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A Workshop-Based Blended Program to Improve EFL Writing Skills

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Abstract

The research aimed at investigating the effect of a Workshop-Based Blended Program (WBBP) on improving the EFL writing skills of Secondary School Students. The participants of the study were Forty (47) First Year General Secondary School Students from Belkas Secondary School, Dakahliya, Egypt. The study adopted the quasi-experimental research design. So, there were two groups: an experimental group (n= 24) and a control one (n= 23). To collect data, the researcher used multiple instruments: an EFL writing skills test (pre-post), and a workshop based blended program designed and implemented on 1st year secondary stage students. The researcher taught both groups: the experimental group was taught through the WBBP while the control group was taught through the regular way of teaching. The results of the study revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the mean ranks of the experimental group and the control group on the post administration of the reading skills test in favor of the experimental group. The effect size of the program was found to be high. The study recommends using the WBBP as a technique in teaching EFL skills and as a training approach in professional development programs of EFL teachers.

Key Words: Blended Learning, Writing, Workshop Model

Introduction

Writing is a skill that people need in most professions; however, there are various philosophies and practices for when and how to teach children to write. Due to the fact that written communication has become more prevalent in students' everyday lives, writing instruction must reflect this need. The conventional writing process is alive and well, and necessary for student success after their academic careers are complete. Olango and Geta (2016) highlighted the importance of writing as related to its use in the daily life as well as the other subskills included such as spelling, acquiring vocabulary, punctuation, conveying ideas and the use of correct grammar. Clearly, writing plays an important role in enabling students to organize their ideas, expressing themselves and providing evidences for their opinions and attitudes. What is more, writing is considered as a mean for

extending students' knowledge and it helps them to learn other language skills effectively (Liu, 2013).

The workshop model is an incredibly efficient method of teaching writing. It represents a way of organizing meaningful instruction with balanced literacy that can meet a variety of student needs (Frey & Fisher, 2006). It traditionally includes minilessons, independent reading and reader response tasks. The Workshop process scaffolds students to deeper levels of thinking and engagement while providing students with greater input into and ownership of their learning (Meyer, 2010). Activities and strategies presented in Workshop model are based on the assumption that students have varying abilities and teachers design instruction suited to individual learners. Teachers invite, nurture and support students which helps move them toward independence (Atwell, 2009). Creating lifelong, reflective and responsive writers is a goal of the Workshop Model (Calkins and Tolan, 2010).

Advancements in technology and developments in teaching and learning procedures have presented new circumstances for more efficient and effective implementation of learning environments, which “make it simple for students and teachers to communicate in non-traditional methods” (Hickman, 2007) and which “are characterized by the introduction of flexible and innovative teaching and learning technology into teaching (Vogel & Klassen, 2001, p. 105). For this reason, it seems important to incorporate technology into instruction and plan models and/or strategies to allow students to acquire and enhance digital competencies more easily. Blended learning is one of the most preferable approaches to instruction that incorporate technology inside classrooms, it combines face-to-face instruction with online learning. Blended learning makes extensive use of learning technologies through the "blend" of physical (e.g lectures, labs, handouts and books) and virtual environments (e.g. chatting, discussions forums, e-mails, etc.) in order to supplement traditional face-to-face learning (Preceel et al, 2009).

In this context, the current research is attempting to investigate using workshop-based blended program to improve the writing skills of EFL secondary stage students. This research will incorporate technology into instruction to observe how it will affect students' motivation and skills while reading. Teachers need to be educated on the advantages technology may have on student motivation and ability within writing as well as how to best implement technology into literacy instruction.

Related Studies

Studies Related to Blended Learning and Writing

Several studies were conducted to investigate the effect of blended learning on developing writing skills.

Challob, Abu Baker and Latif (2016) investigated the effects of collaborative blended learning writing environment on students' writing apprehension and writing performance as perceived by a 12 EFL students enrolled in one of the international schools in Malaysia. Qualitative case study method was employed using semi-structured interview, learning diaries and observation. Twelve male students enrolled in Class Ten were selected to participate in a 13-week study. The findings indicated that the students had positive perceptions towards the collaborative blended learning writing environment they had experienced.

Bataineh (2015) examined the effect of text chat based on word processor on writing accuracy and productivity among a sample of Saudi students. A sample of forty Saudi students were distributed into an experimental group supported by Facebook and Skype programs and a control group who used paper and pencil to write their essays. The study used pre and post tests to measure the effect text chat assisted with word processor on Saudi English major students' writing accuracy and productivity. The study concluded that there is a significant improvement in the performance of the experimental group especially in spelling, punctuation, grammar, phrasal verbs, idioms, idiomatic expressions, pragmatics and creativity when compared to the control group.

