

## TEACHING WRITING COMPETENCE IN THE PANDEMIC: AN EXPLORATION OF BLENDED LEARNING INSTRUCTION

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### ABSTRACT

Writing being one of the considered fundamental macro-skills especially in the context of formal communication and just like reading is crucial in improving educational outcomes and far-reaching implications, a reason why it must be taught even during the pandemic. In this competitive world, writing is also one of the skills that is necessary to excel more particularly in the workplace. However, despite of the fact showing the significant role of writing in a highly competitive world, it is noticeable that still many learners and sometimes graduates possessed very limited writing competence such as the case of the Philippines where learners have problematic writing competence as reported by Magsambol (2020) that some senior high school students cannot even write a decent English sentence and that data from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) on 2019, showed that fifth grade students in the Philippines are falling behind their counterparts in some Southeast Asian countries in reading, writing and mathematics. Specifically, in terms of writing, only 1% of Grade 5 learners in the Philippines achieved higher levels of proficiency, or those that met the highest level in the standards used by the study by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Hence, the teaching of writing competencies should be anchored on highly effective approach especially in this time when the academic landscape has been re-shaped due to the covid-19 pandemic. Thus, this quasi-experimental study was conducted to test the effectiveness of utilizing Blended Learning instruction to improve learners' writing competencies. Consequently, findings revealed that there is a significant difference in the pretest and posttest scores of the writing competencies being tested. Hence, Blended Learning instruction is considered an effective way of improving writing competencies of learners especially in the context of the covid-19 pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** Writing Competencies, Blended Learning, Covid-19 Pandemic, Quasi-Experimental

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is always considered a fundamental skill especially in the context of formal communication and just like reading, it is also fundamentally crucial in improving educational outcomes and far-reaching implications according to Boltron and Ramos (2021). As mentioned by Sumardi and Tarjana (2018), it is through writing that people are capable of sharing ideas, feelings, persuading and convincing others. In addition, Ramos and Gatcho (2020) mentioned that writing is one of the four fundamental language macro-skills that every individual is expected to learn and that it is corollary to the three other skills-reading, listening, and speaking and thus it cannot be learned in isolation. However, on one note, Al-Mukdad (2019) pointed out that writing has always been considered as one of the most challenging skills that a language learner is expected to acquire and in consonance with this fact, according to Barkaoui (2007), is that several other crucial

competencies like linguistic, cognitive, and socio cultural among others go along with it as the learner learns to develop his writing competence.

Moreover, Hubert and Bonzo (2019) emphasized that writing has already become ubiquitous in daily life and that learning writing should transcend beyond the skills of practicing grammar and vocabulary and that as supported by Vasseur (2021), writing is now being called into focus as a central skill for communication and literacies in the twenty first century. This contention simply affirms the fact that grammar and vocabulary are critical foundational knowledge and skills along with comprehension development for every learner who is determined to develop his writing competence and that as the learner acquires the writing competence, this should be used as a tool of expression of concepts for others to comprehend. Thus, the necessity to learn and acquire the writing competence is critical. Moses and Mohamad (2019) added that there are many consequences that could lead to major drawbacks in students' academic performance if they have a weak foundation in writing. Writing is not only vital in order to develop their academic performance, but also contributes to their social and emotional development. Hence, in this competitive world, writing is also one of the skills that is necessary to excel. Their inability to write well, may affect their chances to secure a job in the future.

However, despite of the fact showing the significant role of writing competence in the context of day-to-day activities like those that occur in the workplace, it is noticeable that still many learners and sometimes graduates possessed very limited writing competence. In Pakistan for example, Fareed, Ashraf and Bilal (2016) reported that the writing skills of the students are alarmingly weak and substandard. Similarly, in the Philippines, it has been reported that learners have problematic writing competence. In fact, Magsambol (2020), reported that in the Philippines, some senior high school students cannot even write a decent English sentence. Consonant to this, citing the data from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) on 2019, Balinbin (2020) reported that fifth grade students in the Philippines are falling behind their counterparts in some Southeast Asian countries in reading, writing and mathematics. Specifically, in terms of writing, only 1% of Grade 5 learners in the Philippines achieved higher levels of proficiency, or those that met the highest level in the standards used by the study by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The data showed further that almost half or 45% of Grade 5 learners in the Philippines were in the lowest band, which means they have limited ability to present ideas in writing.

