

# The Impact of Blended Learning on Writing Accuracy for Iraqi EFL Intermediate School Learners

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## Abstract

This research aimed to find out how blended learning affected the writing accuracy of intermediate Iraqi EFL learners. 70 intermediate EFL learners from Iraq took part in this study to achieve this goal. Based on the results of the Oxford Placement Test, they were between the ages of 18 and 32, had Arabic as their first language, and had the same level of English proficiency (OPT). They were divided into the experimental group (n=35) and the control group (n=35) at random. The control group received the identical instruction using a face-to-face, traditional teacher-centered approach while the experimental group received it using a blended learning approach. Pre- and post-testing was used to obtain the data, which was then analyzed using paired sample t-tests and independent sample T-tests. The results showed that, in the pre-test, the mean of the control group was more than the experimental group but the difference was not significant. The experimental group, nevertheless, significantly outperformed the control group after using the blended learning strategy. The findings have some implications for EFL teachers, materials developers, and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, Writing Accuracy, Technology, Traditional Classroom

## أثر التعلم المدمج على دقة الكتابة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية في المدارس المتوسطة العراقية

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### المستخلص

هدف هذا البحث إلى معرفة كيف أثر التعلم المدمج على دقة الكتابة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لطلاب المدارس المتوسطة في العراق. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، شارك في هذه الدراسة ٧٠ طالباً من طلاب المدارس المتوسطة في العراق اعتماداً على نتائج اختبار أكسفورد لتحديد المستوى. تراوحت أعمار الطلبة بين ١٨ و ٣٢ عاماً مع العلم ان اللغة العربية هي لغتهم الأولى، وكانوا يتمتعون بنفس مستوى إجادة اللغة الإنجليزية (OPT). كان تقسيمهم إلى المجموعة التجريبية (ن=٣٥) والمجموعة الضابطة (ن=٣٥) بشكل عشوائي. تلقت المجموعة الضابطة التعليمات المتطابقة باستخدام المنهج التقليدي الذي يركز على المعلم وجهاً لوجه بينما تلقت المجموعة التجريبية باستخدام منهج التعلم المدمج. وكان استخدام الاختبار القبلي والبعدي للحصول على البيانات، التي جرى تحليلها بعد ذلك باستخدام اختبارات **t** للعينة المزدوجة واختبارات **T** المستقلة للعينة. أظهرت النتائج في الاختبار القبلي أن متوسط المجموعة الضابطة كان أكثر من المجموعة التجريبية ولكن الفرق لم يكن معنوياً. ومع ذلك، تفوقت المجموعة التجريبية بشكل كبير على المجموعة الضابطة بعد استخدام إستراتيجية التعلم المدمج. أظهرت النتائج أن لها بعض الآثار المترتبة حيث يمكن لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومطوري المواد وصانعي السياسات التعليمية من اتباعها.

الكلمات الدالة: التعلم المدمج، دقة الكتابة، التكنولوجيا، التقليدية.

### Introduction

Blended learning is a relatively new online invention that has recently appeared in scientific publications and books, at professional conferences, in corporate culture, and on university and college campuses all over the world. Blended learning is the blending of conventional on-campus and online learning contexts, with a focus on computer-based technology[1]. Blended learning was named as one of the top ten trends in the knowledge business in a 2002 survey by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)[2]. According to Finn(2002), "the ability to repurpose content for various delivery formats will become critical, not only from a content development standpoint, but as a way to meet the learning needs of a diverse set of learners". Professional groups, for example, are embracing blended learning to educate their members whilst decreasing travel costs, being distant from family, and wasting office resources [3].

The incorporation of blended learning within the school is another essential aspect of the concept. According to [4], the majority of attempts at online learning have "focused primarily on off-campus student populations." On the other hand, blended learning is a

campus project geared toward general education students. BYU is an example of an institution in which online courses are given to institutions outside campus whilst online technology is "blending" into face-to-face classrooms [5] [6].

