

## Using blended learning to teach writing to Saudi EFL university students during the COVID-19 pandemic



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### ABSTRACT

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The worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled researchers and practitioners to investigate and implement alternative teaching methodologies due to the disruption caused to conventional face-to-face instruction. This study examined the efficacy of integrating the Blackboard platform and face-to-face classroom learning in a blended learning model for teaching writing skills to Saudi EFL university students via amalgamating the advantages offered by both online platforms and face-to-face learning. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, incorporating qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies. It employed a survey methodology, utilizing a questionnaire to identify the students' perceptions with respect to the use of blended learning in the context of writing instruction. In addition, interviews were conducted to determine the students' level of acceptance and willingness to participate in blended learning. The findings indicate that the participants exhibited a predominantly favorable attitude towards blended learning of writing. Furthermore, they demonstrated an awareness of the interconnectedness between engaging the Blackboard platform and face-to-face learning in writing instruction. The positive perspectives and receptiveness exhibited by the students towards blended learning underscore its potential to cultivate engagement, collaboration, and enhanced learning outcomes of writing instruction. The empirical evidence obtained from this study serves as a strong impetus for educational institutions and EFL instructors to utilize blended learning in writing instruction.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study's contribution lies in highlighting the efficacy of integrating the Blackboard platform and face-to-face classroom learning in a blended learning mode to teach writing skills to Saudi EFL university students. This study uniquely examined students' perceptions and their favorable attitudes towards blended learning and its potential to enhance writing instruction outcomes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant repercussions on educational systems on a global scale. As a result, educational institutions have been compelled to swiftly adjust their instructional methods in response to the unprecedented circumstances. The pandemic has unequivocally underscored the imperative to expeditiously shift from conventional face-to-face instructional methods to online as well as blended learning modalities. The blended learning framework facilitates direct interpersonal communication

between students and teachers, thereby cultivating a cohesive community atmosphere and enhancing student involvement (Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg, & Sicilia, 2018; Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013).

Blended learning leverages online technologies to enhance and support traditional teaching methods. Blended learning in higher education, according to Watson (2008), involves the integration of technology and traditional classroom instruction. This approach is characterized by its flexibility, allowing for the utilization of online training, assessment, and other learning modalities to maximize the advantages they offer. According to Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), a variety of factors motivated the shift towards online and blended learning. These factors encompassed the imperative to guarantee continuous educational delivery, compliance with social distancing measures, and the potential to cultivate digital literacy skills among students. According to Dhawan (2020), a considerable number of universities worldwide expeditiously adopted online learning as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic within a relatively short period.

Blended learning, facilitated by online platforms such as the Blackboard, provides students with the chance to get individualized feedback and engage in both asynchronous and synchronous discussions that facilitate the development of writing skills (Fu & Wang, 2021). Incorporation of digital tools and resources in the educational setting enables instructors to effectively foster engagement, creativity, and efficient writing skills among students, thereby augmenting the overall quality of writing instruction (Alharbi, 2015; Sukumaran, Xuan, & Liqiaoling, 2023). Furthermore, online platforms provide students with the convenience of accessing a diverse array of educational materials. This accessibility, in turn, facilitates their active participation in collaborative activities, consequently playing a pivotal role in enhancing and cultivating their writing skills (Ta'amneh, 2020; Yang & Kuo, 2023).

This study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on the effectiveness of writing instruction via blended learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, providing valuable guidance to educational institutions facing these unprecedented challenges. In this context, the study focuses on the development of writing skills among Saudi EFL university students.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Allan (2007) and Sharma and Barrett (2007) define blended learning as an instructional approach that integrates the advantages of online and face-to-face learning, fostering a comprehensive educational experience for students. This notion is further supported by the work of Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) who add that blended learning allows for the optimization of the potential provided by face-to-face as well as online methodologies. This entails enhancing and supplementing conventional teaching strategies using online resources, such as online discussion boards, group podcasts, and self-evaluation instruments (Allan, 2007; Sharma & Barrett, 2007).

Blended learning has undergone a notable shift in its application over time. Initially, it was primarily observed within corporate and higher education settings. However, there has been a clear tendency toward its acceptance in K-12 schooling as well. The study undertaken by Picciano, Seaman, Shea, and Swan (2012) provides evidence of the increasing prevalence of blended learning in K-12 educational settings, hence substantiating this transition. According to a study funded by the North American Council for Online Learning, blended learning exhibits promising prospects for emerging as the dominant approach in the future (Watson, 2008).