The data presented by the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics notify that the writing competency of these learners were developed under the normal and usual academic landscape in the Philippines. On that note, worsening the problem at the current situation is the undeniable presence of the covid-19 pandemic which has clearly re-shaped the academic landscape as learning communities shifted from the traditional face-to-face instruction to mostly online learning. This means that despite the constraining effect of covid-19 to movements and gatherings, teaching and learning the outlined competencies including the need to learn writing competence actually never stop. This is because alternative platforms for instructional delivery are being utilized such as the use of internet and relevant technology. As mentioned by Nash (2020), online platforms are common feature of academic meetings this time and their use has been increasingly adopted as tool supporting during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nevertheless, the importance of employing online platforms alone for academic meetings had not been considered until the covid-19 crisis in early 2020.

Hence, the new academic setting requires modifications and possible migration in the teaching of writing competence to learners who clearly have poor writing competence prior to the pandemic. It is in this context that Blended

learning approach is further explored for possibilities of improving the writing competence of learners in the new normal across the areas of vocabulary, grammar and comprehension. This is because as mentioned, these are critical foundations of developing higher competencies in writing.

### **Blended Learning**

The virus has left a deep impact on almost all sectors; one of them being the higher education sector. Digitalization, internationalization, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) have been determinedly addressing topics in higher education for decades. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has made one thing firm, namely that we have to adopt new norms in our education sector — virtual learning or online learning is and will continue to be the order of the day.

Sometime in the early part of year 2000, according to Graham, Woodfield and Harrison (2013), most higher education institutions around the world have adopted blended learning approaches to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in their institutions thus its used has been encouraged in many HEIs. From an educational perspective, Chowdhury (2020) stated that blended learning refers to the integration of online teaching activities with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, systematic manner. Consonant to this, Neumeier (2005) defined blended learning as a combination of face-to-face (FtF) and computer assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environments and that the most important aim of a Blended Learning design is to find the most effective and efficient combination of the two modes of learning for the individual learning subjects, contexts and objectives. This means that both face-to-face and computer assisted learning are crucial modes in shaping the learning process.

This is because both of these modes can facilitate a huge variety of different communication models, tools and forms that allow for the implementation of different language learning methodologies and the formation of different social settings. Simply, according to Laster, Otte, Picciano, and Sorg (2005) the primary focus is on integrating two separate paradigms, synchronous and online-asynchronous learning.

However, subsequent to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Suleri (202) pointed out that the situation has left a deep impact on almost all sectors including the academic community and of which according to Bordoloi, Das, and Das (2021) there is a renewed interest on the role and utility of online and digital learning at the time of crisis across the whole world. Hence, the significance of blended learning approach has come to the spotlight. This is under the view of reconsidering the idea of pedagogy from traditional chalk-and-talk method to blended learning. As reported by Nijakowski, Lehmann, Zdrojewski, Nowak, and Surdacka (2021), the use of blended learning instruction in conservative dentistry turned out to be effective as it improved learning as highlighted in the investigation.

Hence in the context of blended learning, due to the assistance of computer technology, virtual learning comes in and as pointed out by Leask (2004), it is a good alternative for classical classroom learning as it focuses on both classroom and virtual learning environments. Through blended learning, learners have the possibility to study independently of place and time (Wich and Brunn, 2020) and as well as get connected to their teachers for synchronous meetings for inputs and feedbacks as lessons and learnings are processed.

