

Collaborative Blended Learning Writing Environment: Effects on EFL Students' Writing Apprehension and Writing Performance

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of collaborative blended learning writing environment on students' writing apprehension and writing performance as perceived by a selected group of 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. To learn how to write collaboratively, the students followed the procedures of the blended learning writing process. Students were divided into three groups and were given the freedom to choose the members of the group they would like to work with. They went through the writing process in face-to-face and online learning modes via the class blog and online Viber discussion. Data collected were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. The findings indicated 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 as they experienced and learnt much knowledge concerning the micro and macro aspects of writing. Students also viewed that their online discussion and collaboration on writing in Viber groups and the class blog had assisted them greatly in their writing task.

Keywords: collaborative blended learning writing environment, writing apprehension, writing performance, EFL, perception

1. Introduction

Writing is considered an important language skill and an essential productive activity specifically for second and foreign English (ESL/EFL) language learners (Hussin et al., 2015). In order to be competent writers, ESL/EFL learners not only need intellectual strategies but also certain linguistic and vocabulary knowledge as well as appropriate writing conventions that would help them express themselves effectively (Erkan & Sabah, 2011). It is also a common knowledge that ESL/EFL writing has always been viewed as a complex process. Hence, novice and unskilled writers especially in the early stages of learning require motivational, social, cognitive and cultural input before producing the final written product (Dujsik, 2008; Jun, 2008; Erkan & Sabah, 2011; Raoofi et al, 2014).

Due to the complexity of writing and its various requirements, both novice and advanced EFL/ESL learners usually have negative perceptions towards writing which is generally known as writing apprehension (henceforth, WA) or writing anxiety. Consequently, WA will lead to poor writing performance (henceforth, WP). Shedding some lights on this issue, Hussin et al. (2015:168) have stated that "the phenomenon of the writing anxiety hides the awareness of the fact that it negatively affects the WP". They also suggested that factors contributing to ESL/EFL writing apprehension might be tackled via the use of online learning environments and that the ESL/EFL learners in such learning environments might gain benefits in two ways. Firstly, they could get writing assistance during the revision and editing stages in the form of feedback and comments from their peers and teachers. Secondly, they would be able to gather information from the Internet and share knowledge and writing experience through the online discussion. Subsequently, students would be able to reduce their WA in these learning environments.

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.

Researches on the use of blended learning and collaborative writing to reduce WA and enhance WP have been robust and extensive over the past few decades. Some researchers have investigated the role of blended learning in ESL/EFL writing skill in terms of its effectiveness (Adas & Bakir, 2013; Keshta & Harb, 2013; Shafiee et al., 2013; Arslan, 2014; Abdulmajid, 2014). Other researchers had also examined the effectiveness of using collaborative learning in improving writing (Al-Ahmad, 2003; Taki & Fardafshari, 2012; Jafari & Ansari, 2012; Grami, 2012; Shukor & Noordin, 2014). Results of these studies revealed that blended learning and collaborative learning have been effective in improving students' WP.

Several studies have examined students' perception of blended learning when writing in English. For example, Miyazoe and Anderson (2010, 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.

It is clear that the majority of the above-mentioned studies have examined either collaborative writing or blended learning in separation in order to investigate the ESL/EFL students' writing abilities and performance at various levels of learning in various institutions. Most of the studies cited also focused on probing students' perception towards the blended learning or collaborative writing as separate entity. Thus, the aim of the current study is to qualitatively investigate students' experience and their perception on the effectiveness of the use of collaborative blended learning writing environment (henceforth, CBLWE) in overcoming their WA and improving their WP. The present study is conducted to fill this gap especially in the area of EFL writing by addressing the following research questions:

- 1) What are the perspectives of Class Ten EFL students towards the CBLWE?
- 2) How do these students perceive the use of the CBLWE in their WA and WP?
- 3) What factors of the CBLWE positively affected students' WA and WP?

2. Significance of the Study

The present study is significant since it investigated the use of CBLWE in teaching and learning of EFL writing skill with special emphasis on students' WA and WP since there are very few purely qualitative studies that examined the use of collaborative blended learning approach in the EFL writing setting.