Wang, Han, and Yang (2015) conducted a study proposing that a blended learning system consists of six interrelated elements. The six key elements encompassing the educational landscape of blended learning include the presence of a teacher, a student, an educational institution, course content, technology, and learner support. In blended learning, the role of teachers extends beyond being mere knowledge providers. Instead, they are viewed as facilitators, moderators, advisors, and learning guides. This shift in perspective acknowledges the importance of fostering an active and engaged learning environment.

Consequently, students are prompted to take a more proactive approach to their educational path. They are encouraged to become researchers, practitioners, and collaborators, rather than passive recipients of information. In this blended learning context, the learning materials are designed to encourage both independent study and group projects. Further, while adopting blended learning, it is crucial that students get both academic and technical assistance to help them build and engage in successful learning practices including collaborative work and time management (Wang et al., 2015).

### *2.1. The Blackboard Platform*

In the context of writing instruction, the Blackboard offers a cohesive interface that facilitates the submission of assignments and the provision of feedback, therefore optimizing the workflow for both students and instructors. In the meanwhile, having a single area where all relevant information can be found is a boon to students' capacity to study independently and at their own pace. According to Alamer (2020), the use of digital submissions obviates the need for physical paper handling. Moreover, teachers have the ability to provide prompt and comprehensive feedback on students' written work using many mediums, including textual annotations, audio recordings, and even video recordings. The provision of tailored feedback has been shown to contribute to the enhancement of student learning, since it offers students individualized instruction aimed at enhancing their writing skills (Ta'amneh, 2020).

The Blackboard also offers a variety of functionalities that promote cooperation and interaction among EFL students within a blended learning setting. The use of discussion boards and chat forums promotes peer-to-peer contact, hence affording students the chance to actively engage in meaningful discussions and exchange valuable ideas and perspectives (Alharbi, 2019; Mohebi, 2023). The Blackboard facilitates the cultivation of student autonomy and fosters active involvement. According to Alamer (2020) the Blackboard facilitates independent learning by providing students the flexibility to access course materials, lectures, and other resources at their convenience. Additionally, the integration of multimedia components, such as videos and interactive exercises, inside the Blackboard platform, serves to promote student motivation and engagement. This, in turn, results in enhanced retention and application of writing skills, as shown by the findings of Ta'amneh (2020). Consequently, students exhibit increased engagement in the learning process, assuming responsibility for their academic growth and cultivating self-regulation skills.

Another key advantage of using Blackboard is that it allows teachers to effectively employ differentiated instruction strategies to meet the diverse needs of EFL students. According to Pishva, Nishantha, and Dang (2010), instructors can offer individualized learning paths that allow students to progress at their own pace and utilize supplemental materials that are tailored to address their specific areas of deficiency. In addition, teachers have the ability to create and execute formative tests inside the platform. These tests provide immediate feedback on individual students' advancement and allow instructors to modify their teaching methods appropriately (Pusuluri, Mahasneh, & Alsayer, 2017). The provision of flexibility in instructional methods furnishes an approach that prioritizes the student, so enhancing their active involvement and ultimately leading to enhanced educational achievements.

As such, the Blackboard is extensively used in educational institutions to facilitate blended learning endeavors. Nevertheless, the seamless integration of the Blackboard in blended learning settings presents some technical and pedagogical challenges. Technical problems associated with the Blackboard include concerns pertaining to system performance, usability, and compatibility across many devices and operating systems. The obstacles encountered by instructors in using the Blackboard within a blended learning environment were investigated in a study done by Alzahrani and Alhalafawy (2023). The results indicated that instructors often encountered a technical obstacle in the form of intermittent delays in the system's loading speed. Because of this problem, both teachers' efficiency and students' ability to learn were negatively affected. A related technical challenge faced by the Blackboard users is the need for uninterrupted internet access. According to a study carried out by Hind (2021), a number of Saudi university students had difficulties with internet connection when attempting to access the Blackboard for the

purpose of engaging in online sessions. The students voiced their dissatisfaction over the numerous interruptions and sluggish internet speeds they encountered, which impeded their capacity to engage in online conversations, retrieve course materials, and submit assignments.

