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BLENDED LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES: COURSE DESIGN, COLLABORATION AND ASSESSMENT IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' ESSAY WRITING SKILLS

ANNOTATION

As the current measures in higher education are being related straight to both online and offline platforms, blended learning can be a prototype model in increasing quality and content factors of this stage of education, thereby providing teachers and students with connected and continuous education in practice. In many studies related to the issues mentioned above, blended learning, its practical functions are central to the discussion. Besides that, doing scientific investigations on the correlation between competencies and technologies in TFL plays a constructive role in creating a competitive educational environment for everyone. The study aimed to test blended learning technologies in improving students' writing competence in essay writing skills. As for the tasks of the study, they are: (1) to analyze the importance of course design in conducting lessons on writing skills successfully; (2) to practically experiment collaborative learning between a teacher and students on both platforms; (3) to investigate benefits of e-assessment in evaluating students' writing tasks in the environment of blended learning. The experimental study was carried out among teachers and second-year students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University (UzSWLU) with the help of qualitative and quantitative types of data collection. First, the qualitative method was used while interviewing teachers about the implemented methods, technologies, and approaches at the end of the study. Then, the second type of data

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BLENDED ТАЪЛИМ ТЕХНОЛОГИЯЛАРИ: ТАЛАБАЛАРНИНГ ИНШО ЁЗИШ КЎНИКМАЛАРИНИ ТАКОМИЛЛАШТИРИШДА КУРС ДИЗАЙНИ, ҲАМКОРЛИК ВА БАҲОЛАШ

АННОТАЦИЯ

Олий таълимдаги ҳозирги чора-тадбирларнинг тўғридан-тўғри онлайн ва офлайн таълим платформаларига йўналтирилаётганлиги боис, таълимнинг ушбу босқичида blended (аралаш) таълим шакли амалда ўқитувчи ва талабаларнинг ҳам узлуксиз, ҳам узвий таълим билан таъминланишига хизмат қилмоқда ва у сифат ҳамда мазмун кўрсаткичларининг кўтарилишида прототип модел бўла олади. Юқорида таъкидланган масалаларни ўрганишга бағишланган кўплаб тадқиқотларда blended таълим ва унинг самарали жиҳатлари изчил ўрганилмоқда. Шунингдек, чет тилларни ўқитишда компетенциялар ва технологиялар ўртасидаги ўзаро боғлиқлик устида илмий изланишлар олиб бориш барча учун рақобатбардош таълим муҳитини яратишда амалий аҳамиятга эга.

Мазкур тадқиқотимиздан қўзланган асосий мақсад – талабаларнинг ёзув компетенциясини такомиллаштиришда (иншо ёзиш кўникмаларини такомиллаштириш мисолида) blended таълим технологияларини тажрибасиновдан ўтказиш эди. Тадқиқотимизнинг вазифалари сифатида эса blended таълим муҳотида (1) ёзиш амалиёти дарсларини муваффақиятли олиб боришда курс дизайнининг аҳамиятини таҳлил қилиш, (2) ҳар икки платформада ўқитувчи ва талабалар ҳамкорлигида тил ўрганишни си-

collection – quantitative was used as a form of questionnaire among the participants (students) of the research on virtual platforms to obtain results of blended learning in fostering essay writing skills. According to the research findings, blended learning has a considerable impact on training students as future personnel by assisting them in fostering their communicative and sub-competencies in practice.

Key words: blended learning, course design, collaborative learning, blended task, assessment, essay writing, writing competence, higher education.

новдан ўтказиш ва (3) талабаларнинг ёзув машқларини баҳолашда электрон баҳолаш тизимининг самарали жиҳатларини тадқиқ этиш бўлди. Эксперимент тадқиқотимиз Ўзбекистон давлат жаҳон тиллари университетининг (ЎзДЖТУ) ўқитувчилари ва иккинчи босқич талабалари орасида олиб борилган сифат ва миқдор кўрсаткичларини аниқлаш жараёнига асосланиб ўтказилди. Сифат кўрсаткичи тадқиқотимиз сўнггида амалиётга татбиқ этилган методлар, технологиялар ва ёндашув тўғрисида ўқитувчилар билан суҳбатлар олиб бориш имконини берди. Иккинчи кўрсаткич – миқдор кўрсаткичи эса виртуал платформаларда тадқиқот иштирокчилари (талабалар) орасида сўровнома шаклида иншо ёзиш кўникмасини такомиллаштиришда blended таълимнинг самарали жиҳатларини аниқлашга хизмат қилди. Тадқиқот давомида олинган натижаларга кўра, blended таълим шакли талабаларга асосий чет тилдаги коммуникатив компетенция ҳамда субкомпетенцияни такомиллаштиришлари учун ёрдам беради ва уларнинг мутахассис сифатида шаклланишига сезиларли таъсир кўрсатади.