The findings of this study could contribute to the body of knowledge in EFL writing pedagogy since it sheds

light on how the EFL students perceive the usefulness of the CBLWE in their writing task. Furthermore, the findings could aid English language teachers, textbooks designers and other educational authorities to provide insights concerning CBLWE effectiveness as well as the roles of students and teachers in the language classrooms. The results could also provide guidance on how and when to utilize the face-to-face and online learning activities to decrease the EFL students' WA and enhance their WP simultaneously.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Blended Learning

The student-centered learning approaches are a modern leading trend in the contemporary realm of education. They gain their popularity due to their emphasis on the flexibility of learning by taking into account learners' individual differences in learning, their learning styles, learning habits and learning pace. The student-centered learning approaches also believe in providing students with self-paced online learning opportunities along with traditional face-to-face classroom in enhancing students' learning performance in the English language. This integration of online and face-to-face classroom learning opportunities is known as blended learning which proposes innovative ideas and educational practices and alters the roles to be played by the teacher as well as students (Krasnova & Ananjev, 2015). Blended learning is defined as a method of language instruction that blends and integrates the most effective features of both face-to-face teaching activities and online collaborative learning activities. This form of integration constitutes a single whole and works in constant relationship for the purpose of improving the quality of English language teaching and learning. As such, blended learning helps fortify the learning content, enhance the language learning processes such as the English language and achieve optimal learning outcomes. However, this blend is not done merely by mixing the online and face-to-face traditional learning activities and materials in language learning contexts. Rather, these learning resources and activities are methodically integrated into a systematic and organized way to realize the academic goals and learning outcomes as well as meeting students' needs, individual peculiarities and learning desires (So & Lee, 2013).

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).

3.2 Collaborative Writing

Pedagogically, the teaching of writing skills in English has gone through advanced changes in the last thirty years. As a result of this change, a movement in writing instruction has appeared which emphasizes on the process of writing that leads to the final product rather than focusing on the product of writing. This requires students have to go through a writing process which involves cyclical writing stages so as to arrive at the final product. These writing stages are pre-writing, drafting, and rewriting through the revision and editing stages. Clearly, by involving students in a collaborative, revision group work in each stage of the writing process, along with sharing feedback from the teacher and peers, the students could express their ideas and meaning closer to the targeted intention (Kim, 2010).

Collaborative writing can be defined as a process of social negotiating among several writers for the purpose of constructing meaning, knowledge and content of the text to be written (Ansarimoghaddam & Bee, 2013). As such, the writers collaboratively contribute to all aspects of the written text: content, structure, organization, and language (Storch, 2005). The interest in collaborative writing was triggered by the work of the pioneer, Kenneth Bruffee in early 1970s. Bruffee believes that students working collaboratively in groups are able to produce better-written composition than those students who are writing individually (Jafari & Ansari, 2012).

In developing writing skills collaboratively, students will benefit from the interaction during the various writing stages. For example, in brainstorming of ideas as a pre-writing activity, students will be motivated to write if it is done in a group. Group planning, for example, engages students in working collaboratively to organize content

and discuss the pros and cons while making a decision. In addition, collaborative writing endorses group ownership of the written text, increases students' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and encourages collective learning. Moreover, writing collaboratively helps students to have multiple perspectives on the topic of writing and simultaneously shares ideas and knowledge easily. Consequently, this will develop their self-confidence and decreases the anxiety level associated with the challenges of the writing task itself especially when completing the task alone (Ansarimoghaddam & Bee, 2013). Writing collaboratively can help develop students' writing ability since the process of peer writing and reviewing contributes towards improvement in organization and syntactical elements of the written text. The most important merit of collaborative writing is that it produces independent writers since they have acquired the important skills of self-editing and revision of their own written work (Rollinson, 2005). In short, it can be safely concluded that through collaborative writing, students can learn various language and writing skills more effectively than by working individually (Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011).

