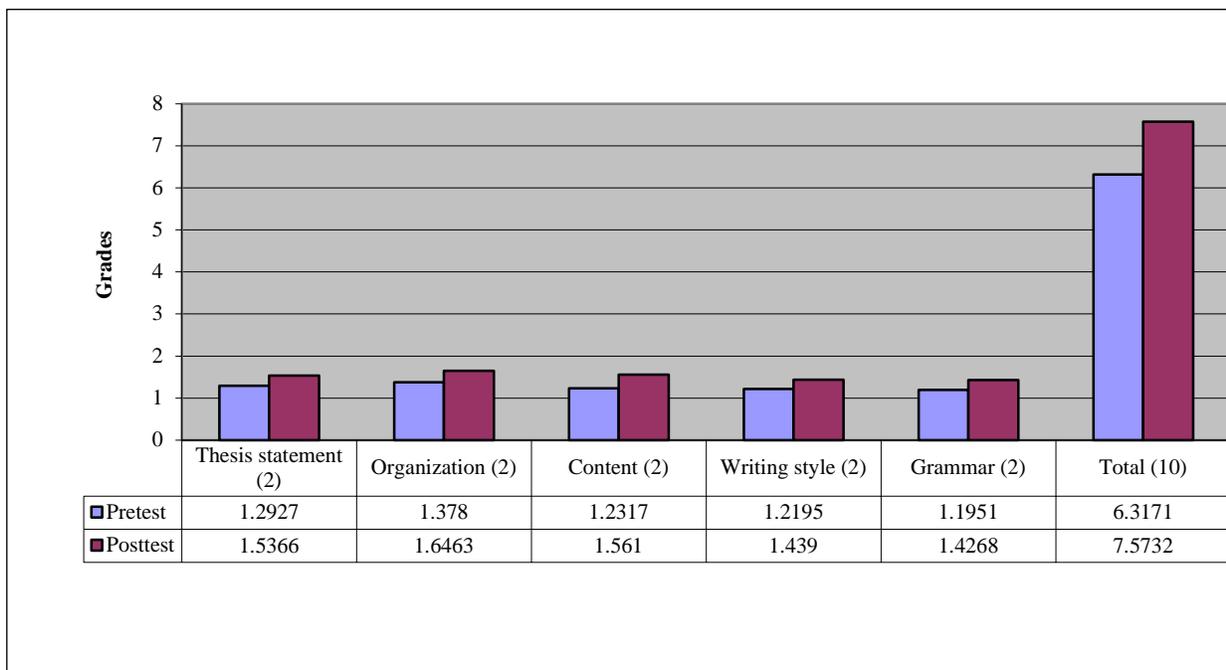
Table 1: Students' Differences in Writing Performance between the Pretest and the Posttest

Test		Means		S.D		df	t	Sig
Type	Grade	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest			
Total	10	6.3171	7.5732	1.78100	1.45156	40	-6.282	0.000

It can be seen from the tables that there is a considerable difference between the mean scores of pretest and posttest. Specifically, students' mean score improved from about 6.3 in the pretest to more than 7.5 in the posttest. The Sig value at 0.000 also shows that this difference is firmly reliable. From this finding, it can be concluded that students' performance in writing was generally improved under the impact of the Moodle-based blended writing course.

As students' writing was marked with the help of grading rubrics, beside the total scores, detailed scores for five different grading criteria were also considered in the comparison process. These detailed scores included such different categories as Thesis statement, Organization, Content, Writing style and Grammar, each of which counted for 2 out of 10 marks. The specific marks for each assessing criteria that students achieved in the pretest and the posttest were also compared by using paired sample t-test. The results of the comparison are briefly summarized in the following chart in order to highlight students' enhancements in different aspects of writing performance as well as their overall progress:

Chart 1: Students' Improvement in Writing Performance



It can be referred from the chart that students made a considerable progress in their writing performance during the Moodle-based blended writing course in terms of different aspects. The improvement in different aspects of their writing including clear thesis statement, appropriate essay organization, diverse content, natural and flawless writing style, accurate grammar and proper mechanics contributed to the general enhancement in their writing skills. This significant development also implies that the innovative learning experiences in the Moodle-based blended writing course play a useful role in improving students' writing performance.

Factors of the Moodle-based blended course that contribute to students' enhancement in writing performance

In order to clarify what factors of the Moodle-based blended writing course contribute to students' improvement in writing performance, the researcher required students to specify the factors that they thought had the most influence on their writing enhancement. Students' responses are summarized in the table below:

Table 2: Factors that contribute to students' enhancement in writing performance

Factors of the Moodle-based blended writing course have the most influence on the enhancement of students' writing skills	Students (N = 41)	
	Number	Percentage (%)
Organization of the Moodle-based blended writing course	15	37
Content of the Moodle-based blended writing course	7	17
Extra materials shared on the Moodle-based blended writing course	27	66
Forums for me to display my writing	12	29
Writing assignments that I have to submit online	16	39
Peer feedback activity for each assignment	19	46
Teacher feedback for each assignment	27	66
Online interaction among students	10	24
Online interaction between teacher and students	21	51
Others	0	0