It is in this context that the study was conducted to explore on the possibility of introducing Blended Learning approach at the Community College by seeking answers on (1) What is the learners' level of writing competencies in English when taught using purely modular instruction due to covid-19 pandemic?, (b) What is the learners' level of writing

competencies in English when taught using blended learning instruction as optional approach in times of the pandemic?, and (c) Is there a significant difference in the learners' level of writing competencies in English before and after using blended instruction?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study made use of the quasi-experimental method using non-randomized pretest-posttest design as introduced by Cook and Campbell (1979). The method was used to test the causal hypothesis if blended learning approach is introduced to the learners will provide significant difference in their writing competencies in English.

This research was conducted within the period of the covid-19 pandemic at Sibonga Community College in the Municipality of Sibonga, Cebu. The town is situated about 50.5 kilometers south of Cebu City. Furthermore, as stated by Pernia (2018), it was the municipal mayor who initiated the creation of the college even with the opposition of the members of the municipal council a local ordinance entitled Resolution No. 043 series of 2008, Ordinance No. 2008-01 was still approved. It was established for the main purpose of providing affordable and quality higher education opportunity primarily to community members of the town and as well as the neighboring areas. Just like any other academic institutions, Sibonga Community College is also very much affected by the covid-19 pandemic as it continuously strives to provide quality instruction to its learners.

However, due to its young age as an academic institution and is suddenly pressed by the quick shift of academic landscape, the institution is exploring for possible alternatives for better instructional delivery to its students. Hence, the study was conducted to explore on the possibility of strengthening the utilization of blended learning which subsequently can be used as support for request of additional fund support from the local government unit in providing the much-needed tools and equipment.

In addition, just like any other studies, permission was obtained from appropriate authorities prior to data gathering. Due to ethical consideration, similar to the study of Boltron and Ramos (2021), the quasi-experimental design was used since it is unethical to create a controlled and experimental group using randomization. This is because the parents of the 39 available respondents as well as the college administration prohibited the researcher from dividing the total number of students into experimental and controlled groups. The consent provided was only for the students as participants in the general study. Therefore, all of them should eventually be subjected to the utilization of Blended Learning approach in the teaching of writing competencies.

Moreover, it is notable that these participants were purposely selected considering the fact that the investigation intends to look for an effective approach in teaching and improving the writing competencies of the learners. Hence, these learners are graduates from various public schools in basic education within the surrounding community of Sibonga Community College and that they joined the Education program with the aim of becoming a part of the teaching profession after graduation. For that reason, it is believed that the total development of their writing competencies is crucial and critical as they too will be unfolding and shaping minds of learners in their time.

Thus, to find out the effect of independent variable which is the use of blended learning instruction, the writing competencies of the participants which include vocabulary, grammar and comprehension were pretested using the standardized instrument. Subsequently, these competencies were tested after the utilization of blended learning instruction.

Z-test was employed to determine whether the calculated means are different through the standard deviation. Moreover, the paired sample T-test was used to determine the possible significant difference between the means of the pretest and posttest.

The quasi-experiment lasted for 20 weeks of which, in the first ten weeks, the writing competencies to improve vocabulary, grammar and comprehension were developed following the purely modular modality. In this case, the learners are scheduled to visit specific sites to receive and return their modules and that feedback are provided via writing in the corrected modules. Moreover, in the implementation of blended learning, learners were still provided the module as part of the instructional materials but they are scheduled to be online in at least thrice a week for synchronous instruction and as well as feed backing to improve their expected output.

The level of writing competencies was tested using the standardized instrument. It consisted of 50 items spread across the micro-competence of vocabulary, grammar and comprehension. The pre-test and post-test results were used to find the significant difference at 0.05 level of significance using the z-test and t-test as statistical treatments.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table 1**

