

## **Blended Learning in a University Writing Course – A Test of Effectiveness**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The advancement in technology has offered both teachers and learners countless opportunities for exploring and pursuing higher standards in the field of education. Particularly in the era of industrial revolution 4.0, technology has become an indispensable tool for both teachers and learners in language learning. However, the appropriate integration of technology in teaching and learning still needs the thoughts and consideration of many educated minds. This case study aimed to explore the impact of combining traditional methodologies and various technological applications and modern classroom activities in a writing class at a national university in Southern Vietnam, hoping to figure out the effectiveness and drawbacks of this mode of learning. Participants were thirty-two intermediate level freshmen, divided into eight groups for various learning activities. Throughout the course of thirteen weeks, the students received formal classroom instructions, got involved in a variety of interactive and independent learning activities and channels (extensive online reading, discussion, analysis of essays, error recognition, mind map presentation, vocabulary collection, Kahoot, Facebook group postings and corrections, Google quizzes), did the pre-test and post-test and completed the questionnaire at the end of the course. Analysis of the questionnaire, and review of the procedures, activities and pre-test, post-test scores revealed that this blended learning model helped students improve writing competence, gain valuable skills needed for the twenty first century and more importantly, generated the motivation of lifelong learning. The study also reported a few issues that need careful thoughts when applying this mode.

**KEYWORDS:** **blended learning, higher education, teaching writing, teaching techniques, technological applications**

### **Introduction**

It can be widely observed that blended learning has taken gigantic steps to become a common tool in language teaching in most developing and developed countries where technology plays an important role. In the era of emerging technologies, learners, especially the young ones even go beyond teachers and educators in aspects of practising and utilising new forms of technology.

Prensky (2001) claims that there exists a widening gap between teachers and learners as the former feel uncomfortable adapting their teaching styles to well fit the diverse and trendy demands of the latter. Ribble (2015) published a book titled *Digital Citizenship in Schools*, introducing the nine elements of a digital citizen which include digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, digital health and wellness, digital security. Isman and Gungoren (2013) conducted a survey in Sakarya University in Turkey on 4395 students participating on a voluntary basis and finalized with the result that students who had more exposure to the internet for reading books/newspaper, banking transactions, shopping, using Twitter and Google+ obtained more digital citizenship features. Technology truly helps develop personalities and abilities, therefore, the concept of using technology in language teaching has been widely adopted and adapted, which contributes to the popularity of blended learning in recent years.

### **Rationale and research gaps**

This small scaled study was conducted at International University, a member of the Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City. With a quite high tuition fee, the International University hosts a majority of students from wealthy families. Mostly self-equipped with modern technological devices like laptops, smartphones, tablets, these students have quite a full grasp of knowledge about technology. Surprisingly, results from a quick survey showed that they mainly used their devices for entertainment related purposes like surfing Facebook, watching movies or chatting with friends, but not for academic purposes. It would be beneficial if the use of the devices was devoted to activities for learning. At the same time, students requested for higher teaching and learning standards and especially, more interesting, motivating and effective learning environments for receptive skill classes such as writing. A review of ninety-seven articles seeking the benefits of blended learning (Smith & Hill, 2019) showed that the blending mode had positive impacts on performance outcomes, satisfaction, engagement and motivation. Therefore, applying blended learning could be a solution.

Despite the fact that blended learning has been existing in developed countries for years, there still remains a doubt about its effectiveness in the minds of many parents, students and even educators. In fact, very few studies investigating the effectiveness of the blended learning model in Vietnam have been reported (Thi, 2019; Tran, 2016). Publications testing the use of blended learning in teaching writing skills at University level in Vietnam are quite rare.

In addition, a review on past studies on classroom activities and online learning applications have indicated that none of these could perfectly act as a blended learning model for teaching writing at the International University. Therefore, a study on a mixed model between technological approaches and classroom face-to-face activities on teaching writing skills was well worth conducting. This was the urge to the conduct of this study.

### **Research questions**

This research aimed to investigate (i) the relationship between the blended learning mode and students' improvement in writing and (ii) the attitudes of students towards this blended mode. There were three research questions as follows:

- (i.) Do students achieve higher scores in the post-test than in the pre-test?

- (ii.) What are the perceptions of students about the applied blended learning mode?
- (iii.) Is there a correlation between the students' post-test scores and their attitude on the applied blended learning mode?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Definition***

There have been various dimensions and methods to describe the term 'blended learning'. Perhaps, the initial concept of blended learning was attributed to Colis and Moonen (2001), cited in Afip (2014), who defined blended learning as "a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning so that instruction occurs both in the classroom and online, when the online component becomes a natural extension of traditional classroom learning" (p.38). Valiathan (2002) investigated the term blended learning in three dimensions including the skill-driven, attitude-driven and competency-driven learning, all of which received strong involvement from the instructor, facilitator and media support tools. Thorne (2003) regarded blended learning as a natural form of learning, specifically the integration of "innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning" (p.16). In a broader sense, Whitelock and Jelfs (2003), cited in van Moergestel et al. (2016) proposed the three aspects of blended learning as "the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches, the combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment and the combination of a number of pedagogic approaches, irrespective of learning technology use" (p.274). To put it briefly, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) regarded blended learning as "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with on-line experiences" (p.96). Blended learning was seen as the mix of traditional practices with online learning activities to produce effective, efficient, and flexible learning (Stein & Graham, 2014). The most widespread concept of blended learning, suggested by many researchers was introduced by Driscoll (2002). He helped identify the four features of blended learning as mixing modes of web-based technology, combining various pedagogical approaches, combining any form of instructional technology and combining instructional technology with actual job tasks. This form of learning appeared to open up a new horizon of knowledge and opportunities for all the teachers and learners involved. In the scope of this study, blended learning is based on the concept of the integration of technological tools and applications into traditional learning activities to give students effective learning experiences through a variety of activities, collaborative work, self-reflection and feedback.

### ***Previous research studies***

A variety of research studies have been carried out hoping to verify the effectiveness and possibilities of this learning mode. In 2012, Pop and Slev aimed to maximize the efficiency of EFL learning in a class-size project. They combined the asynchronous elements including self-paced asynchronous writing and speaking tasks and collaboration via writing blogs. The outcomes revealed that the opportunities to collaborate and work outside classroom boundaries helped students generate their satisfaction and enthusiasm in communicating in the target language. Adas and Bakir (2013) explored how blended learning worked for their university writing class. The experimental study involved sixty Palestinian students during a semester using the online tool- "Moodle". A few tasks required by students included posting their feedback to a given paragraph by teacher as error recognition; submitting a

paragraph written by themselves on a given topic; and giving opinions to a piece of posting. The t-test results showed that the experimental members enjoyed the online working experience, improved significantly their writings using topic sentences, spelling and grammar, punctuation and produced better coherent works. In the same year, Ferriman (2013), hoping that blended learning would be a compensation for the problem of class-size, conducted a quasi-experimental study to compare the writing performance of two groups, each with fifteen undergraduates. However, the outcomes of the experimental group, exclusively treated with the online discussion boards for document sharing, personal messaging and conferencing, were not statistically dominant.

