EDMODO USE IN ESP WRITING:
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract:
A growing body of literature has examined the nature of blended learning and its effects on language teaching and learning, including the use of Edmodo to promote student writing. However, this type of integration of face-to-face instruction and online learning remains relatively new for EFL contexts. Also, teaching writing at the Vietnamese contexts, particularly in the ESP tertiary education, is still largely dependent on conventional way. This paper therefore reports students' perceptions about Edmodo use in writing classes at a Vietnamese university. This paper draws on data collected as part of a larger mixed methods project including tests and interviews over a fifteen-week semester of an ESP writing class. In this paper, the focus is the data from interviews, which explored how students perceived the effects of Edmodo use in their writing learning process. The findings indicate students' positive perceptions about this supportive learning delivery method in writing classes. Implications for teachers and school administrators with regard to practical applications of Edmodo as a potential tool are also discussed.

Keywords: blended learning, Edmodo, perceptions, writing

1. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is on Edmodo use in a blended learning setting in relation to student writing at a Mekong Delta university, Vietnam. In particular, it examines students' perceptions about the impact of this online delivery mode on student writing in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. Writing is widely recognized as key to the four English skills to language learning and communication success (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Ma'azi & Janfeshan, 2018) although it is considered as the most challenging skill for students to acquire (Purnawarman, Susilawati, & Sundayana, 2016; Salma, 2015; Tillema, 2012). This view implies that writing requires students to be

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proficient in a variety of language aspects such as language use, vocabulary, organization, content, and mechanics (Hastomo, 2015; Olshtain, 2000). This productive skill provides students with an opportunity to communicate and interact with others using English for academic and linguistic success from the constructivist perspectives (Ellis, 2002; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, in the information and communication technologies (ICT) era, good writing necessitates students to familiarize themselves with supportive learning environment or platform. One way to make it happen is through blended learning (BL). BL is thought to assist learners in approaching essential information appropriate for their effective learning styles (Graham, 2006). Research has indicated positive impact of blended learning on English language teaching (e.g., Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013). Specifically, this online delivery mode allows students to process a wealth of information for their academia, enrich learning experience; personalize learning support, and develop collaboration (Jafari & Ansari, 2012). In a similar vein, to respond to the call for quality of teaching and learning foreign languages, particularly English, through information and communication technologies (ICT), to meet learners' needs, the Vietnam Blended Learning Program (2011–2015) was launched to integrate blended learning into English language learning and teaching. However, learners' passive learning styles to some extent prevented them from motivating to learn English as a foreign language online. Also, few studies have been conducted on how Edmodo as an effective tool, a blended learning platform is used within ESP tertiary contexts. This paper therefore explores students' perceptions about the Edmodo use in their writing online in English for Tourism classes.

The following section reviews the literature on blended learning, Edmodo, and writing-related motivational factors.

2. Literature review

2.1 Blended Learning (BL)

Research into blended learning, combining both traditional face-to-face and online learning, has addressed an appealing tendency in learning and teaching fields (Graham, 2006; Tarnopolsky, 2012; Vaughan, 2007). Blended learning refers to "*a synergic learning structure, dynamically and organically combining into an indivisible unity traditional classroom learning with online learning for creating a more flexible learning environment with the purpose of intensifying and facilitating the practical training process*" (Tarnopolsky, 2012, p. 14). This view implies that blended learning as a potential tool allows students to become more active and creative in constructing new knowledge of a particular area of study in their learning process. In the same vein, blended learning is viewed as a combination of technology and classroom instruction that facilitates training and assessment and saves costs (Banados, 2006). This positive effect reflects on the claim that in a blended learning environment, teacher-student interactions supported by technological devices or innovations and a variety of methods can help students enhance their learning and save class time. Likewise, in tertiary education blended

learning has been advocated as supportive learning environment in terms of flexibility, increased access or availability and learning experience and student involvement (Tuomainen, 2016). Or in other words, this blend of two instructional ways allows optimal students' learning performance (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2007; Vo, Zhu, & Diep, 2017). From the constructivist perspectives, this learning platform can provide students with more active roles, increased interaction, and greater responsibility in their learning process.

2.2 Edmodo and student writing

Edmodo, designed by Borg and O' Hara in 2008, has addressed a popular trend of an online learning platform facilitative of student learning (e.g., Purnawarman et al., 2016). These authors also posit that Edmodo in the form of a blended learning can engage students in learning writing to produce a good text. Furthermore, Edmodo is known as an educational website that provides a secure platform for teachers and students in terms of connection, interaction and collaboration (Trust, 2017; Tsiakyroudi, 2018). In particular, several studies contend the positive impact of Edmodo on student writing while learning languages, including English (e.g., Fauzi, 2017; Ma' azi & Janfeshan, 2018; Miftah, 2018; Purnawarman et al., 2016). It is likely that after using Edmodo, students' writing ability can be improved. Exploring how students perceive the use of Edmodo in writing classes therefore may provide insights into how teachers and students optimize their practice and writing performance respectively over time. Students' interest and self-efficacy are seen as essential factors that motivate them to learn writing (Tsiakyroudi, 2018), as described below.