Research studies have shown that blended learning can be strongly effective for EFL learners and even more effective than a learning context that is purely face-to-face or purely online [7] [8]. EFL learners in blended learning contexts completed their English language levels at a greater rate than those in a fully conventional learning context [7].[8] conducted a meta-analysis and found that "purely online learning has been equivalent to face- to-face instruction in effectiveness, and blended approaches have been more effective than instruction offered entirely in face-to-face mode" .

Furthermore, modern technologies are great sources for shaping learners' writing skills in a variety of ways, including engaging learners in grasping the prospects for more efficient collaboration with others and sharing their feelings with a wider audience. As a result, with technology help including a blended learning method, they will become skilled writers. As a result, more study on the impact of blended learning on each of the competencies that are typically measured in English language programs is required. To overcome this gap, the present research looks into the effectiveness of blended learning in an English program in Iraq, to see if students' writing accuracy differed depending on whether they took blended learning or regular on-campus lessons.

## Review of the Literature

Blended learning is defined as a mixture of several modes or delivery devices in the educational modalities category, while it is defined as a mix of multiple educational approaches or tactics in the instructional methodologies category. The issue with both of these classifications is that they are very broad and may be applied to practically any educational setting [1]. Furthermore, they face the charge of being "an old notion dressed up in new clothing" [9].[10] claims that it is curricular reform, not the creation of a new medium that has an influence on learning.

The effectiveness of blended learning versus traditional (face-to-face) classes was addressed in some studies. For example, [11] compared a group of students who received face-to-face instruction with a group who received blended learning instruction to discover which strategy is more effective and which strategies are better than others in terms of implementation. Because blended learning activities were more dynamic, the findings revealed that blended learning practices were judged to be more relevant for students in comparison to face-to-face learning activities. Furthermore, some of the online practices had a better effect and outcome on learners because they included more collaborative work between learners, participation, threaded discussions, games, and other features that were helpful and interesting in helping them prepare for exams and enhance their overall language skills.

These findings support [12] the assertion that a blended learning course must be personalized to the learners' attitudes, beliefs, and needs in order to be effective. Furthermore, the information must be intended to be relevant, up-to-date, and usable. Finally, Rao claims that "Blended learning is changing in its implementation mechanism and covers a number of interesting and imaginative ways in which course design,

learning activity styles, and the information environment are changing”[12], all of which contribute to a successful blended learning process.

The efficacy of blended learning has not been the subject of all studies.[13] investigates the ramifications and issues it may have or cause in other areas, including imposed individuality that she claims is increasingly prevalent in writing classes. She adds that most academic writing courses are individualized due to factors including peer review, voice, textual ownership, and critical thinking that cause problems for English students who are utilized to more harmonization and collaborative work rather than individuality in their native cultures. Forced individualism is even more acute in a blended class, according to Harrington, since students have less face-to-face time, do activities alone whilst sitting in front of a device detached from others, and so have fewer possibilities for collaborative work or peer review. It is an issue that should be considered while creating blended classrooms.

Several studies have analyzed the benefits of blended learning on EFL writing (e.g.[14];[15],[16],[17],[18],[19],[20].These researches showed that blended learning is quite successful in helping ESL students achieve favorable writing results.[15],for instance, investigated the efficiency of blended learning in strengthening English written communication skills among Saudi female students. Blended learning, based on the research, enhances communication between students while also reducing pressure in an English writing course. In a similar study,[21] investigated the efficiency of blended learning in teaching English writing skills at Palestinian institutions using an experimental methodology. According to the findings, blended learning substantially aids learners in developing their writing skills.

Furthermore,[19]utilized focus group interviews to investigate EFL students' perspectives of blended learning in an English writing course. According to the research, blended learning assists students in developing written communication skills, self-esteem, and a desire in studying English writing. This progress is made possible by the interchange of textual knowledge and the availability of a variety of reading materials via Internet platforms. [18]analyzed the way blended learning may help students improve their academic reading and writing skills. Action research was used in this study, which included classroom observation, survey, and interview. The participants saw blended learning as a creative and collaborative way to improve their reading and writing abilities.