Калит сўзлар: blended таълим, курс дизайни, ҳамкорликда тил ўрганиш, баҳолаш, blended вазифа, иншо ёзиш, ёзув компетенцияси, олий таълим.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Uzbekistan is gradually and strategically being modernised based on the tasks highlighted in the Presidential decree 5847 “On approval of the Concept of Development of the Higher Educational System of the Republic of Uzbekistan till 2030” and “The Concept of Development of the Higher Educational System of the Republic of Uzbekistan till 2030”. As one of the most critical factors, the system and atmosphere of educating students in higher education should be continuously updated and provided with modern educational, pedagogical, and information technologies to enable students and teachers to work in a convenient educational environment in practice. Given that raising the content of higher education to a qualitatively new level establishing a system for training highly qualified personnel who can find their places in the labour market [lex.uz] plays a vital role in practice; the teaching disciplines in HE should be adapted to meet this requirement. Teaching subjects to students in higher education differs from other stages of education as students are educated to become future personnel of particular fields of society. Hence, the system of TFL in this stage aims to train language

learners (students) to be able to use a particular foreign language in various situations fluently, thereby focusing on fostering their linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies [lex.uz]. Accordingly, implementing an educational system focused on developing practical skills is one of the most crucial tasks in modernising the HE system of the Republic of Uzbekistan [lex.uz]. While fostering these competencies in practice, it is essential to focus on forming students' critical thinking and independent search for information and analysis skills. Considering this factor, our study focuses on fostering students' writing skills in HE specialised in TFL.

In general, introducing digital technologies and modern methods into the educational process provides teachers of foreign languages to create a convenient learning platform for students to develop their competencies in an innovative form. Moreover, as linguistic competence includes competence in language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking skills) and competence in language areas (phonological, lexical and grammar competencies), the requirements for the level of graduates on a foreign language enable students as future specialists to foster their skills and competencies systematically. Besides, in this process, improving each competence and skill in the target language leads students to make a great deal of progress in their professional skills. Therefore, the importance of consolidating these competencies can be proved with one factor that W. Rivers, an Australian linguist and Professor of Romance Languages, mentions that being literate in the native language implies the ability to read and write [Wilga M.R., 1981; 291].

Importance of improving the writing competence in HE

In recent years, most academic writing research leads us to reconceptualise literacy as a social practice rather than a set of skills [Barton D., 1994; Anstey M. & Bull G., 2004]. Therefore, improving the writing competence in the target language involves a language learner following specific methods, strategies and means in practice. Furthermore, unlike the other language skills, teaching writing skills is different because of its role in a foreign language learning, namely that it is considered a means of education instead of teaching. Besides, 'writing in a foreign language' means to express ideas in a written form by using specific means of this or that foreign language [Jalolov J., 2012; 283], and for future professionals, writing skills are essential for their daily work and critical for entry and promotion within their disciplines [Light R., 2001]. Accordingly, curricula aimed at developing students' creative thinking and practical skills and teaching writing skills in a foreign language is of great importance to form educational programs based on students interests, following the needs of the labour market.

Teaching writing skills at every stage of education, such as schools, lyceums, colleges, and universities, is distinctive from each other, but all of them should be continuous and connected based on types of educational institutions. For instance, writing provides language learners with the ability to articulate their ideas, argue opinions, and synthesise various viewpoints [McNamara D.S., Crossley S.A. & McCarthy P.M., 2009; 58]. Therefore, it is crucial to develop a better understanding of the linguistic features that characterise proficient writing [Witte S.P. & Faigley

L., 1981]. As the focus of our study is given to the system of TFL at HE institutions which are specialised in TFL, the significance of gaining fluency in the writing competence in HE can be explained with three reasons in the example of teaching English: (1) the considerable expansion of HE and multicultural diversity of students around the world; (2) the remarkable increase in paying attention to the process of teaching and learning and resources to train teachers in which students' writing plays an integral role in continuing professional development; (3) the emergence of English as the international language of research and scholarship [Hyland K., 2013; 54]. Furthermore, following the reasons mentioned above, students' effective writing is vital to communicate convincingly with others, such as teachers, peers, colleagues, co-workers, and the community at large [Crowhurst M., 1990]. Also, it is commonly known that expressing ideas in a foreign language causes several difficulties for students in HE because of varied reasons, one of which is culture. Hence, it can be understood that it is a combination of a historically spread and systematic network of meanings that enable us to comprehend, develop and communicate our knowledge and views about the world [Street B., 1995; Lantolf J.P., 1999].

