The Influence of Blended Learning on EFL Students' Writing Apprehension and Writing Performance: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This case study attempts to investigate the usefulness of using the blended learning approach on EFL students' writing apprehension and their improvement in writing performance. Twelve male secondary school students enrolled in Class Ten in one of the International Schools in Malaysia participated in the 13-week study. Data collection instruments were pre and post-study semi-structured interview and pre and post-study descriptive writing tasks. The data gained from these instruments were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis of students' responses to the interview questions and content analysis for their pre and post writing tasks. Students were encouraged to do the different writing stages in three collaborative groups in face-to-face class setting and online writing learning activities via the class blog and online discussion via Viber groups. Analysis of the qualitative results indicated that there is a remarkable improvement in students' writing apprehension. Results also showed that students experienced improvement in their writing ability and performance as a whole and in the various macro and micro aspects of EFL writing. The study concluded that integrating online discussion and learning activities with in-class learning activities in an EFL writing context enhances students' positive feelings towards writing, decreases their writing apprehension and improves their writing performance.

Keywords: blended learning, writing apprehension, writing performance, EFL writing, macro aspects of writing, micro aspects of writing.

1. Introduction

Writing is considered one of the four important and critical language skills for all students in all academic levels. It is also more important for the second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) students since they have to write in English language other than in their native languages (Ahmad, 2003; Aljumah, 2012; Raoofi, et al., 2014; Hussin, et al., 2015; and Rass, 12015). However, FL/SL students view writing as a complex and complicated skill as it entails various factors such as motivational, social, cognitive and cultural factors before producing it in its final written form (Dujsik, 2008; Jun, 2008; Erkan and Sabah, 2011; Aljumah, 2012; So and Lee, 2013; Raoofi et al, 2014; and Rass, 2015).

To master English writing skill and convey the intended meaning appropriately, SL/FL students need to address all writing components simultaneously. These writing components are purpose, content, organization, grammar, spelling, vocabulary

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use and mechanics of writing (So and Lee, 2013). Due to the complex nature of English writing and its challenging requirements, both skilled and unskilled FL/SL learners usually have a sense of negative feelings and attitudes towards it known as writing apprehension (WA). Accordingly, WA leads to poor writing performance (WP). Supporting this issue, Hussin et al. (2015) and Rass (2015) state that WA negatively affects and hinders students' WP. Similarly, many researchers concluded that it is difficult to motivate language learners when it comes to the English writing class (Ackerman, 2006; Witte, 2007; Aljumah, 2012; and Rass, 2015)

As a consequence of students' WA and their poor WP in English writing, there has been a challenge for researchers and educators in this field to look for comfortable and flexible learning environments. These learning environments are supposed to motivate students to learn English writing effectively and continue in learning it even after class hours to get rid of their WA sources. One way to tackle this problematic issue is to provide students with flexible and comfortable learning opportunities to learn and practice writing and interact with classmates and teacher continuously. These learning opportunities can be performed in their free time and place to get rid of the time constraints and the limited number of writing lessons in a traditional face-to-face classroom(So and Lee, 2013). Such learning environment is known as blended learning (BL). It combines the merits of both face-to-face conventional classes and online learning classes to produce the optimal outcomes of learning English writing. In a BL environment, teachers and FL/SL learners are provided with the merits of pedagogical richness, the active use of teaching and learning strategies, multiple tools for interaction and discussion, and a better access to knowledge (Yoon and Lee, 2010). In the field of English writing, BL is proved beneficial; it enhances students' interaction with each other as well as with their teacher, decreases communication anxiety and encourages students to be motivated and autonomous learners and improved their academic writing abilities (Liu, 2013) and engages students in a learning experience that is both meaningful to them and suit their personal and academic interests (Rybushkina and Krasnova, 2015; and Krasnova and Ananjev, 2015). As such, by blending online and face-to-face collaborative learning activities in learning and teaching English writing, students might be helped to get rid of their negative feelings towards English writing and overcome their WA.