Considering the bunch of research on blended reading, just a few of them took the writing ability of Iraqi learners into account. To overcome this gap, the present research looks into the effectiveness of blended learning in an English program in Iraq, to see if students' writing accuracy differed depending on whether they took blended learning or regular on-campus lessons.

In blended learning research studies, web tools, techniques, and models are also essential in determining how effective they are, and what their overall advantages and flaws are. [22] developed a concept that could be used for large groups of students in Chile. The study involved a group of 39 learners who were required to participate in one of four semester-long program modules. This program combined learners' self-directed learning via CIT (Communication and Information Technology) with a typical face-to-face lecture with a teacher, who supervised their CIT work and led regular discussions

with native speakers of English. Students complete 100 hours of interactive language learning assignments focused on their requirements, personal motivation, future objectives, and important material that might be beneficial for communicating in an English-speaking nation at the end of the program. A comparison of an initial diagnostic test taken at the start of the program and a final end-of-term test was used to look at how the pilot group's language abilities improved. This was a major positive result, as was their approval of the entire course, as measured by a questionnaire at the end of the program.

[23] did similar research, but their model emphasized information-processing psychology, content structure, and social constructivism rather than the technology component. The author mentioned some key components for this blended learning model's success, including a teacher who managed digital communication tools in the class and explained certain subjects of study to the group; students who raised questions and interacted with one another, stimulated group learning; and supported and had a help forum for learning management topics.

Models can differ, and they need to be tailored to the environment where they are intended to be used. According to [22], it is critical to analyze the setting in light of students' needs, educational content, the available resources, and the faculty involved. Therefore, teachers can achieve the goal of students being engaged by the blended learning program and learning and understanding content that they did not previously understand. There are many alternatives since many factors must be addressed, such as those listed above, but when they are properly merged and modified, a blended approach may be a useful model [22].

## Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. Does blended learning have any significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' writing accuracy?
2. Does face-to-face learning have any significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' writing accuracy?

## Methodology

This study employed a quantitative methodology and a quasi-experimental design to examine how the blended learning strategy improves the English writing abilities of EFL learners. To ascertain the correlations between the variables, this design was used. [24], [25].

## Participants

The data were collected from 70 EFL learners who wanted to take academic writing courses at a university in Iraq. The participants took part in this study based on their willingness and ability to provide relevant data. They were 18-32 years old, had a common L1 (Arabic) and had the same English proficiency based on the result of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) [26]. The participants were assigned to an experimental group (n=35) and a control group (n=35).

## Instruments

### Oxford placement test

An Oxford Placement Test (OPT)[26] was used to identify homogeneous intermediate learners. The OPT consists of 200 multiple-choice questions divided into two sections: listening and grammar. The participants must choose which of two words with identical pronunciations they hear in the listening section, which contains 100 questions. In addition, there are 100 questions in the grammar part that focus on common verb tense and sentence construction. Participants are usually given 60 minutes to complete the test.

### Pre-test and Post-test

Pre-test and post-test were used in this study to collect data. These two tests were used to compare the writing proficiency of the students before and after blended learning. The pre-test and post-test each had a 30-minute response period for the pupils. The instruments were reviewed by a second person to see if legitimate results could be achieved, ensuring the validity and dependability of the data [27],[28]. The tests contained a 'one paragraph' essay on a particular topic. After 6 weeks, a post-test with the same topic used in the pre-test was given to students to determine their improvements in English writing accuracy for both groups.

### Whats App Messenger

The application of Whats App was used in the blended learning approach. Whats App Messenger is an American freeware service owned by Meta Platforms. It enables users to make video and voice calls, send voice messages and text messages, and share documents, images, and user locations. This application runs on both Android and IOS devices but is also accessible from desktop computers. It was used in the experimental group to hold the virtual classes.

## Procedure

This study aimed to investigate the impact of blended learning on intermediate Iraqi EFL learners' writing accuracy. For this purpose, 70 Iraqi intermediate EFL learners were randomly assigned into two groups, a control group (n=35) and an experimental group (n=35). First, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT)[26] was administered to the students to guarantee the homogeneity of the participants. Then, a pre-test was conducted to determine the learners' performance before the treatment.