In conjunction with technical obstacles, pedagogical challenges are also encountered while using the Blackboard in blended learning lessons. One of the primary pedagogical challenges encountered in implementing blended learning via the Blackboard is the proficient creation and dissemination of course materials. The significance of well-organized and captivating information in facilitating meaningful learning encounters for students has been emphasized in research (Mohsen & Shafeeq, 2014). The design of an effective course requires careful consideration of how materials are organized and sequenced, the integration of multimedia components, and the provision of explicit instructions (Kaid Mohammed Ali, 2017). Therefore, instructors must allocate their time and energy towards the development of efficient educational resources that are in accordance with the intended learning objectives. Another significant pedagogical challenge concerns the assessment and feedback processes in the online environment of the Blackboard. Assessing student learning effectively in this context requires careful consideration of various factors, such as the validity and reliability of assessment measures, ensuring academic integrity, and providing timely and constructive feedback (Pusuluri et al., 2017). Alongside, instructors encounter difficulties when it comes to formulating and executing online assessments that are in accordance with the desired learning objectives.

The Blackboard platform provides many advantages for blended learning, but it also has technical and pedagogical limitations. Solving these issues is crucial because it helps create more productive and interesting blended learning environments for students. In order to effectively use the Blackboard platform, instructors should actively leverage its potential by carefully addressing technical obstacles, such as ensuring stable internet access and optimizing the user interface design. Furthermore, it is essential to give equal importance to the pedagogical concerns that cover student engagement and assessment procedures. Thus, instructors can better use the potential of the Blackboard platform by proactively addressing these challenges, leading to a richer and classroom learning experience in blended learning settings.

Numerous studies have investigated the efficacy of the Blackboard platform for developing writing skills. Kassem (2018) case study revealed that the implementation of the Blackboard platform yielded a notable positive impact on the writing proficiency of English majors, while also fostering positive attitudes towards its use. Likewise, Motlhaka (2020) demonstrated that the Blackboard platform provided second language (L2) writers with an online learning community for collaboration and peer feedback, thereby facilitating the enhancement of academic writing skills. Ta'amneh (2020) utilized a quasi-experimental design and observed the effectiveness of the Blackboard platform in developing writing skills and improving attitudes towards writing. Furthermore, Al-khresheh (2021) conducted a literature review, highlighting the significant impact of the Blackboard platform on EFL writing classes, but identified persistent technical challenges. Collectively, these studies underscore the potential of the Blackboard platform in enhancing writing instruction, which is highly pertinent to the current study's focus on employing blended learning for teaching writing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## *2.2. Face-to-Face Learning*

Incorporating face-to-face learning into a blended learning framework has been shown to increase student engagement and collaboration with peers and instructors. According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), face-to-face courses provide many advantages such as the provision of prompt feedback, the opportunity for discussions, the facilitation of group activities, and the development of complex skills. Thus, these interactions contribute to a comprehensive and effective learning experience through facilitating the development of a collaborative atmosphere among students and enhancing the process of knowledge production as well as the exchange of experiences and viewpoints (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

In face-to-face learning, direct interaction with peers in a shared physical space facilitates the development of rapport and the establishment of social relationships. Interpersonal interactions play a crucial role in fostering a healthy learning environment as they establish a feeling of inclusivity and drive for achievement. The casual exchanges, such as informal conversations that occur before or after class sessions, facilitate enhanced social connections between students and their classmates as well as instructors. According to [Tang and Chaw \(2013\)](#), establishing a personal connection has the potential to augment student involvement, mitigate feelings of isolation, and cultivate a supportive learning environment.

However, there are particular challenges associated with the efficient incorporation of face-to-face learning within a blended learning framework. One significant challenge pertains to the inherent constraint of face-to-face contact hours ([Glazer, 2012](#)). In the context of a conventional face-to-face classroom setting, learners have the opportunity to engage in extensive interactions with both instructors and classmates, thereby facilitating the development of in-depth discussions and the provision of immediate feedback. Nevertheless, reducing face-to-face encounters in blended learning poses a significant challenge in terms of fostering comparable levels of engagement and interaction, thereby potentially diminishing the depth of interaction experiences. Furthermore, many students are acclimated to conventional face-to-face learning, making the transition to blended learning challenging. Some students may find it overwhelming to adapt to online learning environments and technologies, participate in asynchronous discussions, and manage the autonomy and self-regulation required for blended learning. The transition may induce resistance, frustration, or disengagement, thereby impeding students' progress toward learning goals ([Xu, 2021](#)).

### 3. AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching writing to Saudi EFL university students during the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the use of mixed research methods allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the topic, providing a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Saudi EFL university students. By employing both the questionnaire and in-depth interviews, the study aimed to capture both quantitative data on students' perceptions and satisfaction with blended learning, as well as qualitative insights into the specific pedagogical experiences that have proven effective in writing instruction. This holistic approach adds depth and richness to the study's findings, ensuring the reliability and validity of these findings.

