Adjunct Learning: Mixing the Cyber World with Face-to-Face Writing Instruction

Fatemeh Behjat
(Corresponding Author)
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, Shiraz, Iran
9/1 Shahamat Alley, Sanaye Blv., Shiraz, Iran   zip code: 7196886456
e-mail: fb_304@yahoo.com

Mortaza Yamini
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, Iran
Daneshgah St., Daneshjoo Sq., Shiraz, Iran
e-mail: yaminimortaza@yahoo.com

Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri
Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, Shiraz, Iran
41 Hasti Building, Jomhoori Blv., Shiraz, Iran
e-mail: bagheriess@gmail.com

Abstract

Proponents of hybrid or adjunct learning consider it as an effective way of expanding language learners' knowledge. Comparing hybrid learning with traditional face-to-face instruction, this study was an attempt to find out which of them could better foster language learners' writing skill. For this purpose, 110 male and female freshmen majoring in English at Zand Institute of Higher Education in Shiraz and Islamic Azad University in Shiraz, Iran were selected as the participants. They took an essay-writing test before the instruction. Then, they were divided into two groups. The first group took in-class writing instruction and activities in conventional mode; the second group took in-class instruction and did their activities online. After the treatment, they all took another essay-writing test as the post-test. The comparison between the conventional and hybrid groups' writing gain scores showed that those who were instructed in a hybrid learning environment could outperform their peers who took traditional face-to-face instruction.
Keywords: Adjunct learning, face-to-face instruction, writing skill, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Though still most of the language classrooms are handled by teachers based on the traditional face-to-face instruction, it is inevitable what learners with their access to the net, would seek some ways out of the classroom to increase their language proficiency. Although the positive role of teachers in traditional classrooms cannot be overlooked at all (Wright, 2000), the notion that evolutions in technology can assist education and language learning, deserves careful consideration. In order to facilitate learning in language classes with regard to the effectiveness of the Internet, one would try to integrate face-to-face classroom instruction with online activities so that the learners can take advantage of both e-learning and conventional instruction. This is the whole story behind blended, adjunct, mixed, or hybrid learning, which combines the usefulness of opportunities offered in

traditional classrooms and active learning through technologically-empowered online environment (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

The present research emphasizes the potential of technology as a powerful tool at teachers' disposal to be used in foreign language instruction. The question which is raised here is whether a hybrid learning environment can enhance writing ability of Iranian EFL learners better than traditional face-to-face instruction or not.

2. Literature Review

Glancing at the history of language teaching and learning, one can easily notice it has been subject to many fluctuations. Learners' and teachers' roles have changed. Teachers have changed from authoritative bodies into facilitators, and students have developed out of passive consumers of materials into active controllers of their learning process. It is now taken for granted that if students are involved in classroom activities and enjoy their active roles, their learning will be enhanced.

In the age of communications and technology, one can easily see teachers making use of computers and the Internet to enhance their students' learning. Distance learning or e-learning is the product of using computers and the net for language learning. A large number of universities and institutes at present are offering online courses so that the learners do not need to attend traditional classes; rather they attend virtual environments for learning purposes (De Praetere, 2008). E-learning was first contrasted with face-to-face instruction. As everything which seems insignificant is questioned by many people in education, distance learning environment and its replacement with traditional face-to-face instruction has been under discussion for a couple of years. In fact, it has been a conflicted arena of human endeavor over education (Morrison, 2004). In general terms, e-learning refers to the use of technology to support and enhance learning and teaching. There are different types of e-learning: purely online, blended or hybrid learning, synchronous, asynchronous, instructor-led group, self-study, self-study with subject matter expert, and computer-based (using CD-ROMs) (Akubulut, 2008). Learning takes place in different environments. Learning environment refers to a particular setting in which learning occurs. Distance learning comes in different forms and can be classified along multiple dimensions including the learning environment. Different examples of learning environments can be traditional classroom-based environment, computer assisted instructional environment, a virtual learning environment (VLE), and a hybrid learning environment (HLE) (Piccoli, Rami, & Ives, 2001).