Ismael, Nadrzrah And Hafiza, (2015) carried out a study to investigate the impact of blended learning on students' writing apprehension. The study used semi-structured interview on twelve male students from primary and high public schools. the findings of the study showed that the students had positive perceptions towards the collaborative blended learning writing environment they had experienced. they perceived that the collaborative blended learning activities had helped them reduced their writing apprehension and improve their writing performance.

Harb (2013) examined the impact of blended learning on students' writing skills in Palestine. The study adopted an experimental approach through dividing forty tenth grade students randomly on two groups, one was taught through blended learning while the other was taught through traditional teaching methods. The findings of the study revealed that there were significant differences in the scores of the control and the experimental

groups in favor of the experimental group and which is attributed to the blended learning. The findings also pointed out that there were statistically significant differences at the participants' achievement level before and after implementing the blended learning program in favor of the experimental group.

Keshta and Harb (2013) investigated the effect of blended learning on Palestinian students' writing skills. The sample of the study consisted of forty males students from the tenth grade in a basic school in Gaza strip. Students were distributed into two groups; an experimental group contained twenty students studied through a blended learning program for eight weeks and a control group contained 20 male students studied through traditional methods. The authors applied a writing achievement test before and after the experiment on both groups. The study concluded that there is a significant statistical difference in achievement in favor of the experimental group against their counterparts in the control group.

Studies Related to The Writing Workshop Model

Al-Hroub, Shami and Evans (2019) examined the differential effects of the writing workshop approach on the L2 (English) writing skills of upper-primary students with varying writing abilities. The participants were 31 fifth-grade students (17 boys and 14 girls) aged 10–11, who followed L2 English writing instruction based on the 'writing workshop' approach at a private primary school in Beirut, Lebanon. An opinion essay served as a pre-test and a post-test in order to gauge writing improvement. Findings revealed statistically significant improvement in students' writing-related outcomes across all writing ability groups. However, the writing workshop was found to result in a differential group effect: generally, above-average writers benefitted more than less-proficient writers. This was particularly clear in relation to the content component of their essay writing.

Turner (2015) determined the impact that using mentor texts in conjunction with the writing workshop would have on struggling first grade writers. A group of eight first grade students participated in the study. The participants had varying writing ability levels. The data collection methods used were individual student interviews, anecdotal notes, student-teacher conferences, weekly conferencing records, workshop recordings, and a teacher research journal. The findings of this study suggested that mentor texts and the writing workshop model increased students' interest in writing and their motivation to write. Additionally, a writing community was

created throughout this process. Furthermore, the students' awareness in writing developed along with an increase in their self-efficacy.

Kafai & Burke (2014) investigated the potential to introduce basic programming concepts to middle school children within the context of a classroom writing-workshop. Results showed that the writing workshop setting alongside the school's existing language arts standards proved to be not only an effective framework for facilitating middle school children's digital composition within Scratch, but also underscored the wider connection between coding and writing as interrelated processes of composition. Digital storytelling in Scratch—particularly in terms of the workshop's focus on characterization and plot analysis—offers a new medium through which children can exercise the composition skills they learned within traditional literacy classrooms while also offering the mutual benefit of introducing coding at earlier ages.

Lin and Enchelmayer (2014) examined the practice and effect of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course. Eleven (n=11) college ESL students were involved in an eight-week ESL composition course of spring semester. Classroom observations, interviews and artifacts were collected and analyzed for this case study. Findings revealed that the majority of ESL students in this sample made progress in their English writing via the practice of writing workshops in the composition course. Findings also unfolded that writing instruction using a Workshop approach successfully enhanced students' writing competence to meet the requirement of the college for starting or continuing college courses.

Salem (2013) investigated the effects of using a program based on the writing workshop approach on developing basic writing skills of prospective teachers of English in Hurgada faculty of Education. For that purpose, the researcher constructed and validated a teaching program based on the writing workshop approach, checklist of the skills and subskills of basic writing skills, and pre-posttest of basic writing skills. The sample of the study was forty students in Hurgada faculty of Education, English Division (prospective teachers of English). Findings of the study indicated the writing workshop-based program had significant effects on improving the subjects' basic writing skills.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the literature review, it is evident that students are not doing well in writing skills tests and teachers seem not use writing strategies sufficiently and/ or appropriately.

In view of the many challenges facing the secondary school EFL students in learning English in general and writing in particular, the current research investigated the effectiveness of using the workshop based blended program to develop EFL secondary stage students' writing skills.

Questions

This research attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the components of the proposed workshop-based blended program used for improving the secondary stage students' writing skills?
- 2- To what extent does the workshop-based blended program affect the improvement of EFL secondary stage students' writing skills?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

- 1- There is a statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the mean ranks of the control group and the experimental group students on the post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the experimental group
- 2- There is a statistically significant difference at the .05 level between the mean ranks of the experimental group students on the pre-post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the post one

Purpose

This research aimed to:

- (1) Design and implement a workshop-based blended program for improving secondary stage students' writing skills.
- (2) Measure the effectiveness of the program in improving EFL secondary stage students' writing skills.