Notwithstanding the promising merits of BL, it is rarely utilized in teaching and learning of FL writing classes. Specifically, little studies have been carried out on the context of FL writing process and instruction in a BL environment to overcome students' WA and improve their WP. Most of the past studies have explored the perception of English language students towards the BL English writing environments. For example, Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010, 2012; Larsen, 2012; So & Lee, 2013; and Ho & Savignon, 2013) implemented quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the effectiveness of using the BL approach in improving students' writing skill at different academic levels as it is perceived by the FL/SL students. These studies revealed that FL/SL students believed that BL has a vital impact on improving their writing ability and performance. Using the similar research methods, Liu (2013) described and evaluated the BL environment in the English Writing Course in terms of course design, material development, student involvement, teacher reflection, and student evaluation. The study concluded that BL encouraged students' social interaction and discussion among the students, decreased their communication apprehension and increased their academic writing ability in English language, enhanced their motivation and helped them be autonomous and independent learners. In a more recent study, Tananuraksakul (2014) qualitatively investigated students' experiences in using Facebook groups as BL in a writing class. Results of the study proved that Facebook is useful as a BL environment for the students to learn with, and not to learn from as facilitated and enriched by the teacher. Moreover, other researchers have experimentally studied the effect of BL on SL/FL English writing skill (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Keshta & Harb, 2013; Shafiee et al., 2013; Arslan, 2014; and Abdulmajid, 2014). Their findings showed that the use of BL is powerful in improving students' writing achievement and performance.

It is clear from the above-mentioned studies that most of these studies have explored students' perception of the use of BL on their writing skill. Additionally, other studies quantitatively investigated the effect of BL on students' writing abilities or achievement at various levels of learning English writing and in various institutions. Along with the aforementioned research gap, the aim of the current study is to qualitatively investigate the effect of using the BL approach on students' WA and their WP. Hence, the present study is intended to fill this gap in the area of EFL writing. It addressed the following research questions:

What is the influence of BL on Class Ten FL students' WA?

What is the effect of BL on improving Class Ten FL students' WP?

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant since it investigated the effectiveness of integrating the in-class learning activities and online learning activities on students' WA and WP. Findings of this study are supposed to contribute to knowledge in the field of English writing learning and instruction for learners of English as a SL/FL. It helps in explaining how BL approach affected FL students' WA and their WP. Accordingly, it encourages and assists textbooks designers, English language teachers and other educational bodies to develop an insight regarding its usefulness, students and teachers' roles in the learning situations. It also shed lights on how and when to utilize the face-to-face and online learning activities to overcome FL students' WA and improve their WP.

Literature Review

Blended Learning

The recent student-centered learning approaches of English language are considered a popular leading trend in the field of education in general and in English language learning and teaching in particular. They were considered influential learning approaches due to their focus on the individual differences of learners in their learning and the flexibility of learning, learners' learning styles and habit and learning pace. Accordingly, these learning approaches believe in providing students with self-learning and flexible online learning opportunities together with the conventional in-class ones for the purpose of enhancing students' learning in the English language. The process of integrating online and in-class learning opportunities is known as Blended Learning. It suggests new pedagogical ideas and educational practices and changes the roles to be played by the students as well as their teacher (Krasnova and Ananjev, 2015).

In the field of English language learning and teaching, BL is defined as an approach to language instruction that integrates the most effective features of both face-to-face learning activities and online collaborative learning activities. This integration represents one whole and works together in a continuous association for the purpose of attaining optimal language learning outcomes. As such, BL helps improve the quality of English language teaching and learning and fortify the learning content. For the purpose of attaining the optimal results of BL in language learning and instruction. However, teaching the English language by using BL does not mean simply mixing the online and face-to-face learning activities and materials. It, rather, means the scientific and systematic integration of these learning materials and sources in an organized manner to meet students' needs, individual peculiarities and learning desires and attain the educational goals and learning outcomes (So and Lee, 2013).

Moreover, BL provides an ideal and exciting flexible learning environment for English language learning and teaching that positively affect the process of FL acquisition. In this perspective, Krasnova and Ananjev (2015) mention that BL has many merits as compared with the conventional methods of learning English language. To them, BL provides flexibility of learning, self-learning and interactivity derived from an online component of BL. In addition, BL affords collaborative work and immediate feedback and spontaneity gained from conventional teaching.