As blended learning involves the use of technologies in various forms, researchers have also been trying to explore different possibilities of technological innovations, software and applications. Keles (2012) gave twenty-four elementary teachers instructions on mind mapping techniques, then interviewed them on a six open-ended questions for their viewpoints. Results indicated that mind mapping helped teachers perform better in planning and evaluating lessons, giving instructions and making the lessons interesting. For students, the usefulness of mind maps involved solving problems, generating ideas, enriching vocabulary, sharpening reading skills and preparing for presentations (Buran & Filyukov, 2015). As for the effectiveness of using Facebook as a component of blended learning, Tananuraksakul (2014) conducted a qualitative research study with fifty-three students in a university writing class in Thailand and found that Facebook could be used as a blended learning tool and platform to learn with, not to learn from. According to Majid, Stapa and Keong (2015), when used as a tool for blended scaffolding strategies and a platform for technological aid, Facebook was proven to help students improve the writing process and writing performance. Challob et al., (2016) explored the effects of a 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. After thirteen weeks through the writing process in face-to-face and online learning modes via a class blog and online Viber online discussion and collaboration on writing in Viber groups, the participants improved greatly in their writing task. Another study on the application of reflective writing was carried out asynchronously using Edmodo as an effective pedagogy for learning English by Sasidharan (2018). Participants approached the materials posted on Edmodo and produced their reflective writings. Results showed that this learning style helped promote student autonomy and active participation in learning, and nurture essential skills such as critical thinking, creativity and problem solving.

These scientific works act as a firm ground to the belief that blended learning is an indispensable component to language learning in the time of technological revolution. However, what to blend and how to blend to fit the purpose of teaching and learning still remain a question for many educators.

## **Methodology**

### ***The sample***

The population of the research study was freshmen of an intensive English 2 writing class, with an English proficiency at the intermediate level. All of these students progressed from intensive English 1. Upon completing intensive English 1, these students had acquired basic grammar and structures and learnt to write full paragraphs from about 100 to 150 words in

the genres of giving narration, description or opinion and even write full essays of up to 250 words. They had frequent exposure to traditional classroom practices, for instance, listening to explanations, looking at samples, practising writing from sentences to paragraphs and essays, receiving new words and phrases for writing from lecturers.

A brief survey on the first class meeting was carried out with the purpose to find out how much these students understood the concept of blended learning or how familiar they were with the teaching and learning practices manipulated by blended learning. The finding revealed that all of these students knew very little about blended learning. Some might have attempted to get online, searching for sample materials but they did not receive formal instructions on how to utilise the effects of this learning mode.

All the students were asked to do a thirty-minute pre-test (*See Appendix 1*) with one essay question taken from the TOEFL iBT exam, of which the writing section includes an integrated writing question and an independent essay question. The papers were graded by two examiners based on the grading rubrics (*See Appendix 2*) issued by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to ensure objective and standard scoring. Based on the scores of the pre-test and the results from the brief survey, thirty-two out of forty students of the class were selected to be participants of the research.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-Test*

Variable	Total Count	Mean	Median	St Dev	Min.	Max.	Range	Q1	Q3	IQR
Pre-test	32	50.69	50.00	10.98	30.00	70.00	40.00	42.00	60.00	18.00

## Theoretical framework

Depending on various factors like the purpose, the availability of facility, the knowledge and capability of both teachers and students, the time allowance, teachers can choose to blend the study mode in different ways. However, Bersin (2004), divides blended learning into two main approaches. The first approach is the Program Flow Model” (p.56). The online and offline components were selected based on the lesson objectives so as to best benefit the learners. In other words, this model “creates a step-by-step curriculum that integrates several media into a chronological program or syllabus” (p.56). The second approach is called the “core-and-spoke” model. “Core” refers to the essence of the course, which can be the basic face-to-face approach (offline mode) or a web-based software or platform (online mode). Then, other resources or supplementary materials (e.g. handouts, activity worksheets, assessment, exercises, online quizzes, software) are provided to complement the primary approach.

In this study, a combination of the two approaches described by Bersin (2004) was employed. With the long-lasting positive mindset towards the traditional approach in Vietnam and also, due to the present context of face-to-face learning at universities, the primary approach was the face-to-face class meetings, added by a variety of teaching and learning activities in both the online and offline mode to make blended learning an interesting and effective experience.

## The steps and components

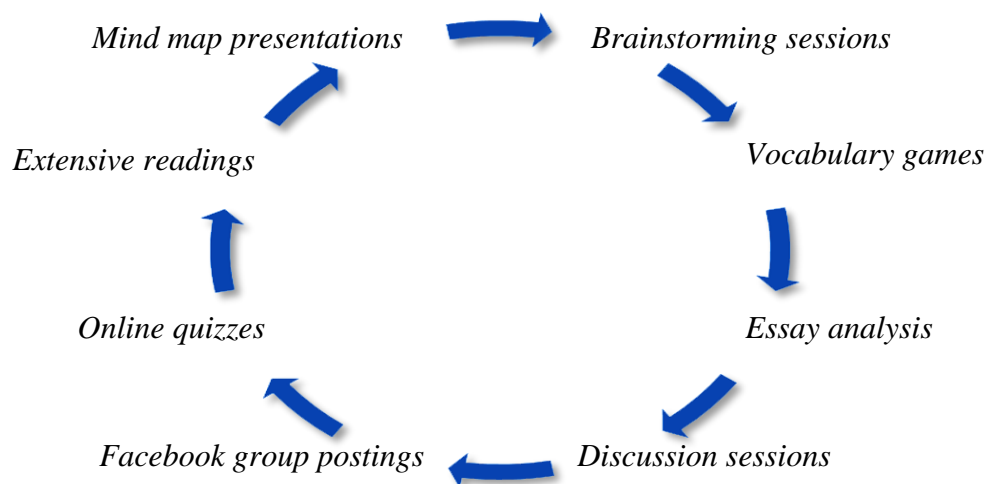
The first class meeting was reserved for informing students of the basic information of the course and for getting their approval to join the study. Their information and scores were promised to be used just for scientific purposes and for the improvement of future classes. Students also understood that they would have the opportunity to experience the combination of different methodologies and techniques for their benefit. Specifically, they would be exposed to and get involved in a variety of traditional classroom practices (e.g. getting explanations, brainstorming, discussion) and collaborative blended learning activities (e.g. mind map presentation, extensive reading, Facebook group) so as to improve their English essay writing competence (Challob et al., 2016). With detailed orientations and a clear recognition of expectations, the participants would be more motivated and make better plans to achieve the aim at the end of the course Ushioda (2013).

The students then proceeded with the pre-test and the brief survey, based on which thirty-two participants were selected. The names of the participants were recorded but no announcements on the list of selection were made since it was believed that failure to be a selected participant could hurt the student psychologically and this might affect the whole process and the effectiveness of the study. At the end of the first class meeting, the students formed eight study groups, each consisting of four members. A Facebook group in a secret mode was created and students were added to the group to get ready for the intensive sessions of the course. These groups were called fixed groups and would operate on the purpose of completing all the tasks needed to be done outside class time. In each class meeting, the lecturer would hold activities to form temporary groups depending on the purpose of the class.