Piccoli, Rami, and Ives (2001) defined computer aided instructional environment as referring to a situation in which students individually enter a self-contained computer-based learning environment with little communication among or between students and the instructor. Wilson (1996) defined VLE as computer-based environments that are relatively open systems, allowing interactions with the participant. Hybrid learning environment (HLE) or adjunct learning refers to a classroom- and computer-based environment that is a relatively open system, allowing synchronous and asynchronous interactions and encounters with other participants.

In a hybrid environment, the blended, adjunct, or hybrid teaching model is defined as the combination of classroom and online instruction that has an abundance of academics proclaiming its benefits. Hybrid courses blend face-to-face interaction with online learning including the delivery of curricular materials, access to resources, submission of assignments, and other activities (Buzzetto-More & Sweat-Guy, 2006).

Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) mentioned six reasons to design or use a blended learning system. They include pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, social interaction, personal agency, cost-effectiveness, and ease of revision. They found that people choose hybrid programs for three reasons: improved pedagogy, increased access and flexibility, and increased cost-effectiveness.

Thorne (2003) suggested some criteria for successful blended learning: Identifying the students' core learning needs; establishing the level of demands for the learners; recognizing the different leaning styles; looking creatively at the potential of using different tools; identifying the learning objectives; illustrating blended learning potentials and developing a user-friendly demonstration; setting up a monitoring process to evaluate the effectiveness of the delivery.

A large number of studies have been done so far on the factors contributing to learning effectiveness including the efficacy of learning environments. As hybrid learning has the potential of enjoying both classical and virtual worlds, it needs much more extensive assessment and research.

Picolli *et al. (2001)* pointed out that whereas there are no significant differences in performance in comparison with a traditional classroom setting, virtual learning leads to higher reported computer self-efficacy but less satisfaction with the learning process. There are also other related research which confirm the improvement in student learning (Maki, Maki, Patterson, & Whittaker, 2000; Hadidi, & Sung, 2000).

In their study, El-Gayar and Dennis (2005) assessed the learning effectiveness of students in hybrid learning environment and the results attested the reliability of hybrid learning. Learners benefitted from both in-class instruction as well as virtual classrooms using videoconferencing, electronic discussion boards, and emails. The findings also showed that learners do not experience any feelings of anxiety and isolation. However, the results indicated that with respect to satisfaction with learning process, there was not any significant difference between pure e-learning and hybrid learning (El-Gayar & Dennis, 2005).

Young (2002) examined hybrid and fully online teaching at several universities and concluded that among the three modes of instruction (face to face, fully online, and hybrid), the hybrid model posed the most substantive benefits for teaching and learning. He supported hybrid learning as an efficient way of expanding course content and stated that analysis of knowledge can be done more effectively through hybrid instruction. Dziuban and Moskal (2001), Rivera, McAlister, and Rice (2002), as well as Wu and Hiltz (2004) also confirmed that hybrid learning increases student satisfaction from learning process.

Bhatti, Tubaisahat, and El-Quawasmeh (2005) examined the perceptions of female students considering hybrid learning and found out that student satisfaction increased with mixed mode learning while the students' dependency on the instructor for assistance decreased. They explained online materials and provided students with the resources to seek out answers independent of the instructor. Rivera et al. (2002), also surveyed student satisfaction among the three modes of learning -- face to face, fully online, and hybrid -- and found that student satisfaction was at its maximum rate with the hybrid learning model (Buzzetto-More & Sweat-Guy, 2006).

In their study, Yu, Choy, Chan, and Lo (2008) pointed out that adjunct learning increases the contact hours students can have with each other and as a result through interaction they enhance their learning compared to classical classes which enjoyed very limited and controlled interaction. They found that through blended learning, students and teachers find the appropriate software and e-learning environment to utilize the communication, collaboration, management and administrative tools to improve language skills.