According to the requirements of the State standards, graduates with foreign languages must be good at composing report articles, instructions for learning and teaching materials, forms and questionnaires, business and professional letters, essays, reports, reviews, qualification papers, statements of intent, CVs and covering letters [lex.uz]. Improving students' essay writing skills in English via blended learning technologies is analysed in this study based on our research theoretical and practical basis. Indeed, one of the reasons to teach writing online is providing students with an environment in which the whole process can be purely textual [Warnock S., 2009] while conducting lessons in the environment of blended learning. This factor of teaching writing skills online enables students to express their opinions in a foreign language more actively rather than just practising linguistic means of the language at offline classroom activities.

Blended learning and its technologies

According to the demands of society and time, programs of teaching and learning foreign languages can change and be utilised differently in practice. However, since the development of communicative skills, the process of language learning involves teachers of foreign languages and students to form social interaction fostering their competencies even though utilising computers has been regarded as a supporting tool by students concerning certain skill areas for a long time [Brandl K., 2005]. Social interaction plays an essential role in enhancing their skills remarkably, such as the ability to search, evaluate, to interact meaningfully with tools [Md Yunus M., Salehi H. & Chenzi C., 2012; 44]. Consequently, in the environment of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), the primary focus has moved from seeing the usage of computers as a primary focus to one that considers technologies to become a regular part of everyday practices. Hence, merging face-to-face activities with not CALL but models of blended language learning that are more comprehensive and inclusive in integrating all modalities, venues, and aspects of learning [Hinkelman D., 2018; 16] is

one of the most productive aspects of the technologies. Then, there can be a question: 'Why exactly blended learning?'. The answer is that individualisation of educational processes based on digital technologies, development of distance educational services, the widespread introduction of webinar technologies into practice, online, "blended learning", "flipped classroom" are put forward in the Concept on implementing digital technologies and modern methods into the educational process [lex.uz]. The term 'blended learning' is mainly used to combine face-to-face teaching with computer technology [Whittaker C., 2013; 12]. Blended learning is a way of learning that combines traditional classroom lessons with lessons that use computer technology and may be given over the Internet [dictionary.cambridge.org]. It is a new educational model that impacts increasing students' outcomes, creating exciting new roles for teachers [Klimova I.I., 2009].

Indeed, implementing blended learning technologies into practice involves teachers of foreign languages doing many tasks during the lessons, such as preparing materials, conducting lessons, introducing activities, assessing students and discussing topics by controlling the whole process on both educational platforms. Although blended learning combines both educational platforms, there is no universally unified system or model to utilise; however, it can be developed and adapted into a particular form by universities or researchers individually [Vasbieva D.G., Klimova I.I., 2005; 4]. On optimising blended learning in practice, it can be said that as the world becomes more and more connected through advances in ICT, classroom experiences need to reflect those same changes [Taranto G., Dalbon M. & Gaetano J., 2011]. Consequently, in this process, the digital literacy of teachers of foreign languages plays an integral role in making the atmosphere of a language learning and teaching convenient. So, teachers who regularly use Web 2.0 technologies need to develop an understanding of new digital literacy and infuse them with their curricular planning and classroom practices [Greenhow C., Robelia B. & Hughes J., 2009]. Following this approach may bring several benefits, for instance, teachers provided with a technological tool are more likely to apply that technological medium in their teaching and curricular planning processes [Russell M., Bebell D., O'Dwyer & O'Connor K., 2003], thereby enabling teachers of foreign languages to practically utilise ICT and their professional skills.

As for blended learning technologies, it is necessary to mention that technologies in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages have progressed for a long time [Garrett N., 2001]. Through the changes and innovations in the system of TFL, technology can be used ambiguously, thereby raising such a question of how it can be understood or seen. The answer to this can be that 'we have to stop thinking of technology in terms of nouns (PowerPoint, YouTube, or Twitter) and instead think in terms of verbs (presenting, sharing, communicating)' [Fisher D. & Frey N., 2010; 226]. Besides, media have many characteristics salient to education by being static or dynamic, mono-modal or multimodal, fixed or portable [Siemens G., 2003] to impact students' interests to foster their skills in the target language. Addressing technology in terms of verbs in teaching writing skills remarkably changes the atmosphere of

education whereby teachers and students foster collaborative learning on both platforms of blended learning. According to the literature on CALL, technologies can be defined differently.

Nevertheless, technologies should be understood widely rather than only approaching them as electronic devices. For instance, if technology is defined from another perspective that focuses on 'process', the following result can be obtained: 'Technology consists of the designs and the environments that engage learners. Technology can also consist of any reliable technique or method for engaging learners, such as cognitive learning strategies and critical thinking skills' [Jonassen D.H., Howland, J., Marra, R., 2008; 12]. Such a definition supports a trend to consider technology to be an experience along with a device [McCarthy J. & Wright P., 2004]. Following this view, understanding technology as ecology means that teachers must focus on performances of technology in the classroom whose descriptions show dynamic actions and relations instead of static entities [Don H., 27; 2018] as it can be referred to as 'relational pedagogy' [Kern R., 2015] in practice. Accordingly, technology can be seen not as an inert artifact but as an active 'actor' by calling this process an 'actor-network' [Latour B., 2005].