Finally, BL provides many motivating and meaningful learning opportunities and engages students in a learning practice that is both meaningful and interesting to them (Rybushkina and Krasnova, 2015). These learning opportunities encourage students' interaction with each other and with their teacher, help students become independent, reduce their anxiety, enhance their participation and engagement and magnify their writing ability (Liu, 2013).

Methods of Data Collection

4. 1 Research Design

The researchers implemented a qualitative case study research design. Specifically, a descriptive single-case holistic research design was adopted. It is descriptive because the study aimed at giving a detailed and comprehensive description to the phenomenon under study in its real setting. It is single-case holistic research design because it studied one case (single-case) and analyzed it as a whole entity and at one unit of analysis (holistic) (Yin, 2010). As for the use of case study, Cohen et al (2007) state that case studies are those studies that aim at portraying 'what is like to be' in a specific situation

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in its real life context. As such, it provides a deep, vivid and detailed information about the case under study such as an event or process in restricted time, place and activity (Creswell, 2014).

4. 2 Instruments

Two instruments were employed to answer the research questions of the current study. The first instrument is the pre and post-study focus group semi-structured interview. These interviews were carried out by one of the three researchers in the school library after distributing the students into three groups; each one consists of four students depending on their desire and familiarity with each other. The second instrument is the pre and post-study descriptive writing tasks. The pre-study writing task was conducted in the first week of the study in which each student was asked to write five paragraphs descriptive essay of not less than 250 words in the title (My favorite vacation spot). In the last week of the study, the same students were asked to write another five paragraphs descriptive essays of the same length about the topic entitled (Twin towers as a global center). The time devoted to write each essay was 50 minutes which is the actual class time in this school.

4. 3 Participants

As for the participants of the current study, they were 12 FL secondary school male students registered in (Grade 10) in one of the International schools in Kuala Lumpur-Malaysia in their second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. It is worthy to note that the study includes only male students because the school system separate classes male from female ones due to the Islamic nature of the school system. Those students were purposively selected out of 18 students which is the total number of students in this grade. The rationale for using purposive sample procedure is to include only those participants who can enrich the study with in-depth information relevant to the issue under study, i. e., students' WA and their WP. As it is explained by Cohen et al. (2007) that purposive sampling is beneficial in obtaining in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it. Purposive sampling aims at getting saturation data rather than generalizing the data collected from it to the whole population or representing the whole population. To select the sample of the current study purposively, several criteria were prepared by the researchers depending on the variables of the study. These criteria were; students' level of WA, writing ability, computer and Internet efficiency and the status of English language in their home countries.

4. 4 Procedures of the study

In the first day of the first week of the study, the researcher asked students to write a descriptive writing task as a pre-study writing task to measure their current writing ability and performance. Then, students were interviewed in their groups as a pre-study focus group interview to elicit information concerning their current WA. Students were interviewed by using the English language as a medium of communication due to two reasons. Firstly, because they preferred to use the English language in responding to the interview questions. Second, the sample of the study as it is mentioned above is not of the same nationality. Therefore, in order to be able to discuss and share understanding among the various groups of interviewees, the English language was the better choice at this moment.

Participants of the study applied the writing process model by Hayes and Flower (1981) and followed its stage; pre-writing, drafting and post writing stages. Throughout the 13 weeks of their second semester of the academic year 2014-2015, participants were distributed into three groups asked to do three writing tasks. In this period of time, the researcher helped students to learn and practice writing a descriptive essay by guiding them to a group of writing activities and online discussion in each stage of the writing process. In the pre-writing stage, for instance, students were asked to do online brainstorming activity via Viber programme installed on their hand phones or desktops to brainstorm ideas, discuss them, filter them and take decision on them. Students then ended this brainstorming discussion by clustering the brainstormed ideas, mapping and outlining them to be drafted in the next writing stage. Following this stage, students grouped in their normal class and discussed the outlined ideas and drafted their essay. Then, this first draft is posted on the class blog. The main purpose of the class blog is to enable the students to receive instructions relevant to the writing skill and its aspects and components, practice writing and language exercises, and to receive notification from the teacher regularly relevant to the writing class. Moreover, the class blog is also used as a space to post the groups' writing drafts to be seen by other students in their group as well as the students of the other groups to study and analyze these drafts and give comments for improvement. Students, then, were asked to perform another online activity called online peer review activity to discuss