Design

The research adopted the quasi experimental design. Participants of the research were (47) first year secondary school students, selected from two classes in Belqas secondary school, Dakahlia governorate, in the academic year (2020-2021). The participants were divided into two groups:

The participants were divided into two groups : (23) students serving as control group and (24) students serving as experimental group. The experimental group was trained according to the Blended workshop-Based Blended Program. The control group was trained according to the regular way of teaching writing skills. The two groups received the pre and post applications of the study instruments.

Instruments

To fulfill the purpose of the research, four instruments were designed and used by the researcher:

1. an EFL writing skills test (pre-post) to assess 1st grade secondary stage students' EFL reading skills.
2. a workshop based blended program designed and implemented on 1st year secondary stage students.

Delimitations

This research was delimited to:

1. A sample of secondary stage students at Belkas Secondary School for girls in Dakahlia governorate.
2. The workshop-based blended program.
3. Some writing skills necessary for 1st year secondary stage students.

Results of the research:

Results of the research are reported in terms of its hypotheses.

Testing the First Hypothesis:

The first hypothesis stated that: “There is a statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the mean ranks of the control group and the experimental group students on the post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the experimental group”.

a Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples was used to compare the difference between the mean ranks of the experimental and control group students in the EFL writing skills test after administering the workshop based blended learning program.

Table (1)
Results of the control and Experimental Groups on the post Administration of the EFL Writing Skills Test

Writing Skills	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Sig. (2 Tailed)
Conventions	Control	23	15.57	358.00	82.00	Significant ≤ 0.05
	Experimental	24	32.08	770.00		
Coherence	Control	23	18.76	431.50	155.50	
	Experimental	24	29.02	696.50		
Organization	Control	23	19.78	455.00	179.00	
	Experimental	24	28.04	673.00		
Word Choice	Control	23	18.65	429.00	153.00	
	Experimental	24	29.13	699.00		
Total	Control	23	16.54	380.50	104.500	
	Experimental	24	31.15	747.50		

Mann-Whitney U-values for the target EFL writing sub-skills are (82.00, 155.50, 179.00, 153.00 respectively) and they all are significant. This indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean ranks of the control and experimental groups students on the post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the experimental group.

Comparing the mean ranks of the control and experimental group on the post administration of the EFL writing skills test shows that the experimental group students' mean ranks on the post EFL writing test are (32.08, 29.02, 28.04, 29.13 respectively), while the control group's mean ranks on the post EFL writing skills test are (15.57, 18.76, 19.78, 18.65 respectively). These values indicates the significant improvement of the experimental group students concerning their EFL writing sub-skills over the control group. These differences are due to using the workshop-based blended program to improve the 1st secondary stage students' writing skills. Hence, the third hypothesis is verified and accepted.

Testing the Second Hypothesis:

The second hypothesis stated that:“There is a statistically significant difference at the.05 level between the mean ranks of the experimental group students on the pre-post administration of the EFL writing skills test in favor of the post one”.

To examine this hypothesis, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks for dependent samples was used to compare the differences between the mean rank of the experimental group students in the EFL writing skills test before and after the administration of the workshop based blended learning program.

Table (2)
Results of the control and Experimental Groups on the post Administration of the EFL Writing Skills Test

Writing Skills	Ranks	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig. (2 Tailed)
Conventions	Negative Ranks	0	.00	.00	3.90	Significant at 0.05
	Positive Ranks	19	10	136		
	Ties	5				
	Total	24				
Coherence	Negative Ranks	0	0	4.50	3.56	
	Positive Ranks	16	8.50	166.50		
	Ties	8				
	Total	24				
Organization	Negative Ranks	0	4.5	13	3.63	
	Positive Ranks	24	9.75	107.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	24				
Word Choice	Negative Ranks	0	6.5	0.00	2.83	
	Positive Ranks	22	11.5	253		
	Ties	2				
	Total	24				
Total	Negative Ranks	0	0		4.11	
	Positive Ranks	24	7.5			
	Ties	0				
	Total	24				

Wilcoxon Z-values for the target EFL writing sub-skills are (3.90, 3.56, 3.63, 2.83 respectively), and they all are significant at the level 0.05. Comparing the mean ranks of the experimental group on the pre-post administration of the EFL writing skills test reveals that there are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the pre-post administration of the EFL writing skills test in the total score. These significant differences are in favor of the post-test.