### 4. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

1. What are the challenges and difficulties perceived by the participants in face-to-face classroom learning of writing?
2. What are the challenges and difficulties perceived by the participants during online learning of writing?
3. What are the challenges and difficulties perceived by the participants in online interaction?
4. What challenges and difficulties do the participants perceive in using technology for blended learning?
5. What challenges and difficulties related to learning flexibility do the participants perceive?
6. What challenges and difficulties related to learning management do the participants perceive?
7. How do the participants perceive their readiness for blended learning?

### 5. METHODOLOGY

#### 5.1. Participants

The data collection process encompassed the sampling of a group of 65 male students from the College of Languages and Translation at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU). Specifically, these students

were enrolled in the Level 3 Writing Course during the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022. The group's average age was calculated to be 20.2 years, with a range extending from 19 to 22 years.

### *5.2. Design of the Study*

The study followed a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2003), as both quantitative and qualitative data were employed. It employed a survey methodology, utilizing a questionnaire designed by Sriwichai (2020), to identify the students' perceptions regarding the implementation of blended learning in the context of writing instruction. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were employed as a means to acquire more profound information pertaining to the degree of acceptance and adoption exhibited by the students towards blended learning.

#### *5.2.1. The Questionnaire*

The questionnaire used in this study aimed to measure the perceptions of Saudi EFL students towards blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire included seven sections, covering classroom and online learning of writing, online interaction, technology utilization, flexibility, management, and readiness for blended learning. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by four experts in the field of EFL instruction.

These reviewers provided comments and suggestions focusing on statement clarity, relevance to the study objectives, and appropriateness as a measure of student perceptions. The researcher carefully addressed these comments and made necessary revisions. A pilot study was then conducted with a small sample of 24 Saudi EFL university students, separate from the main study, to determine the questionnaire's reliability. The students' responses indicated satisfactory levels of internal consistency, as reflected by Cronbach's alpha values equal to or greater than 0.74.

This confirms that the questionnaire is suitable for accurately assessing Saudi EFL students' perceptions of blended learning for writing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *5.2.2. The Interview*

The study adopted an interview from Sriwichai (2020) to obtain the participants' viewpoints of blended learning of writing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview comprised seven statements covering the challenges and difficulties pertaining to the seven sections of the questionnaire. The interview questions were also reviewed by the four EFL experts who critically evaluated the interview's content, clarity, and appropriateness in measuring the intended perceptions.

Suggestions regarding ambiguous wording or missing aspects were addressed by modifying and refining the interview statements. This iterative process was implemented to ensure that the interview statements effectively captured the desired information and offered a comprehensive understanding of Saudi EFL students' perceptions regarding blended learning of writing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *6.1. The Questionnaire*

This section presents the findings of the questionnaire that aimed to measure the perspectives of Saudi EFL university students regarding the use of blended learning for teaching writing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire statements focused on the following aspects: classroom and online learning of writing, online interaction, technology utilization, flexibility, management, and readiness for blended learning.



Table 1. Face-to-face learning of writing.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Classroom writing activities facilitate the development of self-paced learning skills.	13 20.00%	17 26.15%	18 27.69%	13 20.00%	4 6.23%
Engaging in writing activities within the classroom setting facilitates the generation of ideas for completing course assignments.	6 9.23%	20 30.77%	15 23.08%	17 26.15%	7 10.77%
In classroom writing, I get immediate support and feedback from my teacher and peers.	11 17.05%	21 32.30%	15 23.08%	12 18.46%	6 9.23%
I find that my writing skills improve better when engaging in teacher-directed activities within a classroom setting.	9 13.84%	18 27.69%	17 26.15%	12 18.46%	9 13.84%
My writing skills improve more effectively when I engage in collaborative activities with my classmates within the classroom setting.	10 15.38%	16 24.62%	19 29.22%	19 29.22%	1 1.56%
I believe classroom writing is more effective than online writing.	11 17.05%	14 21.54%	17 26.15%	13 20.00%	10 15.38%
I am bored when learning writing in a classroom.	14 21.54%	19 29.22%	18 27.69%	9 13.84%	5 7.69%

Table 1 presents the participants' perspectives regarding face-to-face learning of writing. The results suggest that the participants have varying perceptions and preferences regarding face-to-face writing activities. Firstly, a significant portion of students (46.15%) agreed or strongly agreed that face-to-face writing activities help prepare them to learn at their own pace. This finding aligns with previous research by Fu and Wang (2021) who found that students benefit from having a solid foundation of writing skills through classroom activities. On the other hand, a considerable number of participants (60%) were undecided or disagreed with the statement that face-to-face writing activities help them generate ideas for course assignments. This finding contradicts the research by Watson (2008), who emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions for idea generation and collaboration among students. In addition, a significant majority of the participants (47.68%) agreed or strongly agreed that they receive immediate support and feedback from their instructor and peers during classroom writing activities. However, a considerable portion of the participants (21.54%) were undecided on this statement. This finding aligns with previous studies that have highlighted the importance of timely feedback and support in improving student writing skills (Lee, 2008). Similarly, a significant number of participants (41.53%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they learn writing better through teacher-directed classroom-based activities. However, a considerable portion of participants (26.15%) were undecided on this statement.