In order to maintain flexibility and variety of each class meeting from weeks 2 to 13, different components were combined to fit the objectives of the lesson instead of applying a single component per class. The components of the course are presented in the visual below.

**Figure 1**

### *Course Components*



### ***Brainstorming sessions***

Brainstorming sessions occurred in almost every class meeting. Students worked together to discuss and gather ideas for some topics given by the lecturer. They then created a simple mind map summary of ideas before it was rotated to various groups for revision or adjustments. When the mind map summary completed a cycle and returned to the group, students reviewed and learned a great deal from the ideas their friends had added or even from the adjustments or corrections that other groups had made on the mistakes. Various techniques were used for generating groups as a means to get students work with different personalities.

### ***Vocabulary games***

To break the boring atmosphere seen in some traditional writing classes, students joined a variety of traditional pen and paper or technology assisted games such as hangman, hot seat, running dictation, Kahoot, puzzle. With a belief that games provided pleasant and motivating environments which helped foster vocabulary learning (Alavi & Gilakjani, 2019), the games were designed to involve all the students into the cycle of reviewing, learning, practising and testing on what they had learned. To reach a further aim, these games were expected to help students activate their schemata and unconsciously moved their vocabulary range from the short-term to the long-term memory (Thornbury, 2017). Therefore, this activity was used flexibly at the end of the class as a revision, wrap-up or at the first stage as a warm-up.

### ***Essay analysis***

In order to help students learn and improve on essay writing naturally, the Inductive Approach was employed. According to Brown (2014), learning a second language as well as the mother tongue involved a largely inductive process in which learners had to infer or form certain rules based on the observation or the facts around them. In this study, mostly in the presentation stage of the lesson, many opportunities were created so that students were requested to work in groups, pairs or individually to analyze a part of an essay (thesis statement, introduction, a body paragraph ...) or a complete essay for error recognition or modification. Essay analysis could be in form of paper work or a blended Facebook posting. This activity helped students recognize the elements that should be included in each part of the essay, how various parts of an essay were connected, how to present the main ideas and supporting details in a logical way, how to express the ideas in English, how to improve the range of academic words.

### ***Discussion sessions***

Students had discussion sessions in most class meetings since group work or collaborative learning help boost the students' talking time and lead to more student ownership of responsibility for that learning (Lowman, 1987 cited in Laal et al., 2012). As for the grouping techniques for small activities in class, various techniques of group formation including traditional and technological applications were used (e.g. counting off, picking random partners from a hat, matching names alphabetically, matching favourites, random paper notes, <https://flipquiz.me/grouper>). These techniques just served the purpose of

providing students with opportunities to work with different partners, and at the same time, fostered appropriate exchanges and interactions (Dubé et al., 2013).

### ***Facebook group posting***

This activity served as the main channel for interaction between teacher and students throughout the course. In addition to seeing announcements and reminders, students posted their work, read others' work and gave comments or corrections and read teacher's corrections. Also, they could post the online reading passages, the collection of vocabulary they learned together with the definition and examples. This channel acted as a platform for students to conduct peer-assessment and self-assessment. The Facebook group was set in the secret mode, therefore, all the postings would not cause annoyance to the Facebook community and kept the participants away from the fear of being laughed at or criticized by outsiders.

### ***Google quizzes***

A few quizzes were given to test students' progress and vocabulary at various stages of the course. Quizzes, designed with Google forms, included vocabulary check, paraphrasing tasks, error recognition, paragraph reorder, essay analysis. With mutual agreement between the lecturer and the students, at certain time of the week, quizzes were posted on the Facebook group to fit students' interest in technology and to go green for the environment.

### ***Extensive reading***

This activity was regulated as an outside-class time task. With the topic taken from the theme of the lesson, students in groups searched for relevant reading passages online, then chose a passage of their interest for their group. After that, they were required to make a mind map summarising the key information and posted the passage onto the class Facebook group. On the next class meeting, groups took turns to give the mind map presentation to the whole class. The audience including the lecturer could ask further questions for clarification or elaboration for any confusion in the presentation. The class then voted on the best presentation of the day. Bonus points or rewards were used as an honor or recognition to the winning group.

### ***Mind map presentations***

With the information taken from the extensive reading or group discussions, students worked together in groups to make a mind map on A3 sheet with key notes, illustrations, colors and decorations depending on their creativity. Every member in the group had to take charge of one part of the presentation, got ready and together delivered the presentation to the whole class.

In week 13, students were required to do the post-test, which was in the same format with the pre-test (*See Appendix 3*) and the questionnaire (*See Appendix 4*). Results of the pre-test, post-test and the questionnaire were then used for the analysis to answer the research questions.



## **Research instruments**

### ***The Pre-test and Post-test***

The pre-test and post-test (See Appendixes 1, 3) were designed in the same format, which was a thirty-minute-essay writing task of the TOEFL iBT exam. The purpose of the two tests allowed for quantitative comparisons to answer the first research question.

### ***The Questionnaire***

The questionnaire (See Appendix 4) includes thirty-two questions in a five-point Likert scale (to get general attitude/ opinion), checkboxes (to get feedback on benefits/ drawbacks) and paragraphs or open questions (to get descriptive feedback/ comments). A Google form design was applied for the convenience of conducting and collecting results. Data collected from the questionnaire was used to answer the second research question. Answer to research question 3 came from the combination of post-test scores and the questionnaire findings.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection happened at two main phases of the study:

- Phase 1: the pre-test, taking place in the first class meeting
- Phase 2: the post-test and the questionnaire, taking place at the end of the course (week 13)

Two teachers were in charge of grading the pre-test and post-test papers, based on the detailed scoring rubrics issued by ETS. It was a requirement to record key notes of the grading, which would be the foundation for later analysis

To examine the scores of the pre-test and the post-test, the statistical tool Minitab19 was used to provide descriptive statistics for analysis. Descriptive statistics of the pre-test were used to select participants whereas those of the post-test were used to make a comparison. A paired sample T-test and Confidence Interval (CI) were analysed to examine the improvement of the participants.

To process data taken from the questionnaire, the excel spreadsheet was utilised due to its useful functions. When all the participants finished the questionnaire, the responses were recorded in a Google sheet, which then was saved as a spreadsheet file. Automatically, names of the respondents were presented in rows and their responses to each question were placed in corresponding columns/ cells. This allowed the production of graphs or calculation on percentages quickly and easily.

Via MiniTab19, the correlation between the post-test scores and the attitude of students towards the applied blended learning mode was calculated to answer research question 3.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Post-Test*

Variable	Total Count	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Min	Max.	Range	Q1	Q3	IQR
Post-test	32	71.53	72.50	6.77	60.00	85.00	25.00	65.25	78.00	12.75

**Table 3**

*Estimation for Paired Difference*

Mean	Std. Deviation	SE Mean	95% CI for $\mu$ difference
-20.84	12.19	2.15	(-25.24, -16.45)

Statistics from Tables 2 and 3 showed that the participants improved significantly in the post-test ( $M= 71.53$ ) compared to the pre-test ( $M = 50.69$ ). The score range of the post-test also moved positively in comparison to that of the pre-test, with Min (60.00), Max (85.00) and Min (30.00), Max (70.00) respectively. With 95% confidence, the scores of the post-test were significantly different from those of the pre-test.