2.3 Interest in writing

Students' interest occurs when they are given an opportunity to do a particular thing or interact with others (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). Specifically, once students are keen on writing, they spend more time, effort, and pay much attention to that activity for their learning and achievement. Thus, it is a key component that help them to succeed in their learning by getting them involved in a more flexible and interactive learning space (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007). In other words, from the motivational theory of achievement and expectancy perspectives, students who have strong interest in their writing are likely to improve their skills and do better than other peers, thereby gaining positive affect (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010). One potential way to achieve such goals that develop students' interests in learning writing is through Edmodo, a technological device or a supportive learning platform.

2.4 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is another motivational factor that influences student learning (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as "*beliefs in one's capacities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments*" (p.3). This view suggests the idea that self-efficacy is related to an individual's beliefs or judgment of his or her potential success in performing a given task. Therefore, this influence for writing is

integral to teaching and learning in terms of motivation and student learning over time. It is also important to note that self-efficacious students are more likely to make their efforts and tackle with challenges in order to attain their goals (Bandura, 1977, 1997). In a writing blended learning course, self-efficacious students are likely to choose the task to write and retain his/her interests in fulfilling such task (Tsiakyroudi, 2018). Or in other words, there is a strong relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and students' writing task performance in their learning process.

3. Methodology

This study took place over the second semester of the academic year 2018 at a Vietnamese university. The aim was to investigate the impacts of the use of Edmodo as a blended learning platform that influenced how students in English for Tourism class improved their writing performance over time. Moreover, the focus of the study was ESP classes as this science subject-specific instruction is specifically critical in tertiary education and identified as one of the university's key priorities (Nguyen, 2013). This article only focuses on the part of the study regarding students' perceptions about Edmodo use that could motivate them to learn writing online.

Forty sophomores from English for Tourism class participated in this study reported in this article. At the time of the study, their age ranges from 19 to 20. The data collected in the wider study included tests and interviews. For this article, the data discussed is mainly drawn from the semi-structured interviews with ten students after they were trained with Edmodo. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insights into their perceptions about the use of Edmodo that motivated them to learn writing, thereby addressing what needed to improve or change to their online writing practice over the course of the study. Each interview took approximately fifteen minutes.

All interview data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). This type of coding allowed for identifying themes, managing and analyzing the data (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

4. Findings

This section presents the findings from the study indicating participating students' positive perceptions about Edmodo within the blended learning platform in ESP writing classes.

4.1 Insights into students' perceptions about Edmodo use in writing
Analysis from the interview data indicates that all of ten participating students reported having positive perceptions about the implementation of Edmodo in the blended learning course to practice online writing in English for Tourism class. Their responses to five categories are described in detail in Table 4.

Table 4: Content of blended learning course

Categories	Participants' responses
Online input and learning materials	Satisfied, appropriate, sufficient, useful
Topics of online writing tasks	Relevant
	Interesting
	Motivating, meaningful and daily practical
English use and course objectives	Detailed, adequate, appropriate, feasible
Design	well-designed and clear organized
Motivation and self-efficacy	better writing and feeling confident

4.2 Appropriate online input and learning materials

With regard to online input and learning materials, as noted in Table 4, all students had positive views on the implementation of Edmodo in the blended learning course to practice online writing. They considered these two course contents were appropriate and useful. The following extracts below illustrate their views.

"I think online input is practical and appropriate. It is also useful as it is an extra source of reference for my writing assignments." (Chau, interview extract)

"Materials are numerous and useful for my writing practice. They help me review what I learnt and link with new things at class meeting." (Diu, interview extract)

"I am pleased with the online writing tasks as they are sufficient enough to help me improve my writing outside classroom practice." (Hong, interview extract)

"I can apply what I learn from online writing resources right at class and even when I am at home." (Loan, interview extract)

However, one student identified that while learning online writing, he needed support or guidance from the teacher:

"Sometimes, I found it difficult to understand what to do with online materials and writing tasks. So, during breaks, I had to meet my teacher, asked for clarity and then figured out how to do things." (Nghia, interview extract)

4.3 Relevant online tasks

When asked how students felt while practicing online writing topics or tasks, all ten students revealed that they felt more motivated since these topics allowed them to review what they learned from most recent face-to-face lessons. They stated:

"I really like to write more frequently because tasks help me review what I learnt from the previous lessons. I can download the lost handouts given by the teacher whenever I needed them. This type of learning was so convenient to my study." (Loan, interview extract)