The responses further indicate that while some participants (40.00%) agreed or strongly agreed that they learn writing better when they collaborate with others in the classroom, a higher number of participants (60.00%) either disagreed or were undecided on this statement. This finding aligns with the findings of Zhang and Plonsky (2020), who observed that collaboration can have both positive and negative effects on writing performance, depending on various factors such as group dynamics and individual preferences. Additionally, the results reveal that a substantial proportion (38.59%) of students hold the perception that face-to-face learning of writing is more effective compared to online learning. This finding supports the previous research conducted by Xu (2021), who argued that face-to-face interactions provide immediate feedback and support, enhancing the learning experience for students. Finally, a notable proportion of participants (50.76%) reported feeling bored when learning writing in a face-to-face classroom. This finding echoes the findings of Bernard et al. (2009), who highlighted the need for engaging and interactive classroom activities to overcome student boredom and maintain their motivation.

Table 2. Online learning of writing.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
This online course makes learning writing engaging and convenient.	23 35.38%	18 27.69%	12 18.46%	10 15.38%	2 3.12%
I am comfortable with self-directed study in this online writing course.	39 60.00%	8 12.31%	8 12.31%	6 9.23%	4 6.23%
I enjoy online writing courses for faster access to educational content.	27 41.54%	14 21.54%	10 15.38%	8 12.31%	6 9.23%
I recommend reducing classroom time in this writing course.	13 20.00%	5 7.69%	19 29.22%	16 24.62%	12 18.46%
I prefer online writing courses over classroom ones.	22 33.84%	15 23.08%	14 21.54%	11 17.05%	3 4.61%
I am bored when learning writing online.	9 13.84%	7 10.77%	17 26.15%	18 27.69%	14 21.54%

Table 2 exhibits the participants' perspectives in relation to the learning of writing skills through online learning. It shows that the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with certain statements. For instance, (35.38%) of participants strongly agreed that learning writing online is interesting and convenient. This result aligns with previous research conducted by Dhawan (2020), who found that students generally perceive online learning to be convenient and engaging. Additionally, (41.54%) of participants strongly agreed that learning writing online allows them to access instructional content easier, which supports the findings of Ndzinisa and Dlamini (2022) who emphasized the accessibility benefits of online learning platforms.

However, not all responses were positive. It is notable that (43.08%) of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they recommend reducing classroom time in this writing course. Furthermore, (24.61%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are bored when learning writing online. This result resonates with the findings of Müller and Mildemberger (2021), which emphasize the importance of designing online learning experiences that are engaging and prevent boredom.

Table 3. Online interaction in blended learning.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel lonely learning writing online.	11 17.05%	9 13.84%	16 24.62%	19 29.22%	10 15.38%
I want to communicate with my online writing instructor.	30 46.15%	7 10.77%	19 29.22%	7 10.77%	1 1.56%
I want to engage with classmates while learning writing online.	18 55.38%	10 15.38%	19 29.22%	7 10.77%	2 3.12%
Learning writing online enables easy communication with instructors and other students.	19 29.22%	23 35.38%	5 7.69%	14 21.54%	4 6.25%
I can work well with my team on writing course tasks.	16 24.62%	16 24.62%	17 26.15%	3 4.61%	11 17.05%

Table 3 displays the participants' perspectives with regards to online interaction within the context of blended learning. A considerable portion of the participants (30.89%) felt isolated when learning writing online. This finding is consistent with previous research that highlights the potential feeling of isolation that can be experienced in online learning environments (Bunts-Anderson, 2016). Furthermore, the majority of participants (56.92%) expressed a desire to interact with their teacher during online writing. This result aligns with previous studies that emphasize the importance of teacher-student interaction in online settings (Song, Zhang, & Gao, 2022; Wang,



Hassa, Pyn, & Ye, 2022). Moreover, a significant proportion of participants (70.76%) indicated their preference to interact with their classmates when learning writing online. This finding aligns with research that emphasizes the importance of peer interaction and collaboration in improving learning outcomes in online environments (Bunts-Anderson, 2016; Peeters, 2016).

