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Enhancing EFL Learners' Writing Capability in a Blended Learning Environment: The Effects of Learning Styles

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effectiveness of practicing writing in a blended learning environment. Sixty upper-intermediate EFL learners were selected to participate in this study. They were randomly assigned into four groups including: Extroverted-blended, introverted-blended, Extroverted-traditional and Introverted-traditional. These groups were shaped based on the learners' learning style including Extroversion and Introversion and their participation in a blended learning Environment and traditional language classes. In the blended learning environment, they practiced learning writing skills using different media and technology while in the traditional learning environment, they did that without using these tools. The results showed that the extroverts performed better than the introverts and the learners in the blended learning environment performed better than those in the traditional learning environment.

Keywords: *Writing, Introverts, Extroverts, Blended Learning, Traditional Classroom*

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1. Introduction

Writing is a commanding skill by which individuals find the competence to share ideas and feelings and also encourage others (White & Ardnt, 1991). As stated by Weigle, (2002) "It is a process of generating a text as a communicative bridge between the reader and the writer. It is important to view writing not solely as the product of the individual, but as a cognitive, social and cultural act" (p. 146). Writing has been manifested as "an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience" (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997, p. 8). Hereafter, becoming increasingly aware of this obligation, English language instruction circles are paying added attention to this ability (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 1999) as the competence to write well is not a naturally advanced skill; rather, it is typically learned or culturally interconnected as a set of performs in formal instructional locations or other situations (Brown, 2001).

Shin (2003) considers that if acquaintance of writing in a second or foreign language were merely a problem of knowing how to write things down in the novel encryption, then teaching of writing

could be a reasonably easy task. Certainly, acquaintance of writing even in one's native language is not only a matter of writing things down. Indeed, "competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners" (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006, p. 81). Perhaps the typical of those who have strived to put their views on paper would approve that pronouncing oneself unquestionably in writing can be a lethargic and affectionate process (Hadley, 2003). This may well be mostly true in the setting of ELT as "to a preponderance of EFL learners, nothing is more depressing than doing a writing mission and knowing that it will come under the eyes of the instructor, who will contemplate about it as a foundation of errors to be corrected" (Tuan, 2010, p. 81).

It is with little amazement then that huge creativities and activities are made to improve EFL learners' writing capability through scheming more effective writing progressions. Many such activities are being emerged within the background of task-based language teaching (TBLT) which has been the subject of extensive inquiry in the last two to three decades (e.g.



Ellis, 2003, 2006; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Long & Crookes, 1992; Marashi & Dadari, 2012; Nunan, 2005, 2006; Robinson, 2005; Willis, 1996).

The influential impact of online learning in the field of ESL/EFL writing is underscored by Rybushkina & Krasnova (2015). They stressed that the conventional face-to-face learning environment does not necessarily suit all students since each individual student has different learning abilities and does not necessarily share similar ways of learning with other students. Nevertheless, Internet-based pedagogy and online learning environments have been found to help students as well as teachers to overcome various problems in the learning and teaching of writing skills such as time constraints, inadequate facilities to support writing as well as lack of motivation (Krasnova & Ananjev, 2015; Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2016). As such, by blending the face-to-face and online learning collaboratively in the ESL/EFL writing classrooms, students could be facilitated in overcoming their negative feelings towards writing and consequently, their WA could be reduced or eliminated once and for all.

Additionally, blended learning provides an optimal and exciting environment for teaching and learning the English language that positively affect the process of foreign language acquisition as a whole. In this respect, Krasnova and Ananjev (2015) remark that blended learning has many advantages over the traditional mode of learning a language. To them, blended learning provides flexibility of learning, personalization, and interactivity derived from the online component of blended learning as well as collaborative work, immediate feedback and spontaneity gained from conventional face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, blended learning provides various motivating and flexible learning opportunities and engages students in a learning experience that is both meaningful and interesting to them (Rybushkina & Krasnova, 2015). Blended learning experience also promotes participation and interaction among students and between students and their teacher, decreases their anxiety, encourages independent learning, and most importantly, promotes their writing ability (Liu, 2013)