via Viber with their group mates the first drafts posted on the class blog. This discussion aimed at providing constructive comments and feedback on the first drafts of the essay using the guidelines of peer review guide adopted from Moloudi (2011). Then, a summary of their peer review discussion was also posted on the class blog, printed out and brought to the next class meeting to be discussed by students. After that, students wrote the second draft of the essay. It is worthy to mention here that the second drafts were collected and studied carefully by one of the three researchers and the teacher of English language for this class to provide the final comments to them to be written in a final form. Finally, the last versions of the essays written by students were published on the class blog and on the class notice board to be seen by all students as a motive to them.

These writing stages and activities were followed in the three writing tasks and in the same order as they are portrayed in Figure (1) below. In the last week, the researcher carried out the post-study descriptive writing task to be able to identify students' probable improvement in their WP and interviewed the students in the three groups to elicit information concerning their WA.
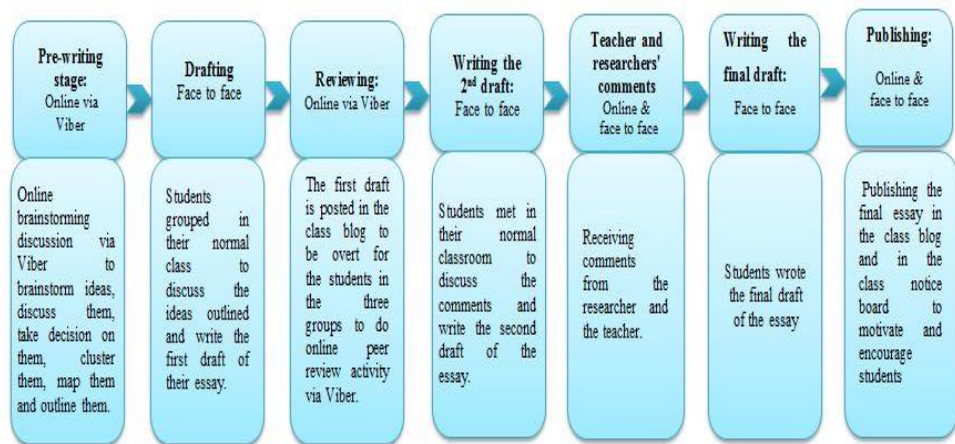

Figure 1. Procedures of the Study

Results and Discussion

The aim of the current paper is two-fold: to investigate the influence of BL on Class Ten FL students' WA in one of the international schools in Kuala Lumpur, and to investigate the effect of BL on improving their WA. To this end, the data collected by the pre-study interview were compared with the data collected by the post-study interview with reference to students' WA. In addition, students' pre and post-study descriptive writing tasks were analyzed and rated according to the Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) rating composition rubric. This rating rubric of writing is the modified and updated version of Jacobs et al., (1981) ESL Composition Profile. This writing rubric was used to determine the difference between the pre and post-writing tasks for each student so as to identify whether there was an improvement in their WP. Students' pre and post-writing tasks were rated by two skillful teachers of English language in the school who have a very long experience in teaching writing in these international schools. It is worth noting here that the data included in the analysis are collected from 11 participants only out of 12 participants (the actual sample of the study) since one of the participants was on medical leave and postponed the academic year. Consequently, he was not available at the time of conducting the post-study interview and the post-study writing task. As a result, the whole data collected from this student was excluded from the final analysis.