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that with the current technological advancements and the use of computer and Internet in the language classrooms, students have more opportunities to practice online collaborative writing activities and their collaboration is not only restricted to the classroom setting. They can share information and construct and exchange knowledge and meaning with each other in all stages of the writing process. An example of these activities is that learners can gain knowledge and feedback from the teacher and peers via online interactive programmes irrespective of time or place. Online peer review allows room for flexibility for students and this can reduce their writing anxiety and emotional pressure when sharing feedback verbally which they normally experienced in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Online peer review is also more effective as opposed to face-to-face peer review whereby it allows careful monitoring of conversation and less pressure in providing responses and as such it can establish a sense of teamwork and partnership (Kim, 2010).

4. Methods of Data Collection

4.1 Research Design

A qualitative case study method was employed for the present study. Specifically, a descriptive single-case holistic research design was adopted. It is descriptive because the researchers were keen in giving a detailed and comprehensive description to the phenomenon under study in its actual setting. It is a single-case holistic research design because the researchers had focused on one case (single-case) and had analyzed it as a whole entity as one unit of analysis (holistic) (Yin, 2010). As for the use of case study, Creswell (2014) states that case studies are studies where a researcher attempts to provide an in-depth analysis of the studied case such as an event or a process which is constrained with respect to time, place and activity. The researcher would collect in-depth information about the case by using various data collection instruments over a sustained period of time (Creswell, 2014). Case studies as they are described by Cohen et al. (2007) portray 'what is like to be' in a specific situation in its real life context. The main aim is to get in-depth and vivid information about the participants' experiences, feelings and thoughts and their perception of that situation. As such, researchers are focused on describing a particular event relevant to the case under study as well as describing all the actors or group of actors who participated in the event as well as their perceptions of the event.

4.2 Participants

The participants of the current study were 12 secondary level EFL male students enrolled in Grade 10 in one of the International schools in Malaysia. They were in their second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. There were no female participants in the study since female classes are isolated from male ones due to the Islamic nature of the school. The students were purposively selected out of 18 students representing the total number of students in the class. The rationale behind this sampling procedure is to select information-rich case as emphasized by Cohen et al. (2007) that purposive sampling is helpful in obtaining in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it. Its purpose is getting saturation data rather than representing the population or generalizing the collected data to the whole population. The students were selected according to a predetermined criteria assigned by the present researchers depending on the variables of the study. These criteria were; students' level of WA, their writing ability, computer and Internet efficiency and the status of English language in their home countries.

4.3 Data Collection

The current study had employed several data collection instruments to collect detailed information about the phenomenon under study and to triangulate, validate and cross-check the data obtained from the various research instruments. As such, the researchers had utilized a focus group semi-structured interview, learning diaries and

observation to gather the required data for answering the research questions. With respect to data collection tools, Creswell (2014) reiterates that qualitative researchers usually use multiple sources for data collection purposes such as interviews, observations, diaries and other qualitative data collection tools rather than depending on a single data source. In line with this, a post-study focus group semi-structured interview was conducted involving the participants of the study after dividing them into three groups with equal number of students. For the writing task, all participants were asked to continuously record their feelings, experiences and perceptions and the problems that they encountered throughout the CBLWE activities immediately after completing each online and face-to-face writing task. A total of 33 copies of learning diaries were collected from the students at the end of the three writing tasks assigned throughout the semester during which the study was conducted. The researchers also compiled observation notes throughout the semester documenting the important events and activities in both online and face-to-face modes that also serve as data for the study.

4.4 Procedures

Selected students who participated in the CBLWE followed the main stages and sub-stages of the process approach to writing based on the Hayes and Flower (1981) model; pre-writing, drafting and post writing stages (see Figure 1). After dividing them into three groups, they were assigned to do three writing tasks during the 13 weeks of their second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. During this period of time, the researchers provided guidance to students on how to write a descriptive essay by guiding them to a group of writing activities and online discussion in each stage of the writing process. For example in the pre-writing stage, the students did the online brainstorming discussion via Viber program installed on their hand phones or desktops. The aim of this discussion is to brainstorm ideas, discuss the ideas, make decisions and filter them, cluster, map and outline these ideas to be drafted in the next writing stage. Students then joined their normal class to discuss the ideas outlined and wrote the first draft of their essay. After that, the first draft was posted on the class blog created for this purpose to be open for the students in the three groups to do online peer review activity following the guidelines of peer review guide adopted from Moloudi (2011). Summary of their discussion was also posted on the class blog, printed out and brought to the next meeting in their normal classroom to be discussed after which the students wrote the second draft of their essay. One of the three researchers and the teacher also reviewed their essay to be written as a final form. Then, the final form of the essay was published on the class blog and on the class notice board as a motivation for them to see their final form of essay published for others to view. These writing stages and activities were repeated for all the three writing tasks and in the same order as they are portrayed in Figure 1 below. In the last two weeks of the study, the researchers collected the students' learning diaries and interviewed them in three small groups to elicit information concerning their perceptions about their learning experience.