In order to blend a conventional class with Web-based instruction, a virtual environment is required. One of the common e-tools which can serve as the means for Web-based instruction is a weblog. A weblog, or blog, is also defined as a frequently updated online personal journal (Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma, 2009). There are a number of studies done on the effectiveness of weblogs. Concheiro (n.d.) stated that the learning process that is integrated with blog is less focused on the teacher and more on the students. They do not expect the teacher to give them all information. By reading and commenting on others, they start to learn from each other without teacher's direct involvement. As a result, the students become more critical and analytical in their learning process.

Zhao (2003) did a survey and found out the Web plays a great educational role in improving language communicative skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to Chapelle (2003), research on computer technology has shown a lot of interaction in language acquisition. Lavin (2006) explored WBI and Web 2.0 tools especially weblogs and wikis as useful asynchronous computer-mediated communication tools in language education. Pinkman's (2005) action research indicated how teacher's incorporation in a blog project in a language class in Japan enhanced their language abilities. In their survey on the students' views on the application of weblogs in teaching , Zare-ee, Shekarey , and Fathi Vajargah (2009) emphasized the idea that blogging can support students and faculty members effectively by breaking down the limiting walls of the classroom. Luján-Mora and Espinosa's study (n.d.) revealed that even though most students had not used a blog before, they confirmed being motivated and considered this tool as an enhancer of their learning processes.

Among all language skills, writing is the one which requires an extensive practice in order to be developed. Jack (2009; cited in Sayed, 2010) defines writing as a soft skill that would be nice to improve, but it takes time to be corrected, so most teachers would find it difficult to invest on it by spending the class time over it. Nunan (1989) remarked, "It has been argued that learning to write frequently and expressively is the most difficult of all motor skills for all language users." (p.35).

In a typical writing course, learners are required to apply teacher's instruction in their assignments which are usually in the form of writing paragraphs and essays. To use technology on one hand and practice writing skill on the other hand, one might think of Web tools available through which students can write something either collaboratively, sharing ideas with others and discuss the topic, or independently, not being too much controlled by the teacher. As mentioned, one of these tools is a blog. There are a number of studies which support the positive role of blogs in the improvement of writing skill.

Ward (2004) noted that "a blog provides a genuine writing practice, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, and offers a completely new form with un-chartered creative potential" (p. 3). Pinkman (2005) described a blog project he used in his reading and writing class at the American University of Sharjah, and found how effective it was in not only learners' improvement in reading and writing but also in raising students' interests in these two skills. Rösler (2008) pointed out that Web 2.0 tools such as Skype, weblog and wikis, help learners evoke hopeful expectations about their oral and written communicative skills being fostered. Kelley (2008) stated that blogging improves academic writing by creating comfortable writing environments that induce a sense of self-efficacy and belong to a community of individuals all destined to improve their writing. Tseng's (2008) empirical study on Taiwanese language learners showed that students would have positive attitudes toward blogs, especially in writing practice, free writing, and peer learning. In an empirical research, Sayed (2010) studied the effect of using blog-based peer feedback on the persuasive writing of EFL business management students in Saudi Arabia and concluded that those working on their writing skill through weblogs are more successful persuasive writers. *Parker and Chao (2007)* examined the experiences of high school English language learners as they created personal weblogs and responded to queries on a class weblog. The data from the project demonstrated that blogging as a classroom writing activity is effective in helping students to obtain, process and construct the English language. On the basis of an extensive survey, Frydrychová Klímová and Semrádová (2008) concluded that one of the representative blended courses at the faculty is an optional semester course on academic writing.

All in all, though the media and the net will not solve the major problem of learning a foreign language outside the target language area, it assists teachers "to react to the existing limitations in an innovative and imaginative way and permit the boundaries of classroom learning to be pushed back further by integrating elements of natural language acquisition" (Russeler & Rösler, 2000).

On the basis of the above-mentioned pieces of evidence, a research question was posed in this study:

Question . Is there any significant difference between the writing performances of Iranian EFL learners who use face2face instruction and those who learn how to write in a hybrid learning environment?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Of all available sophomore students majoring in English Translation and Literature at the Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch and Zand Institute of Higher Education in Shiraz, 110 students (17 males and 93 females) voluntarily took part in the study. As they were all in their second year of studying English, they were expected to have passed their Grammar (I) and (II), and thus had the same basic knowledge of English grammar and structure. They were all Iranian students who studied English as a foreign language and were at an average age range of 20 to 27 years old. The course was Essay Writing, and all the students had passed their Advanced Writing Course and were assumed to know the principles of paragraph and essay writing.