Afterward, the experimental group was taught the skills of one paragraph essay employing the blended learning approach, while the control group was taught the same thing using the face-to-face traditional teacher-centered approach. Both groups were taught for 6 weeks using the blended learning approach and the traditional approach respectively. Each semester lasted for 10 weeks which was enough to conduct an experimental study. The application of Whats App was used in the blended learning approach. This application was used for some sessions and it was also used over the week for checking students' assignments. In addition, when the students needed any help or had any questions, they could ask for help there. A post-test was given to both groups of

students after the sixth week to determine whether their English writing accuracy had improved.

The paragraphs were scored by the same rater and accuracy of writing was focused. The accuracy measures used included the proportion of error free clauses to the proportion of errors per clause. The error types considered were: syntactic, morphological and lexical. Moreover, to ensure the reliability of the scores, intra-rater reliability was estimated between the same scorer's scores over repeated occasions. The reliability index obtained was 94.

## Results

### Research question 1

The first research question aimed at exploring the impact of blended learning on Iraqi EFL learners' writing accuracy. To answer this question, the statistical procedures were employed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 24. First, the normality of pre- and post-test scores was checked. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test for pre- and post-test are reported in table 1. It can be seen that the p-value for both tests were 2.00 and .095, respectively ( $p > .05$ ) suggesting the dataset was normal.

**Table 1. Tests of Normality for group A (Pre- and post-test)**

Groups	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Pre-test	.107	35	2.00*
Post-test	.231	35	.092

Since the normal distribution of the data was met, the paired sample t-test was run (table 2). The results showed that there was a significant difference between learners' writing accuracy from the pre-test to the post-test ( $t = 6.410$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that blended learning had a positive impact on Iraqi learners' writing accuracy.

**Table 2. Students' Scores in Pre- and post-test for Experimental Group**

Groups	N	Mean	SD	T	P
Pre-test	35	17.70	6.32	6.410	0.000
Post-test	35	26.14	6.55		

### Research question 2

The second research question aimed to analyze the impact of face-to-face learning on Iraqi EFL learners' writing accuracy. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test (table 3) indicated that learners' test scores on both pre-and post-test were normally distributed ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 3. Tests of Normality for Control Group (Pre- and post-test)**

Groups	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Pre-test	.915	35	.238
Post-test	.970	35	.382

The results of paired sample t-test were shown in table 4. The results showed that the mean of students' writing increased from the pre-test to the post-test but the difference between them was not significant ( $t = 0.991$ ,  $p = 0.146$ ). Thus, it can be concluded that face-to-face learning did not result in a significant impact on Iraqi EFL learners' writing accuracy.

**Table 4. Students' Scores in Pre- and post-test for Control Group**

Groups	N	Mean	SD	T	P
Pre-test	35	18.25	7.45	0.991	0.146
Post-test	35	20.74	7.23		

## Discussion

The findings of this study showed that blended learning had a significant positive impact on the writing accuracy of the selected Iraqi EFL students. The control group's mean was higher than the experimental group's during the pre-test, but the difference was not statistically significant. The experimental group, nevertheless, significantly outperformed the control group after using the blended learning strategy. The results also indicated that learners in the control group who learned using the conventional teacher-centered method made a minor development. A few things that could have an impact on the learners' writing abilities, nevertheless, were noted. These included limited self-regulated learning, a high degree of inhibitions, and few classroom activities. These results agree with earlier research (e.g. [16];[29]). Using various tools to produce in-depth conversation, blended learning enhances learners' writing, claim [16].

Research specifically demonstrates that the mixed learning strategy may enhance different aspects of English writing. For instance,[30] research showed that by using a blended learning strategy, language students may enhance their writing abilities in terms of topic sentences, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. Likewise, prior research has demonstrated that language students' linguistic competencies[31], Following exposure to the mixed learning strategy, enthusiasm, communication skills, and self-confidence in learning English writing all improved [19]. Examples of this include argumentative essay writing [17], organization, grammar, planning, and development of writing ideas [32].