5. 1 The influence of BL on FL students' WA

5. 1. 1 Students' WA before participating in the BL environment

Analysis of the pre-study interview data revealed that all students experienced WA but with varied degrees. For example, eight students out of eleven have high WA. Those students are (S2, S3, S4, S7, S8, S9, S10, and S12). Examples of their responses to the pre-study interview were stated below:

S03: Very high, because it needs a good writing style, good ability in language. mmm, good grammar and spelling use

S08: Mostly High. I see writing a difficult activity because I don't know so much information about the topic. If the topic I have never heard about it, I have never read about it, then it will be challenging.

S09: High writing apprehension. I see it challenging because some time I don't know what you want to write about the topic. I feel my mind empty.

The remaining three students seemed to have moderate WA. Thy stated in their interview that:

S01: Not so much, but sometimes I feel well sometimes I feel worried from making bad writing, spelling mistakes.

S05: hmmm, Not really too much. Sometimes I face writing problems such as spelling, grammar and facts about the topic of essay, that hinder my writing ability.

S06: Depending on the information I am providing in it. In a science for example I have to writing something certain like one specific way then I might be challenging for me and my head will be blocked and do not find time as well for thinking. So it is from time to time might be challenging.

5. 1. 2 FL students' challenges in writing before participating in the BL environment

Results also showed that students have encountered many challenges in their writing that caused them to be more apprehensive in writing. These challenges were mainly represented by the micro and macro aspects of writing. For example, S01, S10 and S12 arranged their writing challenges as the following:

S01: Grammar …. first time grammar. I mean to write in wrong grammar, and secondly is spelling that sometimes I need to search in the dictionary or ask someone which take me time and for organization and use proper words…. I feel nervous sometimes.

S10: First of all organizing ideas for writing, then grammar, and then collecting ideas.

S12: The first difficult thing is collecting ideas, then vocabulary then grammar. S05: Grammar, spelling and mm ideas of what to write.

S06 adds to the above-mentioned writing challenges that he afraid from the use of punctuation marks. He stated that: "*hmmm, grammar, punctuation…. "*

Results also indicated that there are other challenges that students faced when they are writing and caused their high WA. For example lacking the practices and techniques of doing writing is the challenge for S05 as he states "*……As for my writing techniques and practices, they are really missed*". S06 seems afraid from the teacher and his comments to him and his writing. He reported that: "*hmmm, I am really get afraid from the teacher and what she said about my writing*".

Moreover, S07 has WA because he finds it difficult due to his lack of motivation to write. He stated that: "*They are difficult for me and because of that, I think that I am not so motivated in writing*". In addition, students like S06, S10 and S09 reflected their WA due to their overthinking in the final product of writing and its content.

They also stated that they felt apprehensive about that because they have direct negative effect on their writing marks. For example, S06 stated that:

'The final product of writing makes me worried also because the content is valued as much and the product is very important because it effect the final result. This why made me anxious in writing".

Finally, results also indicated that time pressure, classmates and their comments and group work were other writing challenges students faced when writing their essays. These writing challenges were mentioned by S10 that increased his WA. He stated that:

"Time pressure, class mates and teachers affect writing apprehension. The final product also affects my writing apprehension".

As regarding his nervous feelings when writing in group form, He also added that:

"Because writing in a group make me nervous …it is hard for me"

5. 1. 3 Students' WA after participating in the BL environment

Analysis of the post-study interview data reported that there is a positive change in students' WA after participating in the BL environment. Nine students out of eleven experienced low WA as they felt comfortable, relaxed and happy when they asked to write essays in English. Those students are (S02, S03, S04, S05, S06, S07, S08, S10, and S12). Some examples of their responses in the interview scripts are mentioned below:

S05: aaaamm, very good…. I am not nervous at all…I like writing essay now ….. aaaahh, when I start writing I'll never stop…. mmm, I feel so because I feel it is easy to write…. This is why I feel comfortable.

S08: Yah, I feel amazed because it is getting easier because before when I am writing an essay I will take too longer. I feel so because I learnt how to write, to write very fast and how to do this and finish in time I took about one hour to write an essay but now only 20 minutes I finished writing it.

S12: I feel comfortable because in this semester we learnt something that we did not learnt before, like how to write the

Introduction, the body, the conclusion. So I understand what to write which I did not learn before.