3.2 Instrumentation

The instruments which were used to answer research questions were two essay writing tests, the topics of which were similar for both pre- and post-tests. The participants were required to write three –paragraph essays, and the mode of development for both writing tests was argumentative. In order to score the writing performance of the participants at the beginning and end of the instruction, Weir's (1990) rating scale was used. For reliability purposes, the participants' writings were scored by two raters.

3.3 Procedures

This study was done in three phases. First, to observe ethical considerations, sophomore EFL male and female students at the Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch and Zand Institute of Higher Education were informed of the purpose of the study, and were asked to voluntarily take part in the study. Out of all available students, 110 sophomore male and female students volunteered to participate.

The participants were then divided into two groups: a control and an experimental group. In order to see whether the participants in all groups were at the same level in their writing skill, they were asked to write a three paragraph argumentative essay on an assigned topic. The writing performance of the learners was rated according to Weir's (1990) rating scale (1990) by two raters. The scores were correlated, and a good level of reliability was observed. So, the average of the raters' scores was taken as the writing score. A *t*-test was run on the participants' scores in writing and no significant difference was observed between the groups. Due to the fact that the writing tests were administered before the instruction, their average was considered as the pre-test.

Then the second phase of the study, i.e. the instruction started. This lasted for two and a half months, two hours a week, and all learners in the control and experimental groups took writing lessons in the classroom in the form of traditional face-to-face instruction. The difference, however, was in their out-of-class activities. While the participants in the control group were assigned topics on which to write an essay and hand it to the teacher the following session, the experimental group participants delivered their assignments online.

While the way the students' weekly assignments were to be handed in were explained to the control group, in the experimental group, first weblogs were explained. Thus, all participants in the experimental group who were to use the teacher's blog were technology-wise. Another important factor to consider in doing weekly assignments was time. In order to control the time spent on the essay writing activity in both groups, the researcher asked the participants to do their homework in not more than four hours.

The teacher's weblog was introduced (http://hybridlearning.blogfa.com). The participants were asked to visit the weblog after the class to do their homework. Weekly assignments of writing were expected to be posted by the participants on the blog. Each week three different topics were posted. Taking a learner-centered approach, the researcher asked the participants to choose the topic they liked better from the available ones, and type a three-paragraph argumentative essay on it in the blog. The participants were required to discuss the topic of their interests, exchange ideas on how to develop the topic, and have interaction. As they could see each other's assignments, they were also given the opportunity to give suggestions on each other's work and leave comments for their peers.

After the treatment, the study entered its third phase. The participants in both control and experimental groups took post-tests of writing. As in the pretest, the participants were asked to write a three-paragraph essay on the same topic they had before. Students' writings were scored by the same two raters of pre-tests based on Weir' (1990) rating scale, and the scores were correlated for the inter-rater reliability of scores. When it was found out that scores had good correlation and thus enjoyed reliability, the average of the raters' scores were taken as the post-test scores.

The difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, known as gain scores, was calculated and a *t*-test was run for the final analysis.

3.4. Results and Discussion

In order to find out whether there was inter-rater reliability between the two raters' sets of scores, a correlation was run. The results were as follows:

Table 1- Correlation between two raters' scores in writing pre-test

		Rater 2
First Rater correlation Sig. N	Pearson	.831 .000 110

As Table 1 suggests, the correlation between the two raters' writing scores was .831, which represents a high inter-reliability of scores (r = .90) using Spearman's prophecy formula (Henning, 1987, p. 85).
In order to see if the participants in both control and experimental groups were homogeneous, and they were at the same level of writing ability, a *t*-test was run. Table 2 summarizes the related descriptive statistics for the average of raters' scores in the pre-test in both control and experimental groups.