**Table 4.** Technology and blended learning.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think the blackboard platform used in learning this writing course is easy to use.	25 38.46%	16 24.62%	11 17.05%	8 12.31%	5 7.69%
I believe the blackboard is useful for my learning of writing.	32 49.23%	12 18.46%	15 23.08%	4 6.23%	2 3.12%
I believe the blackboard should be utilized in teaching and learning other writing courses.	27 41.54%	14 21.54%	9 13.84%	12 18.46%	3 4.61%

Table 4 presents the participants' perspectives regarding the role of technology in blended learning. The majority of participants expressed positive views regarding the Blackboard platform used in the writing course. Specifically, (63.08%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Blackboard platform was easy to use. This supports previous research by Alzain (2021) who found that user-friendly online platforms can enhance the learning experience. Moreover, an overwhelming majority (67.69%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Blackboard platform was useful for their learning of writing. Furthermore, (63.08%) of participants believed that the Blackboard platform should be used in other writing courses. These findings align with the study conducted by Fu and Wang (2021) which emphasized the importance of the online platforms in improving students' learning outcomes in writing courses.

**Table 5.** Flexibility in blended learning.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I hope to have unlimited access to teaching resources and writing classes.	25 38.46%	16 24.62%	11 17.05%	10 15.38%	3 4.61%
I would like to choose where and when I study the writing lessons.	31 47.69%	13 20.00%	10 15.38%	9 13.84%	2 3.12%
I prefer to study writing classes at my own speed in this course.	26 40%	16 24.62%	8 12.31%	9 13.84%	6 9.23%

Table 5 results indicate positive perspectives towards learning flexibility among the participants. A significant percentage of participants (63.08%) agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to access the teaching materials and the writing lessons without limits of time and place. This finding aligns with previous research by Aban and Nicart (2022) who found that learners appreciate the ability to access course materials anytime and anywhere as it allows for greater convenience and adaptability. Similarly, when asked about their preferences in deciding where and when to study the writing lessons, the majority of participants (67.69%) indicated that they would like to have that flexibility. Furthermore, (64.62%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed to study the writing lessons at their own pace. These result echoes the findings of Banditvilai (2016) who discovered that self-paced learning is valuable in online writing courses as it allows learners to allocate sufficient time for comprehension and practice.

Table 6. Management of blended learning.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Learning writing in a blended learning setting encourages self-discipline and responsibility for learning.	34 52.30%	17 26.15%	10 15.38%	3 4.61%	1 1.56%
Learning writing in a blended learning setting promotes planning and goal-setting.	29 44.61%	19 29.22%	9 13.84%	5 7.69%	3 4.61%
Learning of writing in a blended learning setting makes me organize my time efficiently.	24 36.92%	11 17.05%	16 24.62%	8 12.31%	6 9.23%
I can overcome writing problems by seeking help from others or searching online.	32 49.23%	13 20.00%	14 21.54%	4 6.23%	2 3.12%

Table 6 portrays the results highlighting the management aspects of blended learning. Regarding the first item of learning management, which focuses on the motivation to be self-disciplined and responsible for learning writing, the majority of participants expressed agreement (78.45%). Only a small percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed (4.61% and 1.56%, respectively). These results suggest that a blended learning model is effective in promoting self-discipline and responsibility among the participants. This finding aligns with previous research conducted by Sari, Rahayu, Apriliandari, and Sulisworo (2018), which found that blended learning enhances students' motivation and responsibility in various academic domains. The results also show that a significant number of students agreed or strongly agreed (73.83%) that blended learning promotes the establishment of personal learning plans and goals for writing. These findings are consistent with a study by Aalinezhad, Salehan, and Noroozi (2021) which found that blended learning fosters students' autonomy and goal-setting skills.

A high proportion of participants agreed or strongly agreed (53.97%) that blended learning facilitates efficient time organization in their writing learning. On the other hand, a significant number of students were undecided (24.62%), disagreed (12.31%), or strongly disagreed (9.23%). This suggests that while blended learning may have positive effects on time management for some students, others may struggle to adapt to blended learning. Finally, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (69.23%) that blended learning enabled them to find ways to solve problems. These findings are consistent with previous research by Eggers, Oostdam, and Voogt (2021) which found mixed results regarding the impact of blended learning on time management skills among university students.