However, two students only did not experience this positive change in their WA. They seemed to have slight or did not change in term of their WA. Those students are: (S01 and S09). Their responses to the interview questions are mentioned below:

S01: No too much different …mmm, I do not feel too much difference. I still feel nervous towards writing because I do not like time pressure, I do not like it, I get nervous a lot because I am afraid that…… I would like to finish my essay at time. I am worried about the mark given to me.

S09: mmm, it is more formal and if I have to write in this way, I somehow cannot add all together because when I usually write essay, I put all my ideas in my own lines. Whatever they come out but if I have to write a formal essay in a way formally, then they will be difficult to start because I do not know where to place it.

It is clear from the aforementioned interview scripts that those two students did not improve in their WA because as it is stated by S01 that he still experienced difficulty resulted from the time pressure for writing the essay. In addition, S09 also still have WA due to the formality of this learning approach of learning writing. This student believed that the formality of this learning approach makes it difficult for him to start writing his essay because he has to arrange and organize the ideas logically and to arrange the paragraphs in the essays in a logical order.

Analysis of the results also revealed that there were many reasons that contributed to improving their WA. In this respect, students stated that the BL approach helped them improve their WA because it helped them learn what to write in their essays and how to write properly using good commands of English language. For that reason, S02 stated that:

S02: I feel now it is easier to me to write essay by learning writing using this learning method. So it is much easier now. Before this course, I feel nervous and tense when it is required to write but now I feel that it is like easy, we do not to be like nervous while writing, we feel free. I feel so because if you are sure about what you are writing about, you are sure about the grammar, spelling, so, it is ok, you do not want to feel uncomfortable.

Another reason that contributed to improving students' WA is that BL approach also helped them learn how to outline their essay and plan it. In this perspective, S03 stated that:

"before I do not know how to start in the essay and how to plan it and write it and now I feel much better in all of these aspects because I learn much about them and practice them much".

In addition, BL approach assisted them in learning about the component of the good essay and how to write each one as it is mentioned by S03 and S04. In this respect, S03 mentioned that:

"I feel happy because my writing improved a lot, I feel that I improved in many aspects of writing, for example how to write the

Introduction, how to write the body and how to conclude. I feel nervous but I feel better than before".

BL approach also engaged students in many writing opportunities in which they practiced writing a lot of and get the required mastery and confidence for doing it on their own as it is reported by S04 when he said that:

"Now, because I learnt and practiced it a lot, I feel that is getting easier and easier and there is nothing to worry about. Only when there is a short time for writing. I worry about it".

Other students mentioned that they impressed in this learning environment of writing because it helped them learn how to write their formal essay that is known and accepted internationally. In this perspective, one student (S12) reported that:

"I feel more confident because the way you introduce to us is more formal than what we know before. It is a formal way that is accepted internationally".

Finally, BL approach helped them feel more confident in their writing since they practiced it much and got linguistic, topical knowledge as well as knowledge related to the techniques of writing a good essay. This knowledge and the practice they did in the writing skill helped them be relaxed and more confident in their writing learning. As a result, their WA is improved. In this perspective, one student (S10) thought that:

S10: Now, I feel more confident towards an essay and before this I feel less confident……before, when the teacher give me a writing task to write, I feel less confident ….. this is because I used to commit more mistakes in content and grammar than now, this makes me less confident before.

5. 1. 4 FL students' challenges in writing after participating in the BL environment

As for the change in the writing challenges students encountered in learning writing in this semester as compared with the last semester, the majority of students did not find difficulty in learning and in practising writing. For example, S01, S03, S04, S05, S06, S07, S08, and S12) all admitted that their previous writing challenges and problems have been settled down. Only three students (S02, S09, and S10) claimed that they are still experiencing problems in some aspects of writing. For example S02 reported that this learning environment of writing requires from the students to be creative in writing and he does not be able to be creative in writing as he stated below:

S02: Actually, I am looking to be creative in writing and I find difficult to be creative in writing. I suffer from this problem in this semester because before my writing is normal but now we have to be so creative to write good writing.