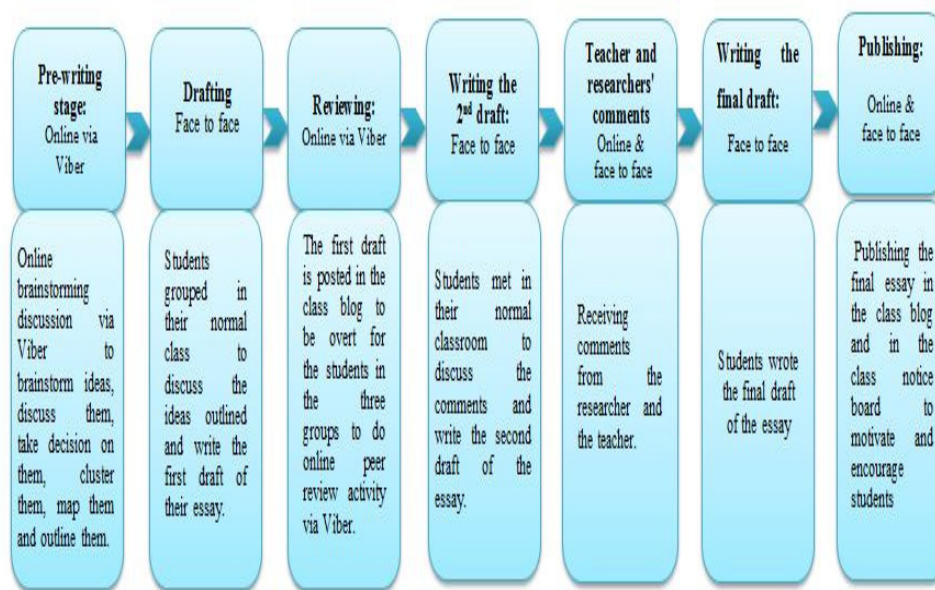


Figure 1. Procedures of the study

5. Results and Discussion

The aim of the current paper is three-fold: to identify the general perspective of Class Ten EFL students in one of the international schools in Malaysia towards the CBLWE; to identify the way the students perceive the usefulness of the CBLWE in their WA and WP and to investigate the factors that positively affected the students' WA and WP in the CBLWE. To this end, the data collected from the interview transcripts, students' learning diaries and observation were analyzed, coded and categorized into several themes. Accordingly, several themes emerged from the students' perceptions towards the CBLWE and its usefulness in various aspects of students' WA and their WP. It is worth noting here that the data included in the analysis were collected from 11 participants only out of 12 participants (the actual sample of the study) since one of the participants was on medical leave at the time of the interview and had postponed his study. As a result, the whole data collected from the missing student was excluded from the final analysis. The themes emerged from this analysis are discussed below:

5.1 Students' General Perspective of the CBLWE

Analysis of the students' responses to the interview questions and their responses in the learning diaries revealed that most of the students (10 participants) claimed that they have positive perception and feelings towards the CBLWE. They justified their claim by stating that this new method of learning EFL writing has a vital impact on their WA and their WP. Those students are (S01, S02, S03, S04, S05, S06, S07, S08, S10, and S12). Examples of their perception from the interview scripts are shown below:

S04: I like it now because in this semester I learnt a lot and it became easier for me to write.

S12: Yes I like it now because It is more advanced.

Similarly, students reflected their positive perception towards the CBLWE in their learning diaries. The following extracts from the students' learning diaries revealed that:

S02: I was really happy in learning writing in this way. It was really helpful for improving my feeling toward writing and improving my writing.