1.1 Language Learning Strategies

There are many miscellaneous learning styles and many different

explanations of learning styles. Reid (1995) demarcated learning styles as habitual and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. Kinsella (1995) suggested that learning styles might be hereditary. Price, Dunn, and Sanders (1980) and Reid (1987) established that learning styles can alter as learners' age. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) described that the concept of learning styles stands up out of Gestalt psychology, ego psychology, and the theories of Carl Jung. Investigators have found learners' favored ways of engrossing and processing information are divisible into categories: cognitive, affective, environmental, sociological, and sensory. The cognitive learning styles include field dependence and independence, tolerance and intolerance of ambiguity, analytical vs. global, and reflective vs. impulsive. They also include Kolb's categories: converger, diverger, assimilator, and accommodator. Environmental learning styles include sensitivity to light, sound, temperature, food intake, time, and other environmental stimuli. Sociological learning styles include student preferences for working in groups or alone, and their feelings about authority. Affective learning styles comprise the Jungian and Myers-Briggs personality types: introvert, extrovert, sensing, intuitive, thinking, feeling, judging, perceiving, and also brain hemisphericity. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has added to the body of research, which suggests that there are many ways to learn and preferences for doing so (Gardner, 2000).

Different psychologists recognized dissimilar personality traits grounded on different philosophies. With the purpose of better comprehension of individual learners' personality traits, many researchers have employed the Jungian personality traits measured by the Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) (Matthews, Deary & Whiteman, 2003).

As Myers and McCaulley (1985) mention, the MBTI is a means to implement Jung's psychological type theory. Its mechanism focused on measuring individuals on four dimensions comprising of opposite pairs: Extraversion/Introversion (E-I), Sensation/Intuition (S-N), Thinking/Feeling (T-F), and Judgment/Perception (J-P), resulting in 16 possible psychological types (Carducci, 1998). Each type is introduced by a four-letter code. For example, ESTJ would

identify a person with extroversion, sensing, thinking, and judging attributes.

Extraversion (E) and introversion (I) dichotomy deals with the way people prefer to attain energy and focus their attention. Extroverts prefer to get energy from outside sources or outer world, but introverts prefer solitary activities and the inner world of ideas as the source of their energy (Eysenck & Chan, 1982). According to Jensen and Ditiberio (1984), it is the first dimension of Jung's system identified a person's general orientation toward life. Extroverts mainly focus their energy outward and tend to interact with people and things. Outer experience (i.e., talking and acting) is so highly important for them that they often begin performing tasks with little planning, then rely on trial and error to complete the task. Since they spend more time dealing with outer experience rather than inner experience (i.e., reflecting and observing), they think most clearly and develop more ideas in action or in conversation. Moreover, they state that introverts mostly focus their energy inward; they tend to consider and contemplate. More cautious about the outer world; they anticipate and reflect before becoming involved in action to avoid errors. When they are alone and uninterrupted by people and incidents, they think best and develop more ideas.

2. Review of Literature

In 1984, Reid published the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire. She then conducted a seminal study in the field of ELL perceptual-learning-style preferences (Reid, 1987); replications have verified her findings (Park, 2000, 2002; Rossi-Le, 1995; Stebbins, 1995). Reid (1987) sent her questionnaire to 43 university-affiliated, intensive ESL programs across the United States. Subjects included native speakers of Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, Malay, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Indonesian, and English (for comparison). Reid's results showed that most ELLs she studied preferred kinesthetic and tactile learning styles. Japanese students showed no strong preferences. Further, students who had lived in the United States longer, and who had higher TOEFL scores, had learning styles that paralleled the learning styles of native speakers of English. Reid also found that speakers of Arabic and Chinese were highly visual and auditory, with Korean students being the most visual. Native speakers of English were the least visual. Other college-level ESL learning-styles research resulted