**Table 1: The Pre-test Level for English Writing Competencies**

Vocabulary as to	No. of Items	h.m	a.m	SD	Computed z-test	Critical z-value	Description
Affixation	7	3.5	4.07	1.48	2.44	1.96	Above Average
Context Clues	8	4	3.70	1.28	1.50	1.96	Average
<b>Totality</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.77</b>	<b>1.98</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Grammar as to</b>							
Subject-verb agreement	5	2.5	2.64	0.96	0.92	1.96	Average
Tense	5	2.5	2.64	0.74	1.18	1.96	Average
Voice	5	2.5	1.85	0.99	4.13	1.96	Below Average
Sentence Structure	5	2.5	2.51	0.76	0.11	1.96	Average
<b>Totality</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9.64</b>	<b>2.50</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Comprehension as to</b>							
Literal	4	2	1.62	0.75	3.21	1.96	Below Average
Interpretive	4	2	1.54	0.60	4.80	1.96	Below Average
Evaluative	4	2	1.44	0.72	4.91	1.96	Below Average
Application	3	1.5	1.23	0.67	2.52	1.96	Below Average
<b>Totality</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>5.82</b>	<b>1.71</b>	<b>6.12</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>Below Average</b>

□ h.m. –hypothetical mean \*a.m. –actual mean \*sd –standard deviation

The research shows that when relying merely on the usage of modular instruction, the learners' level of writing competencies across vocabulary, grammar and comprehension aspects yielded a computed Z-test of 0.85 interpreted as average level, 0.90 interpreted as average, and 6.12 interpreted as having a below average level.

Table 2

Table 2: Post -Test Level for English Writing Competencies

Vocabulary as to	No. of Items	h.m	a.m	SD	Computed z-test	Critical z-value	Description
Affixation	7	3.5	4.82	1.25	6.58	1.96	Above Average
Context Clues	8	4	4.18	1.48	0.76	1.96	Average
<b>Totally</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>2.19</b>	<b>4.28</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>Above Average</b>
<b>Grammar as to</b>							
Subject-verb agreement	5	2.5	3.51	1.02	6.18	1.96	Above Average
Tense	5	2.5	3.28	1.07	4.54	1.96	Above Average
Voice	5	2.5	2.31	1.00	1.20	1.96	Average
Sentence Structure	5	2.5	3.15	0.99	4.13	1.96	Above Average
<b>Totally</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12.26</b>	<b>3.47</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>Above Average</b>
<b>Comprehension as to</b>							
Literal	4	2	2.49	0.72	4.22	1.96	Above Average
Interpretive	4	2	2.13	0.83	0.96	1.96	Average
Evaluative	4	2	1.72	0.76	2.32	1.96	Below Average
Application	3	1.5	1.54	0.79	0.30	1.96	Average
<b>Totally</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.87</b>	<b>2.28</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>Average</b>

□ H.m. –hypothetical mean \*a.m. –actual mean \*sd –standard deviation

In addition, after the introduction of blended learning in the delivery of instruction to the participants, the study shows that the computed z-test of the learners' level of writing competencies across vocabulary, grammar and comprehension aspects is 4.28 interpreted as above average level, 4.06 interpreted as above average, and 1.02 interpreted as having an average level.

Table 3

Table 3: Significant Mean Difference in English Writing Competencies

Competencies/Content Areas	Tests	Mean	Computed t-value	Critical t value	Interpretation	Decision
Vocabulary	Pretest	7.87	17.58*	2.02	Significant	Reject H <sub>0</sub>
	Posttest	12.05				
Grammar	Pretest	9.64	4.28*	2.02	Significant	Reject H <sub>0</sub>
	Posttest	12.26				
Comprehension	Pretest	5.82	5.19*	2.02	Significant	Reject H <sub>0</sub>
	Posttest	7.87				

Finally, after comparing the results of the pre-test and post-test level writing competencies of the respondents, the statistical treatment shows that the computed t-values for the aforementioned English writing competencies are greater than 2.02 (critical value) which give a significant interpretation that reject the null hypothesis. Through Blended Learning Instruction, it helped the learners to be more exposed to affixes drills and practices for vocabulary competencies; grammar competencies like s-v agreement, tense, voice and sentence construction and practices for comprehension competencies such as main idea identification and mind mapping. In which, these subsequently improved in general their writing competencies.