S03: It was so wonderful to me. I benefited from both online and in class learning experiences together. It was effective in improving my writing performance and decreasing my writing anxiety.

This result can be attributed to the valuable benefits relevant to the EFL writing skill students gained from their participation in the CBLWE. Students gained linguistic and topical knowledge that helped them to write their essays easily, comfortably and in a shorter time. Moreover, the way of learning and practicing writing in the CBLWE environment had impressed the students since it provided them with learning opportunities that helped them practice EFL writing any time. As such, it extended the limited time of the class with other online learning opportunities outside the class time. In relation to these findings, Krasnova and Ananjev (2015) state that blended learning provides new learning opportunities that magnify the traditional forms of teaching and consequently improves the process of language learning and acquisition as a whole. The use of technology in the blended learning environment also encourages personalized learning (Basal, 2015). This type of learning gives the students the space and opportunity to progress in their learning at various speed rates according to their learning needs and styles (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012).

This result corresponds with the results reported in several past studies such as Miyazoe and Anderson (2010), Larsen (2012), Adas and Bakir (2013), Liu (2013), So & Lee (2013), Abdulmajid (2014) and Tananuraksakul (2014). Results of all of these studies showed that the blended learning approach and collaborative learning are perceived as effective and trendy approaches in learning writing skills in English. Subsequently, it helps improve the EFL students' writing ability and performance.

Results of the present study also revealed that only one student preferred the traditional way of learning the writing skill. This student justified his preference by saying that the previous way of learning writing was simpler than the current one and did not require complicated processes and techniques. During the interview session, he stated that:

S09: I like it before because it was more simple. In this way we are more organized but before it would be more organized as it is now but I will still be able to put all my ideas.

This student preferred the traditional face-to-face method of learning EFL writing because as he claimed, the current method was so complicated. This new learning method indeed requires the students to be more organized and collaborative in order to progress in their learning of EFL writing. However, observation of this student during the data collection stage indicates that his writing performance was poor. He has little information about

writing skills and linguistic knowledge and more dependent on his peers and the teacher. This may be the reason for his dislike of the CBLWE though it was proven advantageous for other students in the same class.

5.2 The Effects of CBLWE on Students' WA and WP

Results of the study revealed that the CBLWE approach has an important effect on mitigating students' WA and improving their WP. All students reported in their interview that they felt comfortable and enjoyed learning and practicing writing in the last semester. The same result was revealed in their diaries as they expressed positive feelings such as relaxation and appreciation to this learning environment. This method had helped them to overcome their WA.

In addition, results indicated that all students confirmed that the CBLWE was effective in improving their writing ability and performance. The above-mentioned results can be attributed to two reasons. Firstly, it is the role of collaborative writing activities that had helped students learn multiple writing skills and language knowledge more effectively than in working individually (Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011). Secondly, the use of blended learning method had enhanced the EFL students' interaction and encouraged them to be highly motivated and become more autonomous and independent learners. Consequently, the high motivation and autonomy had led to better writing performance (Liu, 2013).

This result supports the results revealed in several past studies such as Al-Ahmad (2003), Hussin et al. (2015) and Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum (2016). The past researchers had concluded that the use of online learning elements in the writing class created non-threatening interaction opportunities among the students that encourage them to collaborate and exchange ideas in a less intimidating learning environment. Consequently, these online collaborative learning activities had enhanced their attitudes towards writing and decreased their WA. However, none of these studies had included the students' perception of the CBLWE in tackling students' English WA as done in the current study. To explain further, the said studies either investigated the use of collaborative learning (Al-Ahmed, 2003) or some online elements (Hussin et al., 2015 and Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2016) and their effects on some aspects of writing or implicitly referred to the idea of WA.

5.3 Factors Affecting Students' WA and WP

Analysis of results also revealed several factors in this learning environment that contributed to decreasing students' WA and improving their WP. These factors are as described below:

5.3.1 Collaborative and Group Work and Communication Opportunities

Analysis of the interview data has revealed that the collaborative nature of work provided by the CBLWE method, the group work as well as the communicative opportunities provided in this environment have a vital role in decreasing the students' WA and improving their WP. For example, S03 mentioned that:

"I feel comfortable in working in groups and collaborate to brainstorm ideas and plan for writing and organizing them. It really reduces my negative attitude towards writing and motivates me to write essays".