Additionally, the blended learning strategy is essential for improving students' writing abilities, but students, teachers, and institutions must put up a lot of work [33] (Lien, 2015). This is due to the fact that difficulties including insufficient staff training, learners with low technological skills, expensive internet costs, unreliable connectivity, and administrative problems can make it difficult to implement the blended learning strategy effectively. Additionally, students must be carefully supervised since blended learning may not be appropriate for learners from diverse backgrounds [34]. For first-year students, transitioning from secondary education to institutions of higher learning, especially in the case of this study, maybe a difficult process.

The use of blended learning in English writing classes may improve students' ability to learn independently, their level of confidence, and their participation in interactive class activities [15],[35],[20]. This is due to the fact that interactive learning techniques including group projects, conversations, and presentations would increase learner engagement and promote both social and academic learning outcomes. The Iraqi government must, nevertheless, take into account any difficulties that might arise from the complete adoption of the blended learning strategy. The steps adopted must guarantee that learners are ready for the change. The demands and preferences of the learners, the expertise of the professors, the materials and sources, and the kind of courses must all be taken into account.

According to [36], "The future may well look back on the last quarter of the twentieth century in amazement at the ability of education to persevere in its traditional form and processes while the rest of the world moved on" (p. vii). Even though this book is from 20 years ago, in 2001, the same issue might still be raised today. One option for EFL programs to stay current and take into account global technology advancements is through blended learning. However, [37] emphasized that the best way to implement blended learning is still being worked out.

Moreover, provided the learners have at least a basic understanding of digital literacy abilities, blended learning may be utilized as a tool to improve the acquisition of information that is already included in the conventional traditional curriculum. According to research, EFL students who take assessments in blended learning settings do the highest. Thus, as part of blended learning, the traditional component of learning is crucial and should not be ignored or underestimated.

Smartphones became one free resource that students can make the most advantage of. Numerous blended learning strategies may be applied using a mobile device and "in fact, there are many ways to teach and learn (both formally and informally) depending on the context and situation"[38]. "Mobile learning provides another opportunity to increase teaching and learning effectiveness" [38 p.7]. According to [38], thus, "if designed properly and integrated into the course in a purposeful manner, mobile technologies can provide today's learners with a more sustainable and practical means to augment their learning experience, especially since today's learners are increasingly accustomed to using mobile technologies as a normal part of their lives".

Smartphones may be used as a medium for blended learning in courses that lack access to basics.

According to [39], it is crucial to develop a blended learning course in order to keep students interested and involved throughout the process. As a result, the course was created utilizing real and engaging content that the learners found interesting and beneficial for their learning. The majority of students also said the WhatsApp platform was easy to use, largely because of its interactive features that let them go through the classes in a planned manner and allowed them to return to any session at any time necessary.

## Conclusion

The blended learning model has essentially been shown to be successful, but its adoption necessitates the combined efforts of governments, educators, institutions, and other organizations. This is due to the fact that the blended learning environment has some difficulties such as inadequate staff training, low learner technological proficiency, expensive internet costs, unreliable connectivity, and administrative problems. With appropriate online resources and additional training for the English teaching staff, curriculum designers should adapt educational programs for blended learning in order to address the obstacles of blended learning among EFL learners, especially in the Iraqi setting. Collaboration with specialized training facilities, like the English Language Centre, will help to attain this aim. Additionally, in order to increase their blended learning capacities, learners must be given chances for adequate self-learning mindset training, and educators should be aware of their students' requirements and abilities.

The results of this study may help us understand how the blended learning strategy enhances the writing abilities of EFL students. By delivering an enjoyable learning experience and a welcoming educational atmosphere, blended learning has been shown to be a promising, imaginative, and practical new option for both teachers and learners. The results of this study may aid educators, governments, and other responsible parties in choosing the best strategy for teaching and assessing English writing in higher education. The study offers useful data that may be applied when creating English curricula, especially for higher education.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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