Course design, collaboration, and assessment

Firstly, applying blended learning technologies into improving students' essay writing skills in HE involves teachers of foreign languages to pay attention to particular aspects of the lessons seriously if the analyses of results of the research literature are taken into account. Especially a course design of the lessons on the writing skills must be adapted to the requirements of the Concept and system of HE to train students as future personnel capable of independently making decisions for the implementation of their intellectual abilities while dealing with their responsibilities in the future. Indeed, in the environment of blended learning, organising lessons to foster linguistic skills in foreign languages can be complicated by modifying the course design at the beginning of the process. However, it is essential to mention that "the iterative nature of a course design and the fact that building a blend is a gradual process" [Tomlinson B. & Whittaker C., 2013; 23] encourages teachers of foreign languages to make the whole process under their control. Thus, blended learning approaches are adapted to improving the target language skills in an incremental manner [Gruba P. & Hinkelman D., 2012], thereby gradually becoming accustomed to the environment. Additionally, being precise, valuable, repeatable, and efficient of a course design [Hinkelman D., 2018; 175] impacts the productivity of the lessons in practice. Based on our research aims, the course design of the lessons of the writing skills will be formed for both of the platforms with the help of the blended learning technologies, which means that the process on the virtual platforms (Telegram, YouTube, Zoom, and Moodle) will be the continuation of the one which is in the classroom at universities. The course design includes all the lesson stages, such as introducing topics to students, involving them in activities, discussing materials with them, assessing them, and providing feedback. Consequently, this process will be undertaken one by one in a continuous and connected manner, thereby managing to increase the efficiency of the study.

Secondly, following the creation of the course design, making progress in fostering students' essay writing skills directly depends on teachers' following theory and approaches in how to improve the skills effectively in the blended learning environment. Because of this reason, the integration of CALL and task-based language learning theory may open several possibilities for both teachers and students to work collaboratively. A model of task-based language teaching (TBLT) which includes the concepts of 'activity' and 'method' into a broad, process view of 'technology' [Hinkelman D., 2018; 46] assists teachers of foreign languages to adapt tasks to foster language students' linguistic skills in blended learning environments by giving a significant focus on designing tasks with the help of blended learning technologies. To make this process convenient, materials and tasks are prepared based on the fundamental strategies and techniques of composing essays, namely particular topics are selected to foster the skills, thereby providing students with the opportunity to become acquainted with the writing descriptors, such as task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy innovatively in practice. Furthermore, tasks are not presented separately but in a combination of online and face-to-face activities [Hinkelman D., 2018; 134] to not result in students' losing their interests in the process. Besides, it is advisory to present practical tasks on the virtual platforms to enable students to study further by revising materials of the lessons deeply, whereas discussions of those tasks are held in the classroom under the control of a teacher. Consequently, a blended task which is a procedure that requires both face-to-face steps and online steps for completion [Hinkelman D., 2009; 38] can be generated successfully in practice. While dealing with blended tasks to improve essay writing skills, a collaboration between teachers and students leads to practical productivity as blended approaches can be positively implemented in a structured and collaborative learning community [Oliver M. & Trigwell K., 2005]. If the tasks of our study are taken into account, collaborative language learning and teaching is a crucial strategy to create a blended learning environment more stimulating in HE. During the practical experiments of our study, the atmosphere of collaborative language learning and teaching is created on both platforms of the process equally. However, the principal focus is on the collaboration between the teacher and students created on the virtual platforms continuously. This approach can be effectively implemented because students will have to address their difficulties in composing essays in the target language virtually during the course.

Finally, one of the most crucial parts of our study is assessment in the blended learning environment in HE, which is considered one of the essential triggers in teaching and learning foreign languages. Assessment in CALL mainly focuses on the process of testing and providing students with automatic feedback regularly [Chapelle C. & Douglas D., 2006], whereas traditional (face-to-face) assessments in paper-based forms are time-consuming, especially assessing speaking and writing tasks in TFL. However, blended language learning assessment is a principled selection and combination of printed, online, and live-action interfaces influencing students' formative learning [Hinkelman D., 2018; 163]. In addition to that, blended assessments

tend to continue a focus on their potential to encourage key learning goals [Brown I., Lockyer L. & Caputi P., 2010], and assessing students' writing skills in the example of fostering their essay writing competence will be adapted to the primary critical teaching and learning goals in HE. To illustrate, as future personnel, students are assessed not only as language learners but also as specialists in this area with the help of blended assessments. As a result, our study's task on assessing students' essay writing skills focuses on online interfaces, such as Google Forms or Moodle, to provide them with automatic assessment, which cannot be automatic but continuous during the course practically. Moreover, all the assessments will be released on the virtual platforms after completing a particular topic or achieving one of the learning goals by a teacher. Following that, this process will be continued with feedback, which will be analysed in our further studies.