Stressing the same point, S06 also stated that:

"now we are communicating with each other, learning in one group, and building an essay and forming ideas....That is better."

It can be inferred from the extracts from the students' interviews that the students felt safe and tend to encourage each other when they were working collaboratively as a team in EFL writing. For that reason, students were more motivated to learn and practice writing together, share writing experiences and build knowledge together relevant to the various components of the essay. This collaborative group work had enriched their knowledge and motivated them to write and as a result, it helped them reduce their WA.

In addition, students were observed comfortable and not stressed while doing the collaborative blended learning writing activities. In addition, their discussion in online and in face-to-face modes was also done without any problems and conflicts especially in the last two writing tasks.

Group work and collaboration were also revealed as positive factors to students in learning writing in the CBLWE since they affected their WP. Supporting the results of the study, S01 for example mentioned during interview that:

"I like to work in groups and that improve my writing"

Similarly, S05 mentioned that:

"when I do any writing I feel I am not alone, I have my friends beside me and we do it as a group."

In their learning diaries, students also mentioned that collaborative writing had helped them feel close to each other and build a strong relationship with each other and with their teacher. In this respect, S06 stated that:

“It exposed us to enjoyable learning activities in writing and built a strong relationship among us and between us and the teacher”

In the same perspective, S10 added that:

“It was a great chance for me to learn writing in this way, we learnt so much from this way. We learnt also from collaboration and negotiation so much about writing”.

Furthermore, students were noted working in groups and discussing together some writing problems in completing the various stages of the writing tasks. Their group work and discussion were noted in both modes; online and face-to-face in-class setting.

Collaborative group work was found to be crucial in the EFL writing classes. Collaborative writing tasks cultivate students' negotiation and social interaction skills in the classroom, decrease their WA when completing the writing tasks alone and promote students' self-confidence (Rollinson, 2005; Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011; Liu, 2013). In addition, sharing ideas via negotiation and collaboration helps students collect various points of view about the writing task and reduces the WA accompanied with difficulty of the writing task (Ansarimoghaddam & Bee, 2013). Moreover, Jafari and Ansar (2012) and Larsen (2012) reported that students who write collaboratively achieve more significant improvement in their writing skills and abilities than those who write alone. The written text produced by the group is richer and better than the best one written by any individual member of the group.

5.3.2 Practice Opportunities

Writing as a language skill needs to be practised much in order to be mastered. This fact was expressed by the students when they stated that the amount of practice in writing had helped them improve their writing ability and they felt comfortable about that since they learnt much linguistic and writing knowledge.

In this respect, S03 stated that:

“my writing is improved because I did a lot of practice in writing and feel happy in doing them”

In the same way, S04 said that:

“I feel that I improved in writing because I practiced writing too much now and I learnt a lot concerning how to start and how to write the body and how to end the essay. It was really an enjoyable and helpful experience.”

Emphasizing the importance of practice in EFL writing, Hussin et al. (2015) state that practicing writing continuously is the best way to master it. As such, providing students with ample practice opportunities in writing exposes students to different challenges that enrich their knowledge and writing experiences. Consequently, this leads to promoting students' confidence in their writing abilities and positively affected their WA.

This result is similar to that revealed by Tananuraksakul (2014) who states that using a Facebook group as a blended learning tool creates ample practice opportunities that can nurture students' writing abilities making them feel relaxed and less intimidated in the EFL writing classroom. This result leads us to the third factor that contributed to improving students' WA.

5.3.3 The Linguistic and Writing Knowledge Gained in the CBLWE

As a result of constant practice in writing and collaborative social interaction, students acquired knowledge relevant to the macro and micro aspects of writing. This acquired knowledge helped them overcome their difficulties in grammar, organization, planning and outlining ideas.