Table 7. Readiness for blended learning

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not decided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I prefer a blended learning setting for writing, rather than only face-to-face learning.	33 50.77%	18 27.69%	11 17.05%	2 3.12%	1 1.56%
I prefer a blended learning atmosphere for writing, rather than learning online fully.	30 46.15%	12 18.46%	13 20.00%	7 10.77%	3 4.61%
I am prepared to overcome the challenges in blended learning for writing.	22 33.84%	7 10.77%	16 24.62%	12 18.46%	8 12.31%
If possible, i wish to take other blended writing courses.	26 40%	20 30.77%	9 13.84%	8 12.31%	2 3.12%

Table 7 illustrates the participants' readiness for blended learning in the context of writing instruction. The majority of participants indicated a positive inclination towards blended learning, with (78.46%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they preferred to learn writing in a blended learning environment rather than in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Similarly, the results revealed that (64.61%) of participants agreed or strongly

agreed that they preferred blended learning over learning fully online. These results align with previous studies that have emphasized the advantages of blending face-to-face and online components in language learning, such as offering a balance between synchronous interaction and self-paced activities (Watson, 2008). When it comes to the readiness to face challenges in a blended learning environment for writing instruction, (44.61%) of participants expressed confidence in their ability to overcome challenges, while (30.77%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, the majority of participants (70.77%) expressed a desire to register in a writing course that adopts a blended learning approach. These findings resonate with previous research that has highlighted the importance of students' self-efficacy and resilience in blended learning settings (de George–Walker & Keeffe, 2010; Owens, 2015).

## 6.2. The Interview

The students' responses to the interview statements are related to the problems and challenges in the context of learning writing in both face-to-face and online settings.

- **Problems and Challenges Related to Face-to-Face Learning of Writing.** The participants identified several problems and challenges in classroom learning of writing. One student expressed his concern about the lack of personalized feedback stating, "In a large classroom setting, it's difficult for the professor to provide individualized feedback on our writing." This aligns with previous research that highlights limited feedback and individual attention as challenges in learning writing (Alharbi, 2019). Another student mentioned that the lack of motivation is a significant problem, stating, "Sometimes, the topics we are given to write about are not interesting, which makes it hard to stay motivated." To address these challenges, one student mentioned the importance of peer collaboration facilitated through blended learning, saying, "Online platforms allow us to collaborate and receive feedback from our peers, which can greatly improve our writing skills." This echoes previous findings that highlight the benefits of collaborative writing and peer feedback in writing instruction (Bunts–Anderson, 2016).
- **Problems and Challenges Related to Online Learning of Writing.** The participants revealed some common problems and challenges related to online learning. One student expressed, "There isn't much contact between teachers and students, so it's hard to get feedback right away and get questions answered." Another challenge highlighted by the participants was the lack of structure and discipline in online learning. As one student mentioned, "Self-discipline is important for online learning because I must be able to handle my time well and keep myself motivated without being told to." These findings are consistent with previous research that has emphasized the need for contact, self-regulation, and self-motivation in online learning environments (Jiang, Wang, Li, & Li, 2022). Furthermore, technological issues were identified as a significant challenge. One student noted, "Bad internet connections and technology problems often get in the way of learning and make me frustrated!" This observation aligns with prior research that has emphasized the importance of reliable technology in ensuring successful online learning experiences (Ja'ashan, 2020).
- **Problems and Challenges Related to Online Interaction.** The participants expressed several concerns regarding online interaction. One student said, "Because we don't talk to each other in person, it's hard to get immediate feedback and clarification on my writing." Another student added, "Without nonverbal contact, it's hard to understand the tone and purpose of written comments." These concerns raised by the students align with the findings of previous research on online writing interaction. According to Harris and Greer (2017), online communication can lack immediacy and clarity, hindering effective writing instruction. Another prominent challenge was the limited opportunity for meaningful peer interaction in online writing classes. "When we talk and work together online, it's not as deep or natural as when we're in the same place," said one student. These challenges correspond with the research findings of Wang et al. (2022), who noted that online writing courses often lack the

social presence necessary for productive peer interactions. A related, distinct issue mentioned by the students was the difficulty in building rapport with instructors and receiving personalized guidance in online learning environments. These concerns echo the findings of Xu (2021), who emphasized the challenges students face in establishing effective communication and rapport with instructors in online writing courses.