METHODS

Study design

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilised in this study to investigate the efficiency of implementing blended learning technologies in improving students' essay writing skills in the target language (English) by focusing on a course design, collaboration, and assessment factors of the lessons in higher education.

It is necessary to mention the importance and plausibility of applying blended learning technologies into the system of TFL in the example of fostering the writing competence based on the tasks highlighted in “The Concept of Development of the Higher Educational System of the Republic of Uzbekistan till 2030”. Thus, the following tasks along with the ones as mentioned earlier [lex.uz] can be accomplished in the system of TFL at philological HE institutions if the environment of teaching and learning foreign languages is created for teachers of foreign languages and students by taking the theoretical and practical basis of blended learning into account:

- elaborating mechanisms for the development of healthy competition among students in the improvement of subjects;
- adapting educational programs and the system for assessing students' knowledge to international standards;
- increasing the proportion of hours devoted to self-education;
- introducing methods and technologies aimed at developing students' skills in independent education, critical and creative thinking, systems analysis;
- introducing methods and technologies aimed at strengthening competencies in the educational process, focusing the educational process on the formation of practical skills;
- focusing on the educational process of advanced pedagogical technologies, curricula and teaching materials based on international educational standards in this direction;
- improving and ensuring the objectivity of the technologies of students' knowledge assessment system, including the development of methods for the non-contact assessment of students' knowledge;

- improving the quality of the provision of educational services to students based on the study of students' opinions about the training sessions (feedback) and developing a system of mutual visits (peer review).

Tackling the tasks mentioned above in the Concept involves the authorities of the HE and teachers of foreign languages to modify their approaches, methods, and technologies to adapt the whole process of teaching and learning foreign languages to the blended learning environment. Furthermore, applying blended learning technologies into the system of TFL provides teachers with the opportunity to personalise their particular teaching methods or technologies in practice.

Participants

The study participants included 95 students of the Faculty of English philology and five teachers of writing skills from the same Faculty as two groups: a group of students and a group of teachers from Uzbekistan State World Languages University. Since our basic investigations were carried out at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, we decided to select this educational institution to test our study experimentally. Moreover, all of the students were second-year students of the university, and their major was English which met one of the most critical requirements of our study, namely the study was related to the system of TFL in philological higher education (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants of the study

No	Types of Groups	Number of Participants
Group of Students		
1.	Group #222	16
2.	Group #223	17
3.	Group #224	15
4.	Group #225	16
5.	Group #226	16
6.	Group #227	15
Group of Teachers		
1.	Teachers of Writing Skills	5
Total		100

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted for four months – from September 2020 to December 2020 during the first semester of the second-year students before the final exams in January 2021. During this period, lessons on writing competence were organised by adapting the whole process to blended learning, primarily focusing on the blended learning technologies for virtual platforms of the lessons in practice. As the virtual platforms of our study, Zoom, YouTube, Telegram, and Moodle ones had been selected, and the whole process was divided into specific stages to teach students effectively in the blended learning environment. Then, two research methods enabled us to collect data on this study: quantitative and qualitative. The first type of research methods, which was quantitative, was utilised to identify the effectiveness of the

blended learning technologies in improving students' essay writing skills according to their answers to the questionnaire. After that, the second type of research methods which was qualitative, assisted us to determine the attitudes of the second group of the participants – teachers on the applied technologies of blended learning at the end of the study.

The questionnaire prepared for the students consisted of ten sections about conducting the lessons on the writing skills in the blended learning environment. The questions were presented online on the platform Telegram as a poll to obtain the study results. The sections were about the platforms, topics, methods, presentations, study materials, assessment, feedback, collaborative learning, tasks, and course design, and every choice made by the participants was accepted as 1 point.