Expressing this idea, S02 for example stated that:

“I feel that I improved in grammar, organization of ideas, planning and brainstorming ideas for my essay. All of these things in writing have improved. This is why I feel enjoyed and comfortable in doing writing in this semester. In addition I feel that I do not have negative feelings and feel motivated and happy when the teacher ask me to write an essay.” He also mentioned that *“ahhh, I like it because I learnt new things in the writing skill that I do not learn before.”*

In the same way, S02 mentioned that:

“I learnt how to start with the introduction. Then the body and how to plan the different paragraphs of the body, then we have to write the conclusion paragraph. In addition, I also learnt about the organization of the

paragraphs and ideas in the essay. I improved in all of these aspects”.

Additionally, S07 admitted that:

“we learnt a lot about how to write an essaywe learnt how to write an introduction, conclusion,”

Similarly, students mentioned the same point of view in their learning diaries. They acknowledged that the knowledge learnt as a group is relevant to components of the essay such as introduction, body, and conclusion. Students gained knowledge in how to arrange the paragraphs in the essay and connecting them logically to be easily followed by the reader. Expressing this idea, S09 reported that:

“... I learnt so much about writing in the previous essays that I wrote with my group. I have learnt about the components of essay and how to write each components, how to arrange the paragraphs and how to connect them together “.

Furthermore, it is also observed that there is a gradual improvement in the different aspects of writing such as grammar, mechanics of writing, vocabularies, organization of ideas and paragraphs in the essay as well as in the content of the essay. This means that students have gained much writing knowledge and experience and had used them when writing their essays.

In this study, CBLWE created a learning atmosphere that provides students with ample online collaborative learning opportunities. These online collaborative writing activities not only enabled the students to meet with their peers and exchange scaffolding virtually but they are also capable of changing their level of WA to a more positive feeling. The experience of learning collaboratively helped them to be exposed to other types of meaningful learning and writing inputs such as grammar, organization, and planning in a more systematic way. This means that CBLWE in this study had helped students overcome their writing and linguistic difficulties when initiating collaborative learning activities virtually and in face-to-face setting. As such, their WA was gradually declined and their writing knowledge and abilities were improved.

The above finding is supported by Ansarimoghaddam and Bee (2013) and Tananuraksakul (2014) who argued that by working collaboratively, students will be provided with ample opportunity to practice writing and gain worthwhile knowledge from their peers. This knowledge may be in the form of exchanging writing experiences and topical knowledge or in the form of editing and revision comments during the peer review session.

5.3.4 Students' Ability to Write Faster than Before

Due to the continuous practice and the amount of knowledge gained throughout the CBLWE, students became able to write their essays in a short time. Students felt comfortable and competent in writing because this learning environment had helped them complete their essay in a short time. Supporting this idea, S08 stated that:

“now as you can see I write very fast because of this method”

This fact is supported further by S01. In his learning diary, he reported that online discussion via Viber gave them the opportunity to prepare the essay in advance by discussing many aspects of the essay such as its components and content and thus they could devote the time during the face-to-face class for writing only. As such, the limited time of the writing class was well-spent in learning writing since the students were able to write in a short time due to their online preparation and discussion of the writing task to be done in the face-to-face class.

On this point, S01 stated that:

“Time is critical for success in writing in class because we didn't have enough time for discussion and sharing ideas in the class because we have limited time so I liked the online discussion via Viber more than in-class discussion”.

Observation data also revealed that the time of finishing the third writing task was shorter than the first and second writing tasks. Students were able to complete their essays in a shorter time because CBLWE had enabled them to work collaboratively and add knowledge to each other in completing their essays. They also derive benefits from the learning technologies such as the class blog and Viber discussion. In this way, they felt more open to learning and practicing EFL writing skills since online learning has liberated the class from physical constraints with respect to time and place. Consequently, this had helped them overcome their WA and they could continue practicing writing without any constraints to improve their EFL writing ability. In this respect, Jafari and Ansari (2012) state that when students work collaboratively and educate each other, they not only reduce the amount of time to tackle the various aspects of writing but, they also help each other and gain benefits from information sharing. Additionally, the use of technologies has effectively “decreases physical limitations of the classroom by presenting outside learning opportunities” (Basal, 2015: 32). Consequently, it helps students to

get rid of the traditional class constraints such as time and place limitations which can be a source of WA.