### *The Questionnaire*

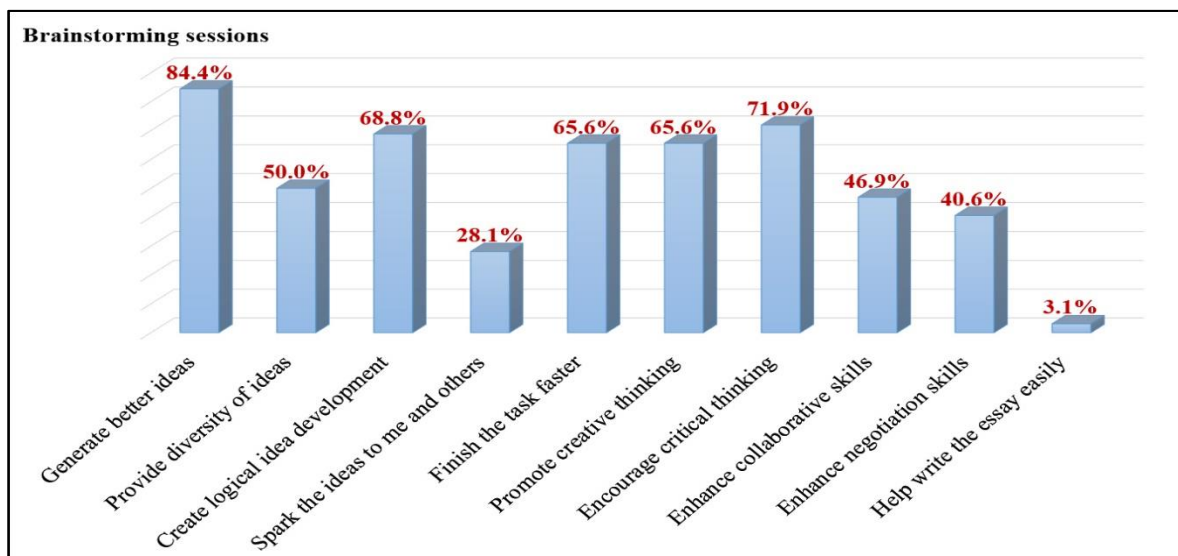
Quantitative data were analyzed with major findings displayed in the visuals below.

**Table 4**

*The Ratings of Usefulness of Each Component*

	Very useless	Useless	Not sure	Useful	Very useful
Brainstorming sessions	0.0%	3.1%	12.5%	59.4%	25.0%
Vocabulary games	0.0%	3.1%	12.5%	43.8%	40.6%
Essay analysis	0.0%	0.0%	9.4%	43.8%	46.8%
Discussion sessions	0.0%	3.1%	9.4%	43.8%	43.7%
Facebook group posting	0.0%	0.0%	21.9%	43.8%	34.3%
Google quizzes	3.1%	0.0%	18.8%	37.5%	40.6%
Extensive reading	0.0%	0.0%	18.8%	40.6%	40.6%
Mind map presentations	0.0%	3.1%	21.9%	46.9%	28.1%

The general ratings of the usefulness of each course components (Table 4) clustered mostly at 'useful' and 'very useful' with the percentage for Essay analysis topping at 90.06%, followed by Discussion sessions and Vocabulary games with 87.5% and 84.4% correspondingly. Still, 3.1% was witnessed at 'very useless' for the quizzes and another 3.1% was found at "useless" in four components: brainstorming sessions, discussion sessions, vocabulary games and mind map presentations.

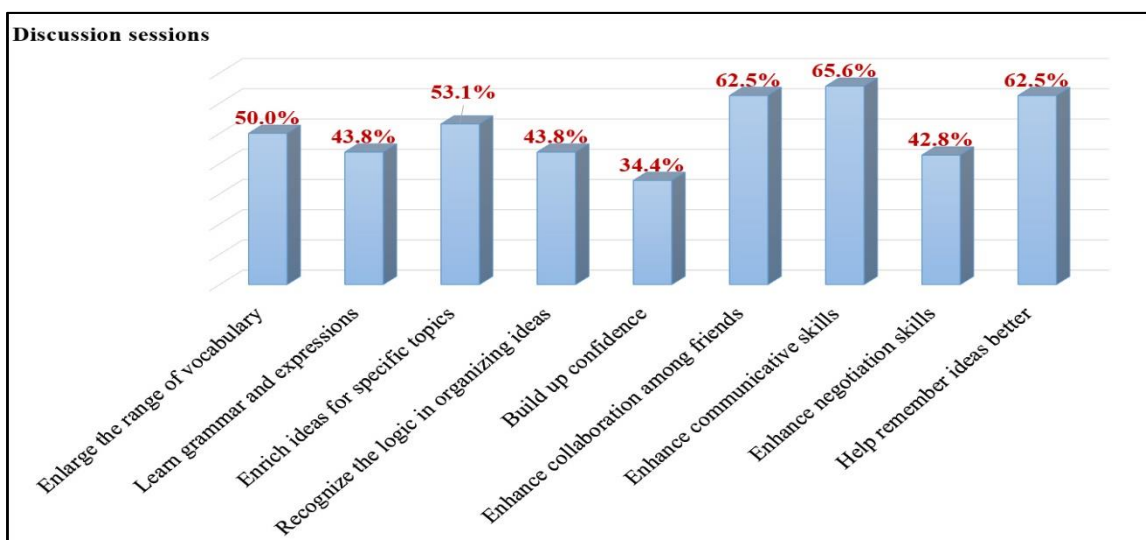
**Figure 2***The Benefits of Brainstorming Sessions*

The illustrations in Figure 2 reported that the benefits of the brainstorming sessions possessed a wide coverage. This typical activity of Communicative Language Teaching resulted in 84.4% saying it helped generate ideas. More importantly, approximately two thirds or more out of the students reported that this activity promoted critical thinking, creative thinking, fast thinking and logical thinking, which are the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills required by any learners to meet the demands of the changing world (Ongardwanich et al., 2015).

**Table 5***The Benefits of Vocabulary games and Google quizzes*

Vocabulary games		Google quizzes	
Create interesting learning atmosphere	56.3%	Interesting	71.9%
Create a competitive learning environment	34.4%	Help build up vocabulary and collocation	65.6%
Build up and review useful language	34.4%	Time saving	56.3%
Enhance collaboration	18.8%	Encourage vocabulary check	56.3%
		Help review skills learnt in class	43.8%
		Encouraging due to the instant results	43.8%
		Competitive	40.6%

The percentage from Table 5 stressed on the belief that interesting environments fostered the process of learning and undoubtedly, most students would like to associate games with the learning process. More than half favored vocabulary games as they helped create an interesting classroom where students could learn, compete, enrich their vocabulary capacity and strengthen cooperation.

**Figure 3***The Benefits of Discussion Sessions*

As shown Figure 3, joining class discussions helped students improve communicative skills, enhance collaboration and remember ideas better with more than 60% for each. Also, as a follow-up for the extensive reading activity, nearly half of the students voted that they could work, discuss and consequently figure out the logic in organization of ideas. This proved to be a useful activity with a variety of benefits gained by the students involved.