Then, the second research method type – qualitative – was applied as an interview with the second group of the participants, teachers, offline by recording them as audio files. While discussing the whole process with the teachers, we required them to confirm their choices towards the technologies mentioned above of blended learning in fostering the essay writing skills by selecting the rate descriptors, such as very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied, and very satisfied. So, the first research method of the data collection was accepted in electronic forms, whereas the second one was as audio files. Following that, in the following table, the demographic features of the participants are presented (Table 2):

Table 2. Participants' demographic features

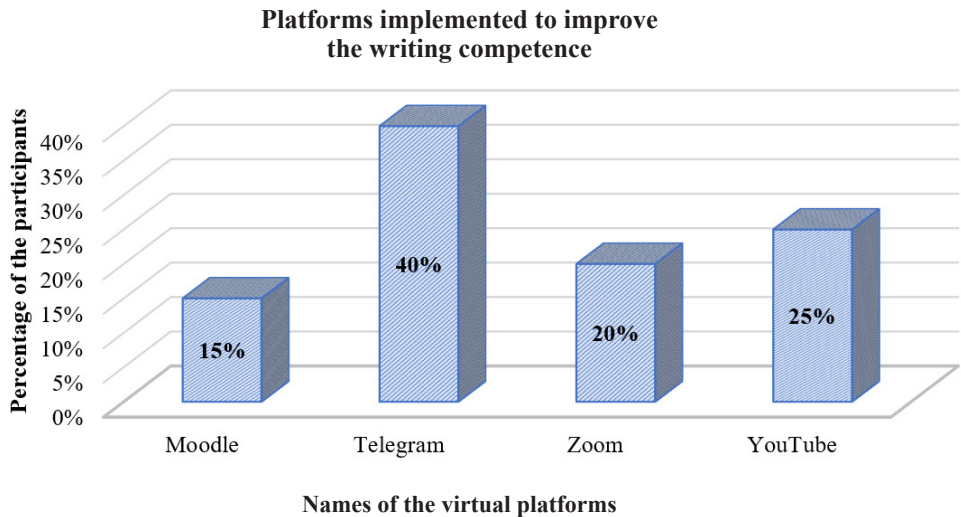
No	Participants' demographic features	Group #222	Group #223	Group #224	Group #225	Group #226	Group #227	Teachers
1.	Age							
	20-24	16	17	15	16	16	15	2
	25-30							3
2.	Gender							
	Male	2	2	3	4	3	3	
	Female	14	15	12	12	13	12	5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the questionnaire released to the students online, the first question was 'Which platforms of the educational process do you support positively according to their functions in improving your essay writing skills?'. By including this question in the poll, we decided to identify the students' viewpoints on testing the efficiency of the virtual platforms in fostering competence. So, the students' responses to the first question were 15% (14 choices) for Moodle, 40% (39 choices) for Telegram, 20% (19 choices) for Zoom, and 25% (23 choices) for YouTube, respectively (Graph 1). According to our discussion with the students at the end of the experiment, the decreases in two platforms (Moodle and Zoom) were because of the Internet connection

and technical problems. However, the students approved of the functions of Telegram and YouTube positively, especially the channels and groups to receive the materials, tasks, and results continuously.

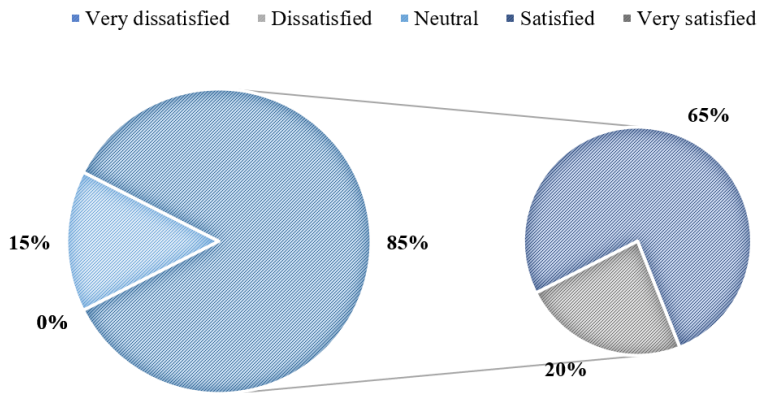
Graph 1.



The second question was 'How do you rate the sequence of the topics during the course, especially on fostering your essay writing skills?'. This question was used to determine the students' perception on comprehending the strategies and skills of writing an essay in the target language because one of the basic aims of our study was to focus on fostering the students' writing competence from the point of educating them as future personnel. Besides, the choices of the students proved that the approach on selecting the sequence of the topics starting with paragraph writing and ending with discursive essay was acceptable, whereby we received the following results: 0% (no choice) for 'very dissatisfied', 0% (0 choice) for 'dissatisfied', 15% (14 choices) for 'neutral', 65% (62 choices) for 'satisfied', and 20% (19 choices) for 'very satisfied' (Graph 2).