in essentially the same findings. Stebbins (1995) found ESL students much more kinesthetic than native English speakers, with Spanish speakers being the most kinesthetic, Koreans overwhelmingly visual, Arabic and Korean students strongly auditory, and Japanese students reporting no strong learning-style preferences. Oxford (1995a), who studied gender differences in the learning style preferences of ESL students, found females more auditory than males, and older students more visual than younger students. Rossi-Le (1995), in studies of the perceptual learning styles of community college ELLs, found most ESL students to be kinesthetic and tactile, Spanish speakers more auditory than others, Vietnamese more visual, and older and English-proficient students more visual.

Two studies by Park concentrated on the relationship among learning styles, nationality and academic achievement. In one, Park examined the learning styles of Asian-American high school students, and compared them to European-American high school students; Park (1997a) concluded that Chinese, Korean, and Filipino students were more visual than European-American students. In a separate study of Armenian-American, Mexican, Korean and European-American high school students, Park (1997b) found that Korean students were the most visual, and European-Americans the least visual. Researching Southeast Asian high school ESL students, Park (2000) found Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese students all had major preferences for kinesthetic, tactile, and auditory learning, but only Hmongs had a major preference for visual learning. Hmongs also had an unusually high preference for tactile learning, while European-Americans showed a negative preference for visual learning. Hmong learning preferences may be due to their not having acquired a written language until the middle of the 20th century. Park (2002) researched Armenian, Hmong, Korean, Vietnamese, and Mexican high school ESL students. Park found all groups except Koreans had major preferences for kinesthetic and tactile learning, while Hmongs and Mexicans shared a major preference for auditory learning. Hmongs also had an additional major preference for visual learning. Other studies of high school ESL students reported similar results (Kroonenberg, 1995; Suh & Price, 1993). The studies in this literature review provide ample evidence that learners may exhibit



learning styles that differ by nationality, gender, cultural group, and English-proficiency level. This paper investigates only the perceptual learning styles of northwest Arkansas adult learners whose native language is not English, and who are engaged in formal educational activities to learn English.

Several studies have examined students' perception of blended learning when writing in English. For example, Miyazoe and Anderson (2010b, 2012), Larsen (2012), So and Lee (2013), and Ho and Savignon, (2013) had used mixed methodology procedure to explore ESL/EFL students' perception towards the effectiveness of using the blended learning approach in improving their writing skill at various academic levels. These studies concluded that students mostly have positive perception towards the usefulness of blended learning in improving their writing. In another study, Liu (2013) had used mixed method approach to describe and evaluate the blended learning environment in one English Writing Course in terms of the course design, material development, student involvement, teacher reflection, and student evaluation. Results of this study showed that blended learning had helped increase social interaction among the students, aided them to be more motivated and autonomous learners, decreased their communication anxiety and enhanced their academic writing ability in English. In a more recent study, Tananuraksakul (2014) had qualitatively explored the undergraduate students' experiences in using Facebook group as blended learning activity in a writing class. Findings revealed that Facebook has proven to be useful as a blended learning tool for the students to learn. With regard to studies on students' perception of collaborative writing, Nakatsukasa (2009) for instance had employed various methods to investigate students' perception of collaborative blogging in ESL writing context. The study focused on students' improvement in writing fluency, the number of words and the use of academic words in their writing. Although results indicated that students had mixed attitudes and preferences for group blogging, results also showed that collaborative writing could play a vital role in improving students' writing fluency especially in terms of the quality and quantity of academic words used in their written texts. In yet another related study, Srijongjai

(2013) explored students' perception towards collaborative feedback activities when they were conducted in a blended learning setting. Findings indicated that students have positive perception towards collaborative feedback activities used in face-to-face and online environments.