**Table 6***The Benefits of Facebook Group Postings*

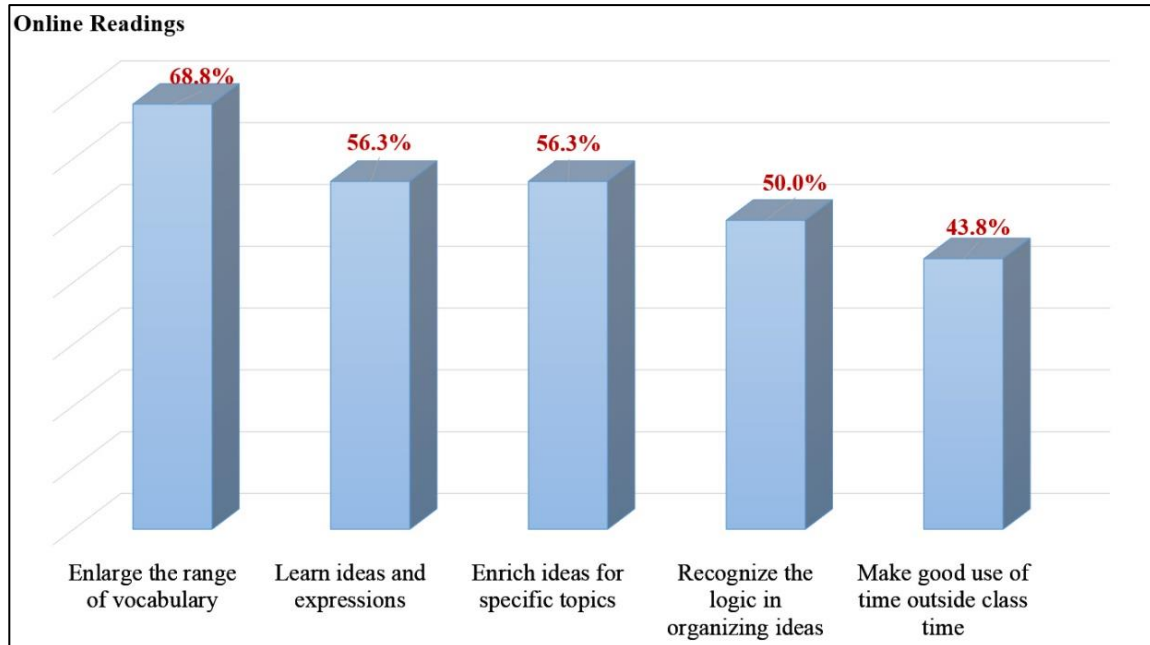
Facebook Group Postings	Percentage
Enhance responsibility	65.6%
Make better word choice	56.3%
Improve technical skills	53.1%
Self-adjust	53.1%
Convenient	46.9%
Enrich ideas for specific topics	40.6%
Recognize the logic in organizing ideas	40.6%
Practise using grammar and structures	40.6%
Learn techniques in arranging ideas	37.5%
Relaxing	28.1%
Keep informed	28.1%
Promote participation and feedback	28.1%
Foster active learning	25.0%
Enhance communicative skills	21.9%
Enhance collaboration	18.8%
Build up confidence	12.5%
Enhance negotiation skills	12.5%

The activity of Facebook group postings also received encouraging feedback. Up to 65.6% of the participants reported that the act of posting reading passages, posting written paragraphs or whole essays, posting comments and receiving instant feedback via Facebook

gave them a sense of responsibility for their learning. At the same time, the majority of the population admitted that this activity provided them with a technical edge and helped them improve on the aspects of word choice (56.3%) and self-adjustment in language learning.

**Figure 4**

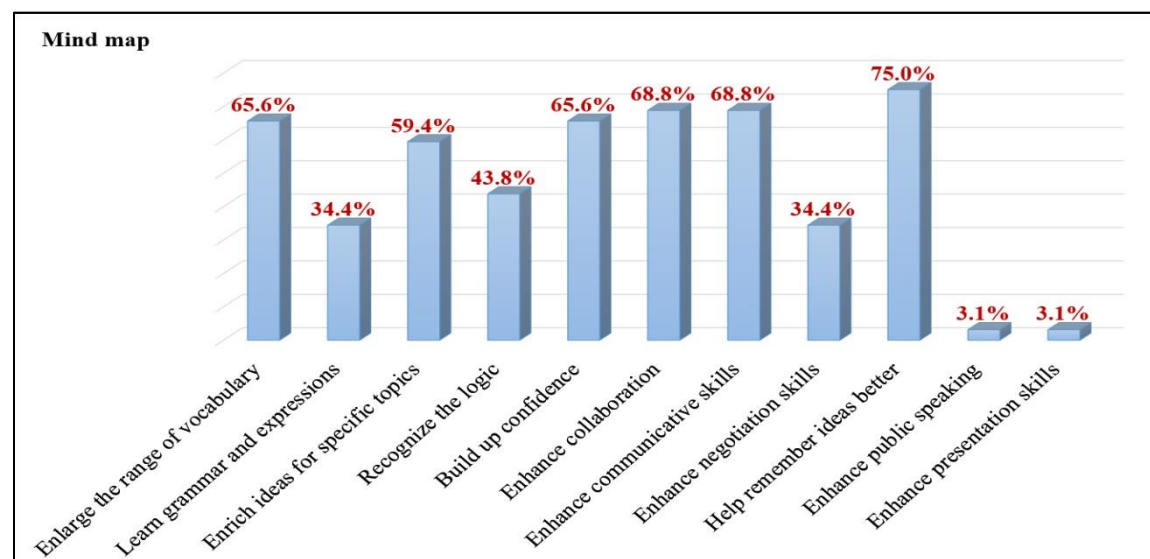
*The Benefits of Extensive Reading*



Specific ratings on the online reading activity showed that this activity brought about many advantages. The peak of this component lay in improving the vocabulary range (nearly 70%). In addition, students could equip themselves with more ideas for future use and above all, they could form a kind of logic in organization of ideas naturally. This self-recognition was very useful and worked as basic background when they started to learn about the structure of essays.

**Figure 5**

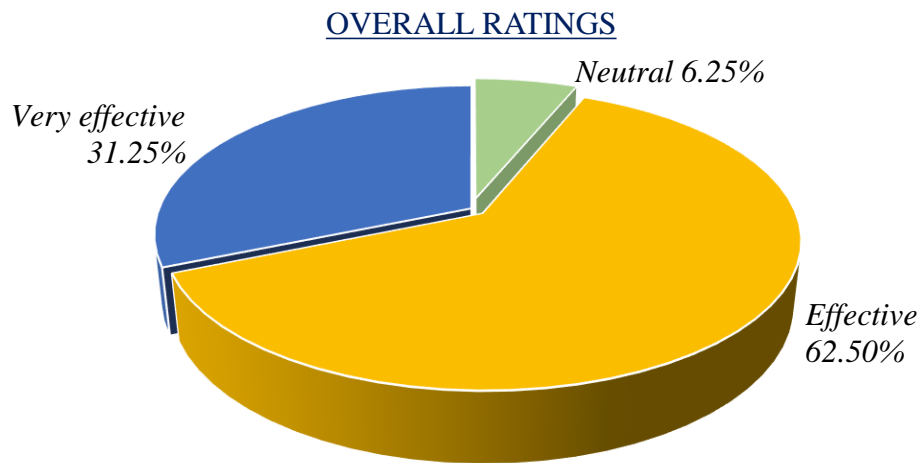
*The Benefits of Mind Map Presentations*



The mind map presentations witnessed quite a lot of positive feedback (Figure 5). In addition to helping to enlarge the range of vocabulary and remember ideas better, the majority of the students agreed that this component helped improve their communicative skills, collaboration and confidence.