"I was interested in learning writing topics as they were interesting and close to daily life activities. The tasks helped make my learning English easier. I can watch short video clips to recall or remember words previously learned" (Nhan, interview extract)

"The topics brought me fun as Edmodo is somehow similar to Facebook." (Oanh, interview extract)

"The writing questions are like daily things related to my current job, so I felt these stimulating." (Tien, interview extract)

"Video and clips on Edmodo got me involved in learning more new words and these could facilitate my understanding of what kind of writing is right to use for my working contexts." (Thuy, interview extract)

4.4 Increased students' writing and course feasibility

With regard to English use and course objectives, seven out of ten students thought that their English was enhanced as they could learn and interact with other peers through clear and feasible course focus. This view is illustrated in the following comments from three students:

"The website was well-designed in English so that I could practice my English easily during the time I learned online." (Huong, interview extract)

"Students could interact with students without face-to-face meeting. Thus, from the very beginning of the course, this learning environment was really convenient for students to receive teacher feedback for their writing immediately." (Ngoc, interview extract)

"I was impressed by Edmodo because this setting was written in English, and I think I will learn a lot upon completing this online blended course." (Thuy, interview extract)

4.5 Clearly organized design

Regarding the design of Edmodo as a blended learning setting in writing, students claimed that this learning platform was clearly organized into structured tasks. One student shared her view:

"I think the design of tasks online using Edmodo was good and clearly presented. I find it easy to follow during the writing course." (Thy, interview extract).

4.6 Motivation

With regard to the reasons for the students to enroll in the blended learning course, seven out of ten students revealed that they found this type of online learning motivating as they could practice writing outside the classrooms. In particular, three respondents reported that they wanted to improve their writing for their future jobs.

"The BL course provided me with useful knowledge for my writing class. I think this builds up my confidence in writing in the long run." (Thao, interview extract)

"I could have more opportunities to practice my writing at home and I thought that this type of 'blend' was useful. I will do more with this." (Quang, interview extract)

"Well, I think I learn new things from this online course as this interaction will improve my writing and I believe this will be great to my major." (Nhung, interview extract)

4.7 Self- efficacy

All of the participants believed their self-expression of ideas or opinions in the writing process were improved in terms of vocabulary increase, lexical resources, and grammar structures. For example, two students shared their reflections on this experience.

"I learnt a lot of vocabulary while doing my writing tasks. Understanding instructions of these tasks could help me improve my vocabulary and grammar points. I think I can write better sentences." (Trinh, interview extract)

"I become more confident in doing on my own by writing single sentences or discussing my ideas with friends, as required by the teacher. I know what vocabulary and language structures were used to express my own opinions." (Thanh, interview extract)

These statements suggest a connection between students' sense of self-efficacy and their writing content knowledge in English.

5. Discussion

This study shows the meaning of using Edmodo in enhancing ESP students' writing performance. Analysis of the interview data indicates students' positive perceptions about the benefits of Edmodo use in learning writing. Specifically, they perceived that the blended learning course content was appropriate, relevant, feasible, and clearly organized. In addition, they found this type of supportive learning delivery mode as motivating. This may be attributed to their awareness of the benefits of Edmodo learning space that promotes their writing performance in comparison with their traditional classroom learning. This supports the claims that once students felt motivated to write online, they could better their knowledge and performance, as noted by Hastomo (2015) and Purnawarman and his colleagues (2016). It was also found that students in this current study expressed their sense of self-efficacy and feeling of confidence in relation to their writing knowledge in English. The interplay between their self-efficacy beliefs and writing may come from the fact that second-year students who spent longer time than first year students could have greater opportunities to practice and enhance their learning (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012). In other words, self-

efficacy beliefs have strong influence on students' writing performance (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Such beliefs may influence their motivation to write (Sari, Rahayu, Apriliandari, & Sulisworo, 2018) and change their views or attitudes by developing new ways of learning in order to maximize their writing as time progresses.

5.1 Conclusions

This study provides insights into how students in English for Tourism class perceived the benefits of using Edmodo while practicing writing English online. Implications are provided for teachers and school administrators.

First, since students acknowledged the benefits of Edmodo use in blended learning writing platform, they become more aware of the value of this online delivery approach in their learning of writing process. As a result of these positive perceptions, teachers should consider how to provide students with timely support, appropriate design of simple but interesting tasks that can engage their learning, interaction, and communication not only with their friends but also with teachers.

Second, since students' perceptions may influence teachers' decisions to change their practices in relation to quality teaching, they may need to be provided with opportunities to have professional training courses on how Edmodo as blended learning platform can be optimally implemented to facilitate student writing in their learning process. Once students are motivated to learn writing online through this effective learning space, they find this knowledge construction worthwhile and rewarding, then sustaining their writing practices as a type of lifelong learning.

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