Table 2- Descriptive statistics for the control and experimental groups' writing performances before the instruction

Writing pre-test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	52	12.6731	1.94756	.27008
Experimental	58	12.3491	1.79543	.23575

According to Table 2, the mean score for the control group's writing was 12.67 and that of the experimental group was 12.34. The results of the *t*-test are indicated in Table 3 in order to see if this difference was significant.

Table 3- t-test for the homogeneity of the participants before the instruction

	Leven's test for equal variance		t-test for equality of means					95% confidence interval of difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean difference	Std. error difference	lower	upper
Equal variance assumed Equal variance not assumed	.024	.877	.908 .904	108 104.200	.366 .368	.32394 .32394	.35690 .35850	-.38350 -.38696	1.03138 1.03484

According to Table 3, as the significance level (.366) is higher than .05, it can be concluded that there was not a significant difference between the performances of participants in the control and

experimental group before the instruction. In other words, they were all homogeneous and were at the same level of writing ability.

After the instruction, a post-test of writing was administered and the participants' performances were again rated by two scorers. To find the reliability of the researchers' scores, a correlation was used. Here are the results:

Table 4- The correlation between the raters' scoring in the post-test

		Rater2
First Rater	Pearson	.902
Correlation		.000
	Sig.	110
	N	

As it can be observed, there is a high correlation between the raters' scores (.902). According to Spearman's prophecy formula (Henning, 1987, p. 85), this shows that the scores given by both raters enjoyed a considerable degree of inter-rater reliability (r = 94).

To answer the research question, after the writing post-tests and calculating the average of two raters' sets of scores, the participants' gain scores based on the difference between the average of pre and post-tests were obtained to see how much the control and experimental groups possibly had improved after the instruction. In order to find out if instruction has been effective for both groups, a paired *t*-test was run.

Table 5- Paired *t*-test for the Effectiveness of Instruction in both Groups

	Paired Differences							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
meanpre-meanpost	-2.67273	1.79536	.17118	-3.01200	-2.33345	-15.613	109	.000

According to Table 5, the value of *t* representing the difference between the participants' pre-test scores and post-test scores in both groups is 15.613 which is higher than the significance level (.000). Thus, it can be stated that the instruction has been effective. Table 6 indicates the descriptive statistics for the participants' gain scores in both groups.

Table 6- Descriptive statistics for the control and experimental groups writing gain scores

Writing gain scores	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	52	1.1154	.81569	.11312
Experimental	58	4.0690	1.17147	.15382

Table 6 indicates that there is a difference in the mean score of the control group's gain score (1.1154) and that of the experimental group's (4.0690). To see if this difference is statistically significant, another *t*-test was run on the gain scores. The results are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7- *t*-test comparing the participants' differences in gain scores for the control and experimental groups

	Leven's test for equal variance		t-test for equality of means					95% confidence interval of difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean difference	Std. error difference	lower	upper
Equal variance assumed Equal variance not assumed	8.381	.005	-15.176 -15.469	108 101.984	.000 .000	-2.95358 -2.95358	.19462 .19094	-3.33935 -3.33230	-2.58782 -2.57486

According to Table 7, the difference between the control and experimental groups' gain scores is significant since the significance level (.000) is lower than .05. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there are not any significant differences between the writing performances of Iranian EFL learners who use face2face instruction and those who learn how to write in a hybrid learning environment is rejected here. In fact, the participants in the experimental group, who practiced their writing online in a hybrid learning environment excelled the control group who practiced in a conventional face2face mode in their writing.

4. Conclusion

The main objective of the present study was to find out if there is any significant difference in the writing performances of learners who are in a hybrid learning environment and those who take face2face instruction. The results of the study showed that those who are taught in a blended or hybrid environment, i.e., using in-class along with online instruction and practice, outperform in their essay writing ability compared to those who attend a traditional face2face environment. The results of this study follow what El-Gayar and Dennis (2005) and Frydrychová Klímová and Semrádová (2008) claimed on the effectivenss of hybrid learning in the improvement of language skills in general and writing ability in particular. Language teachers can benefit from the results of the present study and plan to expose their students with some online out-of-class activities to help them enhance their writing skill.

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