In a sincere manner, responses to the open-ended questions revealed many interesting thoughts and sharing, with a few listed below.

- *“Now I can organize a mind-map with suitable vocabulary, know the right structure for writing an essay.”*
- *“I have improved my writing skill, enhanced my vocabulary and become more confident when speaking in front of a crowd.”*
- *“I feel my self-study ability is better. I can work alone and listen to others, recognize my own shortcomings to fix it.”*
- *“I can master the organization of an essay, be aware of writing a thesis statement, suitable topic sentences and paraphrase the thesis statement. My vocabulary range and ability of paraphrasing improve. My presentation skills and collaboration skills together with negotiation skills and logic skills develop.”*
- *“I can be more logical in arranging ideas, more confident in communicating with friends and faster in collecting ideas for a topic.”*
- *“I improve my people skill, creative and logical thinking, vocabulary, negotiation skills.”*
- *“Beside the improvement in writing, the class gives me a habit of reading for ideas, I can do this for even other courses. I feel more confident because I can be faster in thinking, logical in talking or giving ideas.”*
- *“It helps me to improve and develop my self-awareness. I have to arrange my schedule in order to work with my team and finish homework on time. However, by working in group, I can learn more about vocabulary, different ideas from different people.”*
- *“This course uses many methods to help students improve skills. Personally, I think practising and posting homework on Facebook is a good idea because I not only learn from my mistakes but also learn from my friends in various ways of writing. Furthermore, I think it helps me to reduce time wasting on Facebook, and it is very convenient as well.”*
- *“Blended learning helps our learning more interesting and effective. I can access any files on Facebook group to review the organization of the essay, useful language use or some other techniques that my teacher posted for us. I also enjoy the mind map presentation moment while classroom is like a discussion room. We can share the reading we read and collect the ideas actively. Besides, the mini quizzes that teacher post every two days encourage us to do quickly but precisely to compete with others. Day by day it creates a good habit of learning actively. After class, I also want to read more for academic words and ideas for different topics then organize them in mind map to remember the ideas easily”.*
- *“I love the way we can work with friends and we can do much more outside the classroom.”*

**Figure 6***Ratings of the Applied Blended Learning Mode*

The overall ratings of the applied blended learning model on a 5-point Likert scale showed very positive results. 62.5% of the participants rated the learning style of the course as “effective” and nearly one third (31.25%) ticked their choice as “very effective”. Interestingly, no percentage was reported for negative attitudes.

### Discussion

In response to the research question 1, descriptive statistics recorded the post-test mean scores at 71.53, much higher than that of the pre-test at 50.69. Specifically, comparison of the standard deviation and range of the post-test scores (SD = 6.77, Range = 25) and pre-test scores (SD = 10.98, Range = 40) proved that the wide difference in the abilities of students have been shortened. Maybe due to the training with the new skills learnt, students have performed better in their post-test with the minimum scores of 60.00 compared to 30.00 in the pre-test. The paired sample T-test also revealed that at the 95% confidence level, there was a significant difference between the post-test and pre-test scores. After the thirteen-week training, improvement in the participants’ post-test scores was predictable. This could be a matter of maturity. However, when examining the descriptive statistics between pre-test and post-test in details, it is quite a surprise that there is strong improvement in the post-test scores compared to those of the pre-test. In other words, students achieved higher scores in the post-test than the pre-test. This indicates that students have benefited quite well from the course components. Hence, they fulfilled the requirements of the grading, and achieved certain standards of essay writing.

To answer the research question 2, findings on the attitudes of students towards the learning mode in general, the components in specific and the reasons behind their choices are elaborated. The general ratings (Table 4) positively indicated that all the components of both traditional and online learning activities were useful to the students throughout the writing course. With the positive attitudes of students towards the applied blended learning mode as a whole (more than 90% in Figure 6) and in components (at least 77% for each component in Table 4), there are grounds to belief that the mix of all the activities including brainstorming sessions, discussion sessions, essay analysis, Facebook group posting, online quizzes, vocabulary games, extensive reading and mind map presentations has been useful and beneficial to students in learning essay writing. However, as in Table 4 3.125% or one

student gave a negative attitude towards certain course components. It is understandable that styles of learning, perceptions of learning or attitudes towards a learning mode vary from people to people. There is no perfect methodology or learning style that can fit the demand of every learner. “What works with one learner may not work with another” (Manjula, 2017, p.298), therefore, 3.125% of negative response can be considered a norm. Furthermore, findings from the reasons for the attitudes towards each of the course component suggest that most students were pleased with the applied blended learning mode. With the sharing from the open-ended questions, there are grounds to claim that the combination of activities used in this blended learning mode has brought students many benefits and positively affected students’ attitude in learning, especially the confidence and self-direct learning habit.

**Table 7***The Drawbacks of the Components*

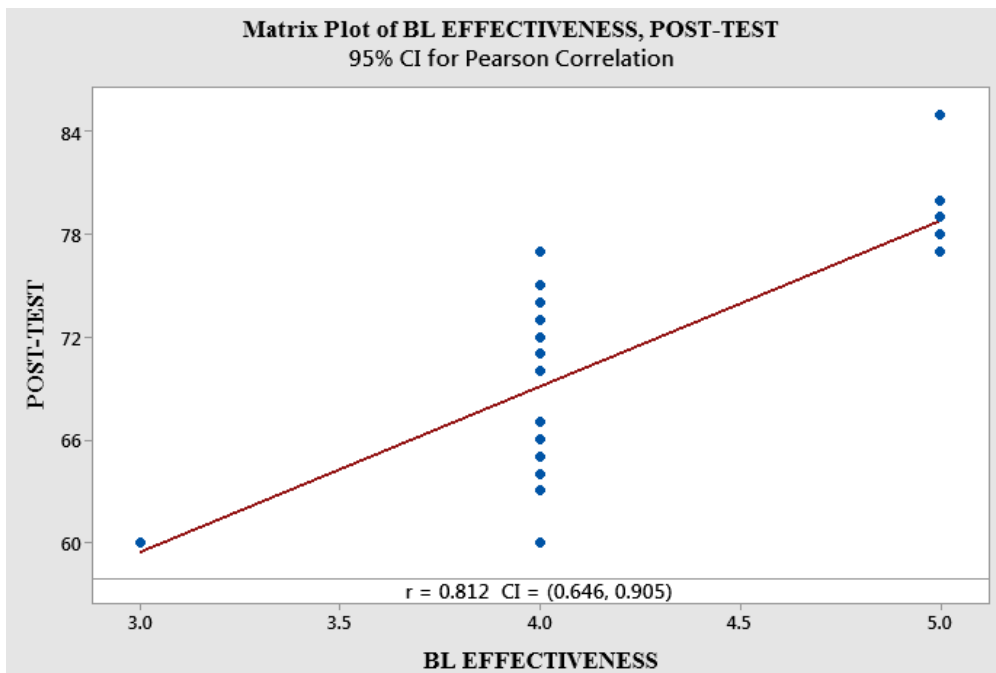
<b>Components</b>	<b>Major negative feedback</b>
Brainstorming sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Difficult to choose the suitable ideas</li> <li>– Some members don’t give opinions</li> <li>– Lose face sometimes</li> <li>– Noisy, difficult to concentrate</li> </ul>
Discussion sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Time consuming</li> <li>– Distracting due to too many different ideas/ opinions</li> <li>– Stressful and noisy</li> </ul>
Facebook group posting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Easy to cause arguments</li> <li>– Stressful</li> <li>– Time consuming</li> <li>– Easy to lose face</li> </ul>
Extensive reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Confusing sometimes</li> <li>– Time consuming</li> </ul>
Mind map presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Time consuming</li> <li>– Stressful</li> </ul>