- **Problems and Challenges Related to Using Technology in Blended Learning.** Some participants highlighted the issue of technical glitches and connectivity problems. For example, one student said, "Sometimes the online platform fails, or the internet connection is bad, making it hard to submit assignments or take part in live discussions." Another student stated, "The internet connection is unstable. This interrupts our online writing sessions." A related issue is the challenge of adapting to new digital tools in writing. One of the students stated, "It can be hard to figure out how to use digital platforms for writing tasks. There are often a lot of different tools and apps to use. It takes time to learn how to use them well." These responses are in line with the findings of Muhria, Supriatna, and Nurfirdaus (2023), who found that students encountered difficulties in adapting to new digital tools in blended learning environments.
- **Problems and Challenges Related to Flexibility in Blended Learning.** The participants' responses to learning flexibility in a blended learning setting reflected a range of problems and challenges they have encountered. One student highlighted the difficulty of balancing multiple responsibilities while writing in a blended learning setting. He noted, "Blended learning needs self-discipline and good time management. It can be hard to balance learning with other things like part-time jobs or family duties." This aligns with the notion of self-regulated learning, which can be more challenging in online or blended learning (de George–Walker & Keeffe, 2010; Jiang et al., 2022). The students also emphasized the need for motivation to stay on track with their writing tasks. One student noted, "Without the structure and guidance of a normal classroom, I find it hard to stay motivated." This resonates with research on motivation in blended learning, which emphasizes the importance of learners taking ownership of their learning process (Eggers et al., 2021; Esnaashari, Gardner, Arthanari, & Rehm, 2023).
- **Problems and Challenges Related to Learning Management of Blended Learning.** One prominent issue highlighted by the participants was the difficulty in maintaining proper time management and self-discipline in an online learning setting. One student mentioned, "With online learning, it's harder to keep a structured schedule for practicing writing, and I often find myself procrastinating." Another challenge was self-regulation in a blended learning environment. One student said, "Without the structure of a classroom, managing our writing tasks may be tough. Home distractions often seem big." This finding echoes the study by Sari et al. (2018), who found that self-regulation and motivation played a pivotal role in attaining favorable learning outcomes within a blended learning setting.
- **Problems and Challenges Related to Readiness for Blended Learning.** The participants' responses provided valuable insights into the specific issues that they encountered when adapting to blended learning. Some students highlighted the issue of digital literacy skills. They mentioned lack of proficiency in using online platforms and digital tools as a significant challenge. One student expressed, "Many students have trouble finding out how to use online tools and writing software well." Similarly, several students highlighted technical issues as a major challenge in readiness for blended learning. The reliance on technology for accessing course materials, submitting assignments, and participating in online discussions can create barriers for some students who are not familiar with the online tools and platforms. The lack of technological readiness can hinder their ability to engage effectively in online learning activities for writing instruction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Nevertheless, the majority of participants' responses emphasized their strong readiness for blended learning, emphasizing their preference for engaging in writing within a blended learning environment rather than exclusively in face-to-face or online settings. A student articulated this preference stating, "I want to learn writing in a blended learning environment rather than learning in a face-to-face classroom only." This perspective is substantiated by empirical evidence, which suggests that blended learning offers a harmonious amalgamation of the advantages associated with online learning, such as convenience, and the invaluable benefits derived from face-to-face interactions, including interaction and feedback (Kintu, Zhu, & Kagambe, 2017; Wang, Chen, Tai, & Zhang, 2021).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be concluded that the amalgamation of the Blackboard platform and classroom learning offers students a comprehensive educational encounter, encompassing the advantages of digital resources, automated evaluation, cooperative work, and direct engagement with the instructor. In a blended learning context, the regular classroom offers a conducive environment for students to actively enhance their writing skills, participate in meaningful discussions, seek clarification through inquiries, and promptly receive valuable input from their instructor. Concurrently, the incorporation of the Blackboard platform in a blended learning model presents valuable opportunities for the enhancement of Saudi EFL university students' writing practices. It provides ease of use and usefulness as students value flexibility, autonomy, and self-pacing of learning. This model facilitates the establishment of a dynamic and interactive learning milieu, thereby fostering active engagement among students and ultimately resulting in enhanced academic achievements. In addition, blended learning serves as a viable solution to the constraints associated with both online and face-to-face learning modalities, while also accommodating the diverse needs and preferences of Saudi EFL university students.

Given the multifaceted nature of blended learning's efficacy in various areas, it is recommended that educational institutions utilize blended learning to further improve student engagement and participation in writing courses. By leveraging the advantages of blended learning, Saudi universities can empower their students and equip them with the necessary skills for future success. Moving forward, it is crucial to capitalize on the lessons learned from this experience to improve the resilience and inclusivity of Saudi Arabia's educational system in the face of any future crises.

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