### Teaching Writing Competencies through Modular Instruction

The development of writing competencies along the context of vocabulary, grammar and comprehension are considered critical among learners. This is because these are considered as cornerstones in the learning of complex writing skills along the way. Hence, according to Nalliveetil and Mahasneh (2017), since writing is not a naturally acquired skill, the learners of English as a Foreign Language have to take efforts to learn the spellings, word structures, sentence structures and higher-order skills to communicate the intended message successfully in different situations and contexts.

Moreover, when the academic landscape shifted from physical to non-physical sessions, the development of vocabulary competencies such as spelling and word structures, grammar competence such as sentence structures, and comprehension as part of the higher-order thinking skills were also affected. It is notable that even prior to the coming of the pandemic, as reported by Deshpande (2014), the enhanced writing skills at secondary and post-secondary education remains unfulfilled and thereby remaining as a challenge among undergraduate learners of English as Foreign Language. Hence the non-native English learners are required constant opportunities for improvement at every stage of learning how to write.

In this case, the Filipino learners of the English language under the period of the covid-19 pandemic were taught writing under the context of modular instruction modality. This was done as a bridging solution to continue instruction to these learners at the undergraduate learners so as not to waste time while the pandemic is on-going. Simply according to Ángela, Roberto, and Aurelio González (2021) is considered as an act of resiliency among teachers, students and the education system which is a crucial factor in the measures dealing with the effects of the pandemic. This because, as mentioned by Srinivasan, Lopez Ramos, and Muhammad (2021), educational institutions were not insulated from the impact of the pandemic a reason why in the initial weeks of the pandemic, many institutions were completely shut down and were forced to reinvent themselves to continue the educational activities. Hence in the context of the study, the reinvention made at Sibonga Community College was relied on modular instruction modality.

However, evidently, the statistical test results of the reinvention using modular instruction modality indicated that both the competencies of vocabulary and grammar are at the average level only and worse is that the comprehension competence is at the below average level. Hence, these results indicate the less effectiveness of modular instruction modality in the teaching of writing competencies to learners. This finding is in consonance with the study of Srinivasan, Lopez Ramos, and Muhammad (2021), in which learners preferred a hybrid education model with a lot of supplementary learning material.

Moreover, Lee and Song (2020) pointed out that teacher-assigned tasks may effectively promote learner engagement and quality instructions. However, by merely relying on modular instruction concerning on the learners' task of which almost cut off the learners from any social interaction with the teachers, the security of correct feedback is at stake. This is because while the teacher may be able to deliver instruction via the printed module and at the same time may be able to provided written feedback from the corrected material, the fact remains that the learner has no direct opportunity to clarify and verify his understanding of the concepts in the printed learning material. Hence, cutting the possibility of verifying and validating the acquired information by the learner through their interaction which is critical in the development of the targeted competencies. An idea supported by Tan, Whipp, Gagné, and Niels (2019) by contending that teacher-student interactions are fundamental to learning outcomes.

### **Teaching Writing Competencies through Blended Instruction**

Consequently, because of the danger that the pandemic has brought to the world especially in academic communities, according to Daniel (2020), many governments have ordered academic institutions to shift from face-to-face into online and virtual education for learners. This was done to make sure that continuous instruction was given to learners amidst the crisis of the pandemic. However, in the case of this study, the local community college opted to adopt modular instruction as its modality. Hence, the study was done to see if the introduction of blended instruction can actually improve their competences in the context of learning writing.

This is because after all, according to Bordoloi, Das, and Das (2021), following the outbreak of the Covid -19 pandemic, there began a renewed interest on the role and utility of online and digital learning at the time of a crisis across the whole world. The different experiments with collaborative learning, constructive learning, cooperative learning and transformative learning (TL) have shown that by adopting accessible, flexible and affordable technologies in education and by integrating in person and online activities while framing the learning objectives and assessing the expected learning outcomes of the learners, newer and effective ways of learning experiences can be visualized.