On the other hand, feedback from the questionnaire leaves us with a few issues to consider. Most components were reported to be stressful and time-consuming as displayed in Table 7. This might be due to the intensity of many tasks given in class and outside class time, so they had to work under pressure and cope with deadlines all the time, as they had to fulfill other tasks and deadlines from other courses in the semester as well. Another concern was associated with the Facebook group activity (Table 5) in the sense that 11 out of 32 students claimed that participating in this learning component possibly resulted in having arguments with friends. This might be due to the frequent discussions and debates, from which students had to work together and reach agreement on specific ideas before sending a post onto the Facebook group. However, the real world is full of controversies and students need to learn to adapt themselves into the real world settings, and only being a part of this setting gives students a chance to obtain practical skills for life.



**Figure 7**

*Correlation between Attitudes towards Blended learning and Post-test scores*



To find out the answer to the research question 3, correlation between the students' attitudes towards the applied blended learning and the post-test scores was calculated. The correlation test showed a positive correlation. Specifically, the Pearson Correlation ( $r$ ) of 0.812 and the wide CI (95%, [0.464, 0.905]) proved that the relationship between the students' attitudes and the post-test scores were statistically significant. Additionally, the R-square (0.659) means that the effect size of correlation is quite large. 66% of the data has correlation. The statistical data allowed us to believe that there exists a correlation between the students' post-test scores and their attitude towards the applied blended learning mode.

### Limitations

It is obvious that high frequency of tasks in various skills urging students to finish in a thirteen-week course was really a pressure, therefore negative feedback on some learning components was unavoidable. Giving students the opportunity to experience this learning mode from the first day students start to explore their college years should lessen the pressure and allow them the time to enjoy the benefits of blended learning at ease. Another limitation lies in the reliability of the results which were based only on the questionnaire and score records of one experimental group due to the involvement of only one group in the research. The correlation test proves that there exists a correlation between the attitude and the post-test score, but the effect size reached the highest of 60% of the samples. The same model applied in a larger scale with both control and experimental groups would give a more scientific result. Moreover, the combination of course components is quite complicated, which means the results could come from the mix of all the components as a whole, the combination of some single components together or even just some single component. Related studies should be carried out to test the effectiveness of each component.

## Conclusion and Educational Implications

With the results found from the questionnaire and the statistical data, there are sound reasons to claim that the selection and arrangement of the course components were logical. Although which component brings students' improvement in the post-test is uncertain, the results fulfill the requirement of the study regarding the application of blended learning and which components to blend. Students benefitted from the course in a variety of aspects. Beside the improvement in writing competence, enhancement in typical skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for instance, collaborative skills, fast thinking, logical thinking, critical thinking, and creative thinking have all been reported. The short answers would excite any educator with the fact that this blended learning mode helps build and cultivate in learners the confidence and self-directed learning attitude, which is logically the trigger to autonomy and motivation for life-long learning. If possible, this research should be carried out in a larger scale so that the effectiveness of this learning model could be clearly examined and clarified.

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**APPENDIX 2. Adapted ETS Scoring Rubrics**

INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

**IE2 TOEFL WRITING – TASK 2**

## Independent Writing Rubrics

*\* Please be noted that key comments of students' responses are compulsory.*

<b>SCORE</b>	<b>Task Description</b>
<b>81 – 100</b>	<p>An essay at this level largely accomplishes all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ effectively addresses the topic and task</li> <li>▪ is well organized and well developed, using clearly appropriate explanations, exemplifications, and/or details</li> <li>▪ displays unity, progression, and coherence</li> <li>▪ displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity, though it may have minor lexical or grammatical errors</li> </ul>
<b>61 – 80</b>	<p>An essay at this level largely accomplishes all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ addresses the topic and task well, though some points may not be fully elaborated</li> <li>▪ is generally well organized and well developed, using appropriate and sufficient explanations, exemplifications, and/or details</li> <li>▪ displays unity, progression, and coherence, though it may contain occasional redundancy, digression, or unclear connections</li> <li>▪ displays facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety and range of vocabulary, though it will probably have occasional noticeable minor errors in structure, word form, or use of idiomatic language that do not interfere with meaning</li> </ul>
<b>41 – 60</b>	<p>An essay at this level is marked by one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ addresses the topic and task using somewhat developed explanations, exemplifications, and/or details</li> <li>▪ displays unity, progression, and coherence, though connection of ideas may be occasionally obscured</li> <li>▪ may demonstrate inconsistent facility in sentence formation and word choice that may result in lack of clarity and occasionally obscure meaning</li> <li>▪ may display accurate but limited range of syntactic structures and vocabulary</li> </ul>

<b>21 – 40</b>	<p>An essay at this level may reveal one or more of the following weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ limited development in response to the topic and task</li> <li>▪ inadequate organization or connection of ideas</li> <li>▪ inappropriate or insufficient exemplifications, explanations, or details to support or illustrate generalizations in response to the task</li> <li>▪ a noticeably inappropriate choice of words or word forms</li> <li>▪ an accumulation of errors in sentence structure and/or usage</li> </ul>
<b>1 – 20</b>	<p>An essay at this level is seriously flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ serious disorganization or underdevelopment</li> <li>▪ little or no detail, or irrelevant specifics, or questionable responsiveness to the task</li> <li>▪ serious and frequent errors in sentence structure or usage</li> </ul>
<b>0</b>	<p>An essay at this level merely copies words from the topic, rejects the topic, or is otherwise not connected to the topic, is written in a foreign language, consists of keystroke characters, or is blank.</p>

### APPENDIX 3. Post-test



INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

#### ESSAY WRITING (POST-TEST)

#### **TOPIC:**

In around 300 words, write an essay on the following topic:

Some people prefer to play team sports. Others prefer to play individual sports. Which do you prefer and why?