It can be seen from the table that the two most influential factors, which were chosen by 66% of students, that beneficially affect students' writing skills are the extra materials shared on the Moodle-based blended writing course and teacher feedback for each of students' assignments. It is understandable because these are the most obvious advantages of blended courses on Moodle platform which can hardly be found in the traditional teaching methods. Besides, 51% of students thought that the online interaction between teacher and students was also considered as a vital element in students' success in the writing course. It seems more convenient for students to contact their teacher outside classroom via online forums or chat for

lesson further explanations as well as writing advice. Meanwhile, a large number of students (accounting for 46%) emphasized the necessary role of peer feedback in addition to teacher feedback in students' writing improvement. Since the special functions of the Moodle platform have facilitated the process of giving and receiving feedback from classmates, students had more chances to better their writing. Moreover, 39% of students indicated that regular assignments submitted online were also effective for them to enhance their writing skills as they have more opportunities to perform their writing ability. According to 37% of course participants, the organization of the online section of the course on Moodle platform in relation to the lectures in classroom also helped students have an effective approach to the theoretical lessons before applying them in real writing practice. Additionally, the other factors such as content of the course, students' writing display, and student-student interaction contribute importantly to students' writing improvement as well. Generally speaking, different factors of the Moodle-based blended writing course play different roles in the entire process of developing students' writing skills. Because students have different learning style and learning pace, these factors' influence on their writing improvement are not at the same level. However, it can be concluded that although students benefited differently from this kind of learning, the effectiveness and usefulness of the Moodle-based blended writing course were apparent and undoubted.

Difficulties students encountered in the Moodle-based blended writing course

Learning EFL writing skills in a new blended environment which is greatly different from the traditional one can be an unfamiliar experience for most students. As this is the first time English majors at Hue University of Foreign Languages have approached to this innovative teaching method which combines both face-to-face instructions and online learning activities, difficulties are definitely unavoidable. The following table summarizes some common difficulties which students encountered when taking part in the blended writing course on Moodle platform:

Table 3: Difficulties students encountered in the Moodle-based blended writing course

Students' difficulties in the Moodle-based blended writing course	Students (N = 41)	
	Number	Percentage (%)
Difficulties with the access to the Moodle-based blended writing course	6	14
Difficulties with the interface of the Moodle-based blended writing course	17	41
Difficulties with the peer feedback activities in the Moodle-based blended writing course	22	54
Difficulties with the technology skills when participating in the Moodle-based blended writing course	26	63
Other difficulties	0	0

According to the figures shown in the table above, it is clear that only a small number of students (14%) found it difficult to access the Moodle-based blended course. In the interview after the course, some students mentioned the lack of necessary facilities such as computers and a stable Internet access as their main hindrance during the blended course. Meanwhile, there were 41% of students said that they encountered some difficulties with the interface of the Moodle-based blended writing course. Based on students' explanations, they were not used to dealing with the homepage of the website, so they had some problems in following the organization of the course, accessing the extra materials shared on the Moodle platform, displaying their writing on the forums as well as submitting their assignments. In addition, a larger number of students (taking up 54%) admitted that giving and receiving feedback to their peers' writing were also uneasy for them. Students justified their choice by specifying such difficulties related to peer feedback activities as their lack of confidence to give feedback to their classmates' writing, their limited time to give feedback to many peers' writing as well as the insufficient quantity of peer feedback to help improve their writing. Most noticeably, the majority of students who took part in the blended course (accounting for 63%) agreed that they had some technical problems when participating in the blended course for the first time. These technical problems included students' lack of confidence about their technology skills, lack of necessary facilities, and need of more technical supports from teacher and so on.

Some suggestions to help students overcome the difficulties

From these above difficulties that students encountered during the blended writing course, there are some suggestions to help students overcome them. In terms of technical problems which most students met during the course, it is necessary to provide students with more essential facilities to deal with the course such as computers and Internet access. Students also expressed their desire to receive more pre-course instructions about how to deal with the online section of the blended course so that they could understand what they need to do more clearly. Additionally, according to students' opinions, there is a need to update the Moodle site frequently so that it can be more suitable for their use. Some suggestions for this include providing a mobile version of this site so that students can use it more conveniently and adding a notification function that can inform students about any new activity on the learning forum. Students also hoped to receive more technical supports from their teacher whenever the problems come. On the other hand, in order to motivate students, it is recommended that the teacher needs to make the course more attractive and interesting by changing the interface of Moodle site as well as adding more various online activities for students to participate. Besides, to help students learn more effectively in this blended environment, the teacher should also expand the deadline for each assignment so that students will have more time to do peer feedback activity and improve their writing before submission. More importantly, students were also aware of their active role in the learning process by emphasizing the importance of their own responsibility and efforts to participate enthusiastically in the course so that they could succeed in this kind of learning.

Conclusion

From the results of the research, it can be concluded that the Moodle-based blended course plays a significant role in enhancing students' writing skills. In comparison with the traditional face-to-face method, blended learning not only makes the writing course more interactive and effective for both teacher and learners but also helps to expand students' learning opportunities outside the classroom. However, in order to improve the quality of the next blended courses, many things should be done to help students overcome the difficulties they encounter in dealing with this innovative learning model.

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