5.3.5 The Blend between Online and Face-to-face Learning Activities and the Social Interaction in Online and Face-to-face Modes

Students had indicated that the combination of face-to-face and online writing activities had some impacts on their learning mode. In addition, the social interaction conducted in face-to-face and online assisted them to be more creative in their writing and thus reduced their writing apprehension. In this respect, S04 for example, in his learning diary stated that:

"I felt more creative and understandable in online and f2f interaction and collaboration because for me collaboration is the only way that helped me in overcoming my frustration feeling toward writing".

In addition, S08 thought that:

"It was really helpful to blend f2f writing activities with online one because they really complete each other".

From the observations done, students demonstrated their high motivation level in doing the writing activities in the two modes of blended learning approach. They were also able to provide constructive feedback and willing to share knowledge. This result can be attributed to the fact that the CBLWE provided students with enjoyable and meaningful learning opportunities that promote their motivation to write since the novel mode of learning suited their individual learning styles when practicing EFL writing skills. The collaborative blended learning writing opportunities also helped them enriched their topical and linguistic knowledge.

5.3.6 Psychological Relaxation

The CBLWE helped learners reduce their negative feelings towards learning EFL writing. Students have overtly reflected their enjoyment and comfort in learning writing due to the above-mentioned factors and the procedures followed in learning writing in the CBLWE. This factor may also be the reason for the students' having low WA by the end of the semester. Expressing their relaxation and positive feelings towards practicing and learning writing, S05 mentioned in his interview that:

"Because before I used to take longer time in doing essay and my writing but now everything is ok".

Similarly, S07 also stated that:

"Yes ... it help me a lot and I enjoyed doing it because it was so effective to my writing ability and to improving my bad feelings towards writing".

In similar vein, S04 reported in his learning diary that:

"This way helped me so much in improving my writing and tackling the sharp frustration I have experienced before in writing".

In addition, there were fewer signs of WA detected when students completed their last two writing tasks. Students were observed to be more relaxed, more comfortable, and less stressed in undertaking the last two writing tasks. This gives a clear evidence that they have improved in their WA due to the positive psychological atmosphere provided by the CBLWE such as flexibility of learning and opportunities to practice writing in their free time and space.

This result can be attributed to the flexible learning opportunities, social interaction events and collaborative writing activities provided in the CBLWE environment. All of these factors of learning writing, in combination, helped in developing students' motivation towards writing, raising their confidence level and lower their WA (Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011).

6. Conclusion

The present study claims its originality in its application to three writing approaches; writing process, collaborative writing and blended learning together as one identity. It also reflects its novelty in qualitatively studying the EFL students' perception towards the effects of CBLWE on the students' WA and WP.

Findings of the study showed that with the exception of one, most students had positive perception towards the CBLWE. Results also revealed that the positive factors provided by CBLWE had played an important role in dealing with students' writing problems namely, the students' WA and their poor WP. These factors had motivated the EFL students to practice writing skill, transformed their negative feelings towards writing into positive ones, and enriched their topical and linguistic knowledge by encouraging them to socialize and share knowledge collaboratively via online and face-to-face learning environment.

The success of the CBLWE can be attributed to two main reasons. The first one is the collaborative learning

atmosphere created in the current study which had helped students to feel less apprehensive, close to each other, and safe and in their learning environment. It also encouraged students to share knowledge and learning experiences that enriched the content of their essays. The second reason is embodied by the blend between online and in-class learning activities of EFL writing that had provided students with flexible learning opportunities that suit their different learning styles, and learning habits. It also took into consideration the students' pace and consequently provided students with self-paced learning. Blended learning also allows students to discuss many aspects of the writing task in advance online and thus they could dedicate the class time for practicing writing only. In short, the commonly recognized advantages of blended learning in this study include flexibility, personalization, and interactivity derived from an online component and direct observation, immediate feedback and spontaneity inherent from conventional teaching.

Though the study had a limitation due to its small number of participants and its subjective nature of research instruments, it could serve as a step forward in the field of EFL writing pedagogy. It stimulates the EFL learners and their teachers to think about how to integrate online learning activities with face-to-face learning to bring the optimal outcomes in learning EFL writing. Further research needs to be conducted with large samples to experimentally investigate the effectiveness of the CBLWE on students' WA and WP.

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