Additionally, S09 and S10 also claimed that they found it difficult to them to collect ideas, arrange them and organize the whole paragraphs and components of their essays. In this perspective, S10 declared that:

S10: Before this semester I have suffer from the grammar and in this semester suffer from collecting and arranging ideas but above all it was funny.

It is clear from the above-mentioned survey of results that the majority of students noticed an improvement in their WA. This improvement in students' WA can be attributed to the various comfortable psychological factors afforded by the BL approach. This learning environment provided students with flexible learning opportunities represented in the online learning activities of writing. In this environment, students were able to practice writing in their free time and place. As such, one of the sources of their WA has been tackled since students have free and open time to write. Stressing this idea, Basal (2015) stated that with the aid of technology, students and their teacher are able to get rid of the class time and space limits. In addition, the limited number of writing lessons and the limited learning sources in the conventional writing class have also been manipulated as learning of writing was extended to the outside of the class walls confines. Moreover, the collaborative group work and students' interaction and discussion in doing the various writing stages also have contributed to decreasing students' WA. In working collaboratively in writing, students felt safe and close to each other since there is a continuous online interaction among them. This online interaction helped them prepare and plan for the writing task in advance by collecting ideas, cluster and outline them to be ready for writing in their traditional writing class. In addition, online interaction also helped students to provided constructive feedback for each other writing drafts so as to produce a well-written and organized essay. All of these factors participated in decreasing students' WA by solving the main sources that lead to students' WA. Supporting the aforementioned ideas, Hussin, et al. (2015) state that all reasons of students' WA might be unshackled within the online learning environments due to the availability of scaffoldings and feedback comments from students and teacher in all stages of the writing process.

5. 2 The effect of BL on FL students' WP

Analysis of students' pre and post-writing tasks showed that all students have improved their overall writing ability and performance as a result of the BL writing course the students undertook in the semester. Moreover, all students also reflected their improvement in the macro aspects of writing (content and organization) and in the micro aspects of writing (grammar, vocabulary and mechanics) as they were represented in the criteria found in the scoring rubric adopted in the study. As shown in Table. 1, all students in group (1) noticed a remarkable improvement in their writing performance. S01 showed an increase in his overall and sub-scores of 22 point from the pre-study writing task to the post-study writing task. Similarly, S02 who got 59 points in the pre-study writing task has improved in the post-writing task and gained 86 points. Moreover, S03 showed 19 points increase from the pre-study to the post-study writing tasks reflecting his improvement in writing. In addition, S04 improved in his writing showing 17 points increase from the pre-study to the post-study writing tasks. Students of this group also revealed an increase in the number of words, adjectives and descriptive expressions in their post-study writing task.

Table 1. Comparison between the pre and post-study writing tasks for students in group (1)

Criteria	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study
	S01	S01	S02	S02	S03	S03	S04	S04
Content/30	22	27	17	26	18	25	17	25
Organization/20	15	18	12	17	14	16	14	16
Grammar/25	12	20	15	22	16	22	18	21
Vocabulary/20	12	17	12	17	13	16	13	17
Mechanics/5	3	4	3	4	3	4	4	4
Total/100	64	86	59	86	64	83	66	83

Students enrolled in group (2) also showed the same improvement in their writing performance. Table. 2 revealed that S05 who is one of the poor students in writing achieved higher points of improvement than his group mates. S06 was the second among his group mates in term of his writing improvement gaining 21 points increase from the pre-study to the post-study writing tasks. S07 represented an improvement in his WP of about 16 points increase between the pre-study to the post-study writing tasks. Then, S08 was the last one in his group in his writing improvement. As in the first group, students in this group also reflected a type of improvement in terms of the use of descriptive word and expressions.