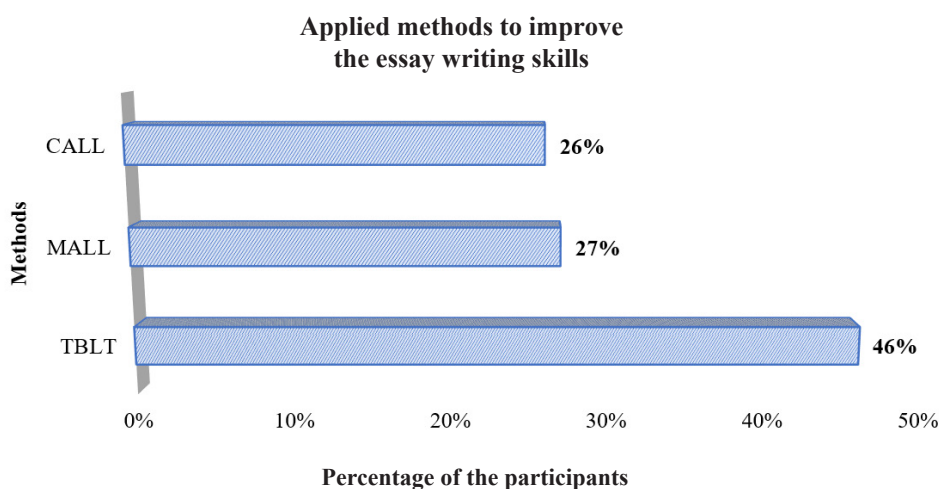
Sequence of the topics

Graph 2.



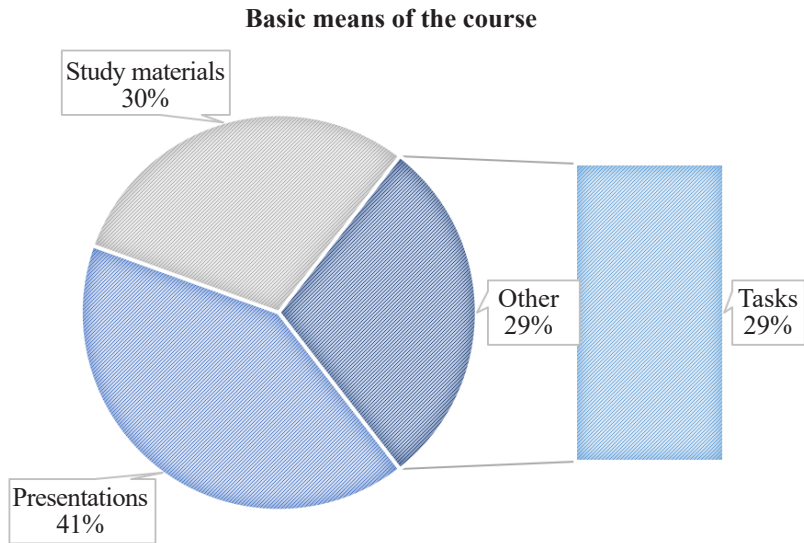
The third question in the questionnaire: 'Your attitude towards the methods – task-based language teaching (TBLT), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL)'. While focusing on improving the students' essay writing skills, we gave a principal focus on the method to increase the efficiency of our study. Therefore, we aimed to draw the students' attention to the tasks of composing various types of essays by presenting the materials for each lesson on both platforms, taking the features of the method into account. After having analysed the choices of the students to the question, the results were 46% (45 choices) for TBLT, 27% (26 choices) for MALL, and 26% (24 choices) for CALL, respectively (Graph 3), which showed that in the blended learning environment, the utilised methods enabled the students to foster their writing competence systematically.

Graph 3.



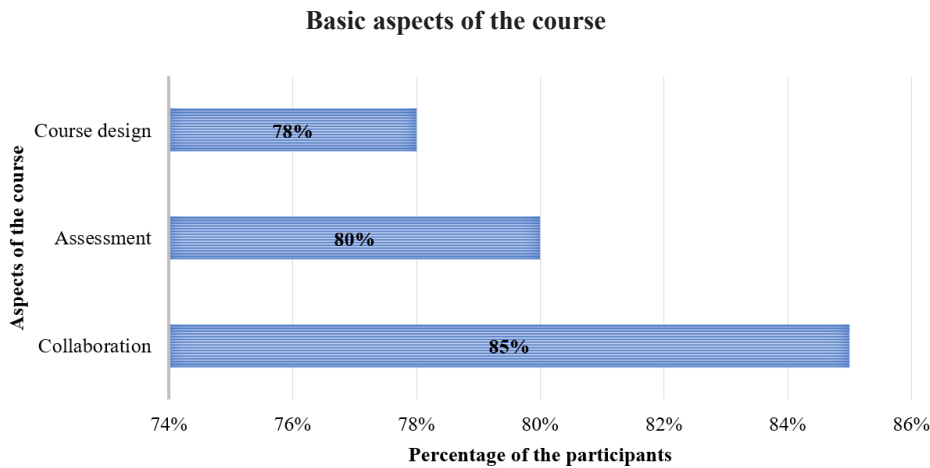
The fourth question in the questionnaire was about the presentations, study materials, and tasks presented by the teacher on both platforms of our study – 'How do you rate the basic means of the course: presentations, study materials, and tasks?'. As for the presentations, we focused on the blended learning technologies while using various means of ICT to foster the students' essay writing skills, thereby increasing the lessons' efficiency in the blended learning environment. Then, we included the other means of the lessons as study materials which were vocabulary handouts, video, audio, and text files about following the essay writing skills during the lessons. After that, the tasks on improving the students' essay writing skills were included in this question of the poll by which we involved the students to understand the essential criteria of composing essays in the target language. In the end, the results were 41% (39 choices) for presentations, 30% (29 choices) for study materials, and 29% (27 choices) for tasks, respectively (Graph 4).