The mean ranks of the experimental group students' post-test implies that the experimental group students' level in the overall EFL writing skills test improved due to the workshop based blended program. It can be deduced that students in the experimental group were more systematic and active in practicing the writing skills through using a variety of educational and technological methods and activities such as (minilessons, guided and independent practice, conference, attached sites, Google documents, zunal webquest, and presentations). These activities helped in creating an innovative and collaborative learning environment. Accordingly, the fourth hypothesis of the present research is proved and verified.

Second, the effect size of the workshop based- blended program on the students' EFL writing skills was measured. Results are illustrated in table (3).

Table (3) Level of Effect Size of the Program on the Students' Writing Skills

Independent Variable	Domains of the Dependent Variable		Z	N	Value of (η^2)	Level of the Effect Size
The Proposed Workshop-Based Blended Program	EFL Writing Skills	Conventions	4.32	24	0.84	High
		Coherence	2.33		0.88	
		Organization	2.14		0.89	
		Word Choice	2.15		0.90	
		Total	2.16		0.90	
			2.73			

Table (3) clarifies the effect size of the proposed program on the writing skills test of the experimental group in the four writing sub-skills of secondary students. It is obvious that all values exceeded 0.50 which ensures a high effect size for all the writing sub-skills (conventions, coherence, word choice, and organization) as the r values for these skills was (0.84, 0.88, 0.89, 0.90 respectively). The outcomes show the high effect of the proposed program on improving the four writing skills as a result of the variety of activities. These activities help students differentiate and maximize their learning and made students enjoy learning and to be eager to write and express their thoughts and opinions. Students can either interact with the teacher or among themselves by discussing certain pieces of writing. Furthermore, they had the responsibility to give feedback and assessment for their peers' compositions as well as receiving feedback from their peers. These results show the form of interactions, participation, and

engagement occurred in the blended writing workshop which attributed to both face-to-face and virtual communities of practice.

Discussion

The results of this research revealed that:

- 1- The workshop-based blended program was effective in improving 1st grade secondary stage students' writing skills. This can be assured by these points:
 - The experimental group students excelled in comparison to their counterparts on the post writing skills test.
 - The experimental group students' performance on the post administration of the writing skills test was much better when comparing students' pre-mean scores to their post-mean scores.
 - Results of the present research show that the experimental group achieved more improvement on the post administration of the EFL writing skills test compared to the pre-test.

These results are in line with results revealed by many studies (e.g. Challob, Abu Baker & Latif , 2016; Keshta & Harb, 2013; and Bataineh, 2015) which revealed the positive effects of blended learning on students' writing skills. Besides, some studies concentrated on the effective impact of using the workshop model on improving writing skills as in Al-Hroub, Shami and Evans (2019), Turner (2015), Lin and Enchelmayer (2014), Salem (2013), and Kafai & Burke (2014).

The researcher has noticed the following points during the treatment:

- By the end of the experiment, the experimental group achieved a high level of EFL writing skills. They enjoyed learning through the minilessons, chatting, conferencing, answering some writing assignments, and sharing their answers, so their motivation towards learning EFL writing skills was increased as well.
- The research showed that students were very interested and extremely motivated to learn, since they generally struggle with focus and motivation to follow through on assignments.
- The teacher was comfortable with teaching a workshop model lesson with technology. Students had multiple opportunities to engage with the ideas in whole-group, small-group, and individual contexts.
- Students can then work in small groups or independently on the key learning activity. This allows the teacher to confer with other students

who require assistance, differentiate instruction, and reduce cognitive overload in struggling learners.

- It takes advantage of the Web-based and digital resources that allow for individualization and immediate and personalized feedback and to support our low-performing readers in the digital age.

Recommendations

Based on the results and conclusions of the current research, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1- It is necessary for EFL teachers to implement the blended programs in their classes.
- 2- Well-equipped computer facilities, language labs and appropriate technical and administrative support should be provided. Teachers' decision to use Workshop-based blended program (WBBP) in the classroom can be influenced by the availability of resources, convenience of tools and their personal experiences.
- 3-Teacher training is important for the successful implementation of (WBBP). Teachers should connect their knowledge and skills for (WBBP) with textbooks they use for their actual teaching, and evolve effective teaching and learning strategies for English language to develop students' motivation.
- 4- The ministry of education should adopt and support the idea of designing Workshop-based blended programs and encourage teachers to apply and use Workshop-based blended programs.
- 5- Ministry of Education should develop training program in order to foster and encourage the use of these types of Workshop-based blended programs and further improve the quality of language practices and exercises in their classes.
- 6- The program could be beneficial to all language teachers who intend to facilitate and improve the processes of assessment, evaluation as well as language practice in general.

Suggestions for further Research

The following ideas may be considered for further researches:

1. Investigating the impact of workshop based program on other school levels and language skills.

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2. Conducting similar studies that investigate the effect of using workshop-based blended program on the language skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) in other educational stages.
 3. Investigating the effectiveness of using workshop-based blended program in improving students' twenty first century skills.

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