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Table 2. Comparison between the pre and post-study writing tasks for students in group (2)

Criteria	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study
	S05	S05	S06	S06	S07	S07	S08	S08
Content/30	16	22	17	24	17	22	16	21
Organization/20	13	19	14	19	16	19	13	18
Grammar/25	12	21	17	21	17	20	17	18
Vocabulary/20	10	18	14	18	14	18	16	19
Mechanics/5	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4
Total/100	54	84	65	86	67	83	65	80

As for students in group (3), results also revealed an improvement in their writing ability and performance. Table. 3 below indicated that there is varying degrees of improvement in students' WP. For example, S09 who was the poorest one in his group, gained 18 points increase from the pre-study writing task to the post-study writing task. However, he used few descriptive words and expressions in his pre and post-study writing tasks. S12 gained 60 points in the pre-study writing task and 83 in the post-study writing task showing 23 points increase in his WP. S10 showed a slight improvement in his WP gaining 14 points difference between the pre-study writing task to the post-study writing task. S10 and S12 also showed improvement in terms of the number of adjectives and in the total number of words in their post-study writing tasks.

Table 3. Comparison between the pre and post-study writing tasks for students in group (3)

Criteria	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study
	S09	S09	S10	S10	S12	S12
Content/30	14	19	17	22	17	25
Organization/20	12	15	14	17	12	16
Grammar/25	11	18	16	18	15	21
Vocabulary/20	13	15	15	18	13	17
Mechanics/5	3	4	3	4	3	4
Total/100	53	71	65	79	60	83

This positive improvement in students' writing ability and performance can be turned back to the fact that because they were increased in their WA, students felt motivated and interested in learning and practicing EFL writing independently. Moreover, by using the BL writing environment, learners are exposed to various meaningful learning inputs from each other that helped them improve their writing ability and knowledge. These learning inputs are represented by students' discussion and interaction to share ideas related to the topic of the essay and also exchange linguistic knowledge. This idea is emphasized by Kim (2010) when he state that learners are more likely to be exposed to various types of meaningful input from other peers and provide effective language support on the errors which are based on learners' enhanced output. In addition, Cahyono, and Mutiaraningrum (2016) state that the Internet-based teaching of writing stimulates collaborations and thinking skills that enable students to form ideas, exchange thoughts and write together in a meaningful and autonomous way. As such students got benefit from their collaboration by instructing each other, adding to each other's writing and linguistic knowledge. As a result, their WP was increased and improved.

6. Conclusion

This case study claims its originality since it qualitatively investigated the effect of the use of BL on unshackling EFL students' WA and improving their WP. Findings of the study revealed that there is a positive effect of the use of BL on improving students' WA and their WP. The majority of students have positively improved in their WA and all of them have noticed a remarkable improvement in their WP. This result was attributed to the various psychological and pedagogical factors afforded by this learning environment. These factors motivated students to practice EFL writing skill, changed their negative feelings into positive ones, and enriched their topical and linguistic knowledge by encouraging them to socialize and share knowledge collaboratively via online and in-class learning settings. Only two students seemed to have slight or did not change in term of their WA as they stated that they are still feeling apprehensive due to the time pressure for writing the essay and the formality of this learning approach of learning writing.

The success of the BL in learning FL writing can be attributed to two main reasons. The first one is the collaborative learning atmosphere created in the current study. This learning atmosphere helped students feel more confidence as they were encouraged to self-correct their mistakes and correct their classmates' mistakes. As a result, they felt more independent in their learning and practicing of writing and worked collaboratively with little interference from their teacher. Accordingly, students felt less apprehensive they were close to each other and safe in their learning of writing. It also encouraged students to share knowledge and learning experiences that enriched the content of their essays. The second reason is represented by the blend between online and in-class learning activities of EFL writing. This blend provided students with flexible learning opportunities that suit students' differences in working styles, and learning habit. It also took into consideration the students' pace and consequently provided students with self-paced learning. BL also allows students to discuss many aspects of the writing task in advance online and devote the class time for practicing writing only.

Though the study had a limitation due to its small number of participants and its subjective nature of research instruments, it forms a step forward in the field of EFL writing pedagogy. It stimulates EFL learners and their teachers to think about how to integrate online learning activities with face-to-face ones to bring the optimal outcomes in learning EFL writing. Further research needs to be conducted with a large number of participants to provide experimental quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of using BL on improving students' WA and their WP. In addition, similar qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted to examine the effect of BL on improving other types of essays.

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