3. Methodology

Sixty female intermediate EFL students studying English at the University of Velayat located in Iranshahr (Iran) contributed to this study. These students were nominated based on their scores on a sample Preliminary English Test (PET) directed to a greater model of 90 learners (the sample PET had been piloted among 30 other female intermediate EFL learners). Next, these 60 applicants were randomly put into two experimental groups preceding to the treatment phase; unsurprisingly, there were 30 learners in each group while each group comprised of two lessons of 15 students. Henceforth, a total of four curricula were established. The participants' age range was between 18 and 26.

Additionally, two instructors (the researcher and a colleague of his who taught the same level of classes at the same university) contributed as raters of the writing section of the PET in this study. The two raters enjoyed a significant inter-rater reliability of 0.83.

3.1 Instruments and Materials

3.1.1 IELTS Independent Writing Test Module

The IELTS Writing Test is designed to assess a wide range of writing skills, including how well you

- write a response appropriately
- organize ideas
- use a range of vocabulary and grammar accurately

Two tasks provided for the learners. In this study, we only focused on the task two. In task two, you should spend about 40 minutes

- write in a formal style
- write at least 250 words

The researcher used this test as the pretest and posttest. The writing tasks were rated by two writers based on the IELTS writing rubric. The tests were scored from 40. Each learner received two scores for each test and the final score was an average score.

3.1.2 Oxford Quick Placement Test

In order to be assured of the homogeneity of all the participants in terms of English language proficiency, Oxford

Quick Placement Test (OQPT) which is a time-saving and reliable English language proficiency test developed by Cambridge ESOL and Oxford University Press (2004) validated in 20 countries by more than 6000 students was administered. Considering practicality, it is quick and easy to administer. There are two versions of OQPT: a paper and pen (P&P) version and a computer-based (CB) version which is an adaptive multiple-choice test marked by computer. In the present study P and P version consisting of two parts was used. So, the first part, consisting of 40 questions, is taken by candidates who are at intermediate level. The participants of the present study took only the first part due to their proficiency level. According to the guidelines of the test, the students who got a score between 24 and 30 are intermediate, and therefore, they could participate in this research. As can be seen in Table 3.3, the participants were selected based on the ranking of the test (See Appendix A).The test ranking is as follows:

3.1.3 Writing Posttest

After the treatment process, another sample IELTS writing paper was administered to both groups as one of the posttests.

3.2 Procedure

The participants were divided into four experimental groups. In the first group, extrovert learners practiced writing in a traditional classroom. In the second group, introvert learners practiced writing in a traditional classroom. In the third group, the extrovert learner practiced writing in a blended learning classroom. In the fourth group, the introvert learners practiced writing in a blended learning environment. Each group contained 15 leaders. Before being put to the groups, the learners took Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) questionnaire to assign them as extroverts or introverts. The blended learning class included a smartboard, personal tablets and Email. The learners participated in 10 sessions of one hour. Before beginning the treatment, they took a writing pretest and after the end of the study they took a writing posttest from the PET.

4. Data Analysis

In order to analyze data, the researcher used One Way ANOVA test. The analysis was conducted with SPSS software version 21.

5. Results

In this part, the results are provided. The following tables provide the results for the pretest.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the pretest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
intro-tradi	15	12.8667	1.84649	.47676	10.00	16.00
extra-tradition	15	13.4000	1.54919	.40000	10.00	16.00
intro-blend	15	12.7333	1.57963	.40786	10.00	15.00
extro-blend	15	13.1333	1.45733	.37628	10.00	15.00
Total	60	13.0333	1.59413	.20580	10.00	16.00

The above table provided the descriptive results for the pretest. The results for the Anova in the pretest is provided below:

Table 2: Anova test [Pretest]

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.933	3	1.311	.503	.682
Within Groups	146.000	56	2.607		
Total	149.933	59			

As it is clear from the above table, the difference between the groups is not statistically significant in the pretest.