Give reasons and details to explain your opinion.

#### **WRITE YOUR ANSWER HERE.**

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## APPENDIX 4. The Questionnaire

### PART 1: THE BLENDED LEARNING COMPONENTS IN DETAILS

1. Which of the followings is/are your problems in writing an essay? You can tick more than one item.
  - Lack ideas due to lack of general knowledge
  - Have ideas but lack necessary vocabulary
  - Not understand the essay structure
  - Lack critical grammar for essay writing
  - Unable to differentiate between main ideas and supporting
  - Unable to arrange ideas in a logical order
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. How do you rate the usefulness of having extensive online readings to writing an essay?
  - Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful       Very useful
  
3. What are the benefits of the extensive online reading activity? You can tick more than one item.
  - Enlarge the range of vocabulary
  - Learn grammar and expressions
  - Enrich ideas for specific topics
  - Recognize the logic in organizing ideas
  - Make good use of time beside class time
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What are the drawbacks of the extensive online reading activity? You can tick more than one item.
  - Confusing sometimes. Don't know whether the information is reliable.
  - Time consuming. Need to check vocabulary to understand.
  - Boring. Reading is a passive activity itself.
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. How do you rate the usefulness of the mind map presentation activity to writing an essay?
  - Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful       very Useful

6. What are the benefits of the mind map presentation activity? You can tick more than one item.
- Enlarge the range of vocabulary
  - Learn grammar and expressions
  - Enrich ideas for specific topics
  - Recognize the logic in organizing ideas
  - Build up confidence
  - Enhance collaboration among friends
  - Enhance communicative skills
  - Enhance negotiation skills
  - Help remember ideas better
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
7. What are the drawbacks of the mind map presentation activity? You can tick more than one item.
- Time consuming
  - Stressful
  - Irrelevant. This activity is not related to developing skills of writing an essay.
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
8. How do you rate the usefulness of the in-class discussion sections to writing an essay?
- Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful      Very useful
9. What are the benefits of the in-class discussion sections? You can tick more than one item.
- Enlarge the range of vocabulary
  - Learn grammar and expressions
  - Enrich ideas for specific topics
  - Recognize the logic in organizing ideas
  - Build up confidence
  - Enhance collaboration among friends
  - Enhance communicative skills
  - Enhance negotiation skills
  - Help remember ideas better
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
10. What are the drawbacks of the in-class discussion sections? You can tick more than one item.
- Time consuming
  - Stressful
  - Noisy. It gives me a headache.
  - Distracting. Different people have different ideas.
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
11. How do you rate the usefulness of the essay analysis activity to writing an essay?
- Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful      Very useful
12. What are the benefits of the essay analysis activity? You can tick more than one item.



- Enrich ideas for specific topics
  - Recognize the logic in organizing ideas
  - Learn the techniques in arranging ideas in an essay
  - Build up confidence
  - Enhance collaboration among friends
  - Enhance communicative skills
  - Enhance negotiation skills
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
13. What are the drawbacks of essay analysis activity? You can tick more than one item.
- Time consuming
  - Stressful
  - Noisy. It gives me a headache.
  - Irrelevant. This activity is not related to developing skills of writing an essay.
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
14. How do you rate the usefulness of the brainstorming stage in groups (discuss the main ideas, supporting details and draw a mind map)?
- Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful       Very useful
15. What are the benefits of the brainstorming stage in groups? You can tick more than one item.
- Generate better ideas
  - Provide diversity of ideas
  - Create more logical idea development
  - Sometimes spark the ideas to me and other group members
  - Finish the task faster
  - Promote creative thinking
  - Encourage critical thinking
  - Enhance collaboration skills
  - Enhance negotiation skills
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
16. What are the drawbacks of brainstorming stage in groups? You can tick more than one item.
- Difficult to choose the most suitable ideas for the essay because different members have different point of view
  - Time-consuming
  - Boring
  - Make me lose face because i can't think of the ideas
  - Some members don't give opinions
  - Stressful
  - Noisy. I can't come up with my ideas
  - Irrelevant. This activity is not related to developing skills of writing an essay.
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_

17. How do you rate the usefulness of the Facebook postings and correction activity to writing an essay?  
 Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful      Very useful
18. What are the benefits of the Facebook postings and correction activity? You can tick more than one item.
- Relaxing
  - Enrich ideas for specific topics
  - Recognize the logic in organizing ideas in an essay
  - Learn the techniques in arranging ideas in an essay
  - Practise using grammar and structure in writing an essay
  - Make better word choice in writing an essay
  - Build up confidence
  - Enhance collaboration among friends
  - Enhance communicative skills
  - Enhance negotiation skills
  - Improve or sharpen the technical skills
  - Keep informed
  - Self-adjust from your own and your friend's errors
  - Promote participation and feedback between students
  - Make me feel more responsible for my writing and my group's work
  - Foster me learn/ participate actively
  - Convenient
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
19. What are the drawbacks of the Facebook postings and correction activity? You can tick more than one item.
- Boring
  - Time-consuming
  - Stressful
  - Easy to cause arguments with friends
  - Easy to lose face
  - Irrelevant. This activity is not related to developing skills of writing an essay.
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_
20. How do you rate the usefulness of the Google quizzes (Google form) to writing an essay?  
 Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful      Very useful
21. What are the benefits of the Google quizzes (Google form)? You can tick more than one item.
- Interesting
  - Competitive
  - Time saving
  - Encouraging because of instant results and correct answers shown

## Blended Learning in a University Writing Course

- Help build up vocabulary and collocations  
 Help review skills learnt in class  
 Encourage me to check more vocabulary and learn more useful structures  
 Others: \_\_\_\_\_
22. What are the drawbacks of the Google quizzes (Google form)? You can tick more than one item.
- Boring  
 Time-consuming  
 Stressful  
 Irrelevant. This activity is not related to developing skills of writing an essay.  
 Others: \_\_\_\_\_
23. How do you rate the usefulness of the vocabulary games in groups to writing an essay?
- Very useless       Useless       Not sure       Useful      Very useful
24. What are the benefits of the vocabulary games in groups? You can tick more than one item.
- Create interesting learning atmosphere  
 Create a competitive learning environment  
 Build up or review useful language for writing  
 Build up confidence  
 Enhance collaboration among friends  
 Enhance communicative skills  
 Enhance negotiation skills  
 Improve or sharpen the technical skills  
 Others: \_\_\_\_\_
25. What are the drawbacks of the vocabulary games in groups? You can tick more than one item.
- Boring  
 Time-consuming  
 Stressful  
 Noisy. It gives me a headache.  
 Irrelevant. This activity is not related to developing skills of writing an essay.  
 Others: \_\_\_\_\_

## PART 2: THE BLENDED LEARNING IN GENERAL

1. What do you like best in this course? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What do you like least in this course? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What improvements have you made after this thirteen-week course? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What activities help you make those improvements?  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What areas of your writing competence haven't seen any improvement?

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6. How do you rate the effectiveness of this learning mode?

Very ineffective       Ineffective       Neutral       Effective       Very effective

7. What do you suggest to make the course more effective?

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This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you.