Consonant with this, as observed in the study, after the introduction of blended learning in the delivery of instruction to the participants, the study shows that the computed z-test of the learners' level of writing competencies across vocabulary, grammar and comprehension aspects is 4.28 interpreted as above average level, 4.06 interpreted as above average, and 1.02 interpreted as having an average level. This means that across the writing competencies needed to be developed, the usage of blended learning instruction resulted to improvement in their competencies. In which, under vocabulary competence, it improved from average to above average. Same findings show in the grammar competence from average to above average. Moreover, for comprehension competence, it moved up from below average to average.

The result proves that framing and assessing the learning outcomes are not the only ingredients of a successful teaching and learning process. This also requires the teaching modality that is most fitted in the context of the learners and the learning situation. Hence, the utilization of blended instruction in this case has obviously allowed the learners to gain more level in their writing competencies. Since it must be noted that writing as a discipline just like other disciplines that require practical exercises can be best taught with appropriate modality in an environment constrained by the pandemic. Thus, according to Ożadowicz (2020), the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes in sectors that required exposure such as the case of engineers is strongly determined by practical exercises.

Meaning to say, through the use of blended learning instruction in the teaching of writing, the modality has provided avenue for the learners to have an interaction in the verification and authentication of the concepts learned of which are crucial in the writing competencies. After all, as mentioned by Klímová (2008), blended learning undoubtedly contributes to the development and support of more interactive strategies not only in face-to-face teaching but also in distance education and that developing activities linked to learning outcomes namely place focus on learner interaction, rather than content dissemination.

Hence, the provision of interaction either between learner and learner or between teacher and learner through the use of blended learning instruction paved a way for this verification and authentication of concepts in a form of feedback by the teachers or reactions by the learners. This idea is anchored on the epistemological implication of Aristotelian logic that everything, meaning all concepts including those in the learning of writing competencies, either is or is not itself. As explained by Azad (2021), the only possibility of knowledge of something is to know it as itself, since what is not itself is non-being and does not exist. In other words, to know something in its true essence is to know it as self-identical and, consequently, what is not itself is either an illusion, and does not have essential being, or it is due to incomplete knowledge that it appears self-contradictory.



### Significant Mean Difference Before and After Using Blended Learning Instruction

The determination of statistical significance is made by the application of a procedure called statistical test. Underlying all statistical tests is a null hypothesis. For tests involving the comparison of two or more groups, the null hypothesis states that there is no difference in population parameters among the groups being compared. According to Leysieffer (1999), to decide whether the null hypothesis is to be accepted or rejected, a test statistic is computed and compared with a critical value obtained from a set of statistical tables. When the test statistic exceeds the critical value, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the difference is declared statistically significant. Any decision to reject the null hypothesis carries with it a certain risk of being wrong. This risk is called the significance level of the test.

In the study, after comparing the results of the pre-test and post-test level writing competencies of the respondents, the statistical treatment shows that the computed t-values for the aforementioned English writing competencies are greater than 2.02 (critical value) which give a significant interpretation to reject the null hypothesis. This means that there is a statistical difference in the writing competencies before and after the utilization of blended learning instruction.

Ultimately, a productive result was found in the use of the blended learning instruction. This finding is supported by Chowdhury (2020) on the fact that the implementation of blended learning tools in HEI can result in significant improvements in the effectiveness, reach and cost of providing education in comparison to traditional learning approaches. These improvements can be so profound that they have the potential to change the overall competitiveness of the entire institution.

### CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the improvement in instructional processes in turn led to positive outcomes that were measured through the scores recorded by students. This was observed through the utilization of Blended Learning Instruction which is considered an effective modality in teaching writing competence in this time of the pandemic. Hence, despite the physical division between learners and teachers, positive flow of instruction occurred and productive output are observed. The use of Blended Learning Instruction provides an alternative avenue of all those in the academic context around the world to continue the transmission of knowledge and exchange of concepts without curtailing the possibility of authenticating and validating this knowledge being shared.

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