In the following tables, you can see the results for the posttest.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the posttest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
intro-tradi	15	14.8667	1.64172	.42389	12.00	18.00
extra-tradition	15	16.1333	.74322	.19190	15.00	17.00
intro-blend	15	17.3333	.97590	.25198	16.00	19.00
extro-blend	15	18.0667	.70373	.18170	17.00	19.00
Total	60	16.6000	1.61770	.20884	12.00	19.00

The above table provided descriptive results for the posttest. As can be seen, the groups mean improved in the posttest. To check the difference statistically, the researcher used one way Anova. The results are provided below:

Table 4: ANOVA for Posttest [Posttest]

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	88.667	3	29.556	25.179	.000
Within Groups	65.733	56	1.174		
Total	154.400	59			

From the Anova table, it can be seen that the difference between the groups in the posttest is statistically significant. To check for the difference between the groups, the researcher used a post hoc test.

Table 5: Post hoc test [Multiple Comparisons-Dependent Variable: posttest Scheffe]

(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
intro-tradi	extra-tradition	-1.26667*	.39561	.023	-2.4070	-.1264
	intro-blend	-2.46667*	.39561	.000	-3.6070	-1.3264
	extro-blend	-3.20000*	.39561	.000	-4.3403	-2.0597
extra-tradition	intro-tradi	1.26667*	.39561	.023	.1264	2.4070
	intro-blend	-1.20000*	.39561	.035	-2.3403	-.0597
	extro-blend	-1.93333*	.39561	.000	-3.0736	-.7930
intro-blend	intro-tradi	2.46667*	.39561	.000	1.3264	3.6070
	extra-tradition	1.20000*	.39561	.035	.0597	2.3403
	extro-blend	-.73333	.39561	.339	-1.8736	.4070
extro-blend	intro-tradi	3.20000*	.39561	.000	2.0597	4.3403
	extra-tradition	1.93333*	.39561	.000	.7930	3.0736
	intro-blend	.73333	.39561	.339	-4.070	1.8736

As it is clear from the above table, the difference between traditional classroom groups and blended learning environment is statistically significant.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of practicing writing skills in traditional



learning classroom and blended learning environment among introvert learners and extrovert learners. The results showed two things. First, extroverts performed better than introverts in both groups. Second, learners in the blended learning environment performed better than the learners in the traditional learning environment on their writing abilities.

The findings of this study also indicate that the learners' performance in experimental groups increased following the treatment. Indeed, both traditional and blended classes provide learners with a wide range of advantages: for example, a comfortable learning environment that allows more introverted students to overcome stress or fear and speak or have discussions with others. Furthermore, the learners in both groups were motivated to do the tasks that were real and meaningful for them while being provided the opportunity to actively participate in completing the tasks. Naturally, such pretexts common to both teaching modalities generated a higher degree of motivation among the learners in the two groups.

These results were opposite to the results of some studies. The results of this study opposite the findings of a study conducted by Carrell, Prince, and Astika, (1996) in which they found that introverts obtained better scores than extroverts in writing course during both the first and second semesters. Likewise, these results were opposite Jahanbazi's (2007) investigation in Iran in which he found out that introverts were more successful than their extrovert counterparts in the overall writing quality. Findings also rejected Callahan's (2000) claim that writing for extroverted learners seems to lag behind speaking, whereas, introverts are better at expressing themselves through writing rather than speaking. In a similar vein, findings of this study rejected the results of another study conducted by Layeghi (2011) on the relationship between learners' extroversion/introversion personality types and their performance in the argumentative writing with regard to the content and form; he found that introverts significantly outperformed extroverts in both form and content.

Jensen and Dittberio (1984) found the extroverts' writing with little planning, not writing from outlines; their writing process is quick, that is, they write down immediately whatever comes in their mind

without so much contemplation. They further state that the difficulties that many extroverts have with writing is because of the isolation and the lack of oral feedback in writing process; writing seems too isolated a process for them which causes them become blocked. Extroverts' progress in generating ideas depends too much on talking about the topic, interviewing, or presenting reports. They understand the oral presentation better than the written version. Thus, they can revise their writing better through their advisers' talk and oral feedback.