Graph 4.



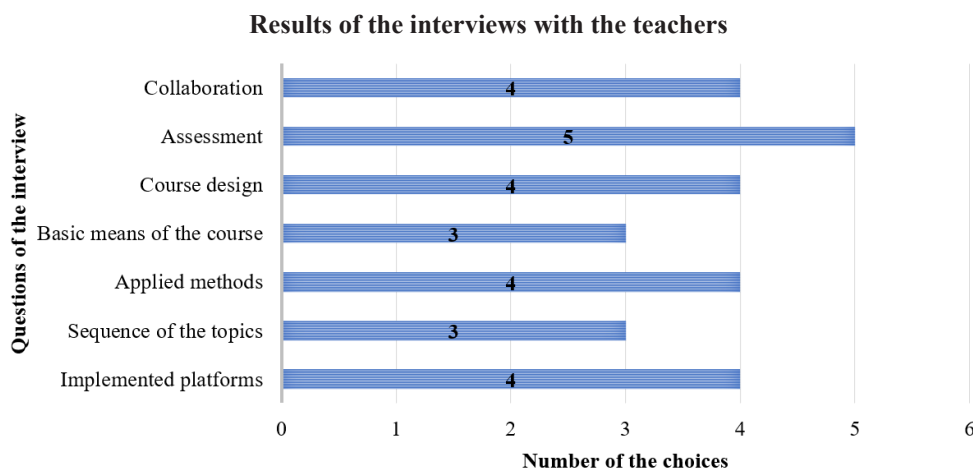
The last question of the questionnaire was about collaboration, assessment, and course design on which: vocabulary study was given as well – 'Which of the following ones do you rate as the most effective aspects of the whole process: collaborative learning, assessment, and course design?' because these factors played an integral role in creating the environment of blended learning in improving the essay writing skills effectively. Thus, collaborative learning assisted the teacher and students to work cooperatively, especially on the virtual platforms of our research (85% (81 choices)). As for the assessment aspect, the participants positively approved the research approach as they learnt how to focus on significant factors of composing essays in the target languages (80% (76 choices)). Then, the students rated the course design as one of the most compelling aspects of the lessons not only via the poll but also the points during our discussion at the end of the study (78% (74 choices)) (Graph 5).

Graph 5.



Having analysed all the participants' responses, we had interviews with the second group of the participants – teachers of the writing skills on the whole process. Firstly, we discussed the implemented platforms of the study, and four teachers approved them positively. Secondly, the sequence of the topics was supported by the 3 of them because the other 2 of them mentioned that the number of the lessons devoted to topics was different, which should have been rearranged. Thirdly, all four teachers supported the methods of improving the essay writing skills in the blended learning environment. Fourthly, three teachers mentioned that the primary means of the course appealed to them, especially on the virtual platforms, by holding the students' interests to the lessons during the whole process. Finally, we discussed the aspects of the course in detail as they helped us create the educational environment systematically, so course design with four choices, assessment with five choices, and collaboration with four choices turned to be the final results of our qualitative research method (Graph 6).

Graph 6.



CONCLUSION

In summary, the creation of the necessary conditions for increasing the level of enrollment in higher education depends on many factors as we have discussed in the sections mentioned earlier of the study, and the system of fostering writing competence, especially essay writing skills, requires both a teacher and students to follow specific strategies to achieve successful results in practice. Hence, blended learning can enable them to create a convenient environment for teaching and learning in HE, thereby providing the system of HE with the opportunity to train highly qualified, creatively and systemically thinking personnel based on international standards. As it is necessary for future personnel to be capable of independently making decisions for the implementation of their intellectual abilities and upbringing as a spiritually developed personality in the future, teachers of foreign languages must adapt their teaching methods and technologies to the requirements and conditions of the rapidly changing world at this stage of education gradually.

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