Recently a lot of studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of implementing blended learning on students' performance but few studies have ventured into how students' writing skill improves. Many researchers found that designing a blended course improves students' scores and that the students showed positive attitude towards the implementation of such a blend, (Boyle, 2003; Dowling, 2003; Dziuban, 2004). O'Toole and Absalom (2003) contended that uploading material online positively affects the achievement level of the students. They found that the students who read the online material in addition to the in-class lecture had better performance in a quiz than those who only depended on the inclass traditional lecture. Researchers as Singh (2003) found that the students' participating in a blended course performed 10% better than those enrolled in a section taught in the traditional approach.

Even so, as argued in Wold (2011), an effective instructional design model appropriate for online foreign language writing courses have not been found and designers of such a model should teach writing needs and should teach using a blended learning format instead of solely using an online learning format. It should be the same with traditional foreign language writing courses, because blended learning have been found to offer a process-oriented environment for collaboration, communication, confidence building, and better attitudes towards writing that does not exist when working exclusively online (ChihHua, 2008; Clark & Olson, 2010; Colakoglu & Akdemir, 2010).

In addition, several line of research can be suggested. First, second language researchers are encouraged to use blended learning to examine the effects of corrective feedback. Previous research on using email and the Review' section of MS Office to provide input for second language writers

(Ghahari & Ameri-Golestan, 2013) and to give corrective feedback on IELTS Writing Task 1 (Ameri-Golestan, 2012) has shown that the application of technology, such as the internet and certain software does result in better performance in students' writing. Another line of research that can be supported by blended learning is raising language learners' consciousness with regard to the rhetorical structure of different types of writing, such as descriptive, expository, and argumentative, among others. Finally, the impact of uptake can be scrutinized using blended learning. Language learners can receive the materials, instruction, and feedback in the classroom, but they can receive extra materials related to the type of correction they received in the class through the internet and send their corrected writing as uptake to the teacher.

To introduce blended learning environment to English teachers, teacher training centers and institutions obviously play a considerable role in familiarizing teachers with such classes. This training could be done both for teachers who are being trained to become teachers or those already engaged in the practice of pedagogy in the form of in-service courses.

Syllabus designers and materials developers have to provide the content of teaching materials with comprehensible and proper tasks and exercises necessary for blended learning environment. They should thus consider tasks as the building blocks for classroom teaching and for designing instructional activities. Furthermore, syllabus designers and material developers can produce textbooks which highlight blended writing tasks; naturally, such materials must be accompanied by teachers' guidebooks thereby assisting teachers in their application. Such an approach would, in turn, endow teachers with a more open hand in selecting some tasks according to their learners' interests. All this, of course, requires a universal emphasis on learners' creativity in performing the convergent tasks presented in the materials.

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Appendix 1 : IELTS Independent Writing Test Module

1. You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.
Write about the following topic:
Nowadays food has become easier to prepare.
Has this change improved the way people live?
Give reasons for your answer using your own ideas and experience.
[Write at least 250 words]

Appendix B. Oxford Quick Placement Test

Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
Name: Date:
Quick Placement Test [Version 1]
This test is divided into two parts: Part One (Questions 1 – 40) Part Two (Questions 41 – 60)
Do not start this part unless told to do so by your test supervisor. Time: 30 minutes
Questions 1 – 5

Part 1
Where can you see these notices?

For questions 1 to 5, mark one letter A, B or C on your Answer Sheet.

1. Please leave your room key at Reception	A. in a shop B. in a hotel C. in a taxi
2. Foreign money changed here	A. in a library B. in a bank C. in a police station
3. AFTERNOON SHOW BEGINS AT 2PM	A. outside a theatre B. outside a supermarket C. outside a restaurant
4. CLOSED FOR HOLIDAYS Lessons start again on the 8th January	A. at a travel agent's B. at a music school C. at a restaurant
5. Price per night: £10 a tent £5 a person	A. at a cinema B. in a hotel C. on a camp-site

All the detailed appendices can be requested through email to e.zainadiny@gmail.com