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Research of Enhancing Business English Writing Skills Based on the Blended Learning Model in Vocational College

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Abstract

Business English writing is a compulsory skill to be mastered by Business English major students but there is little progress in acquiring writing skills due to unattractive and ineffective teaching methods. The objective of this study was to investigate the effects of using the blended learning mode of task collaborative learning in improving Business English writing skills of students in China. The sample of the study consisted of 80 second year Chinese Business English students from Guangdong Polytechnic Science and Technology; two business English lecturers also participated in this study. All the students were of the same age group with similar results in their first-year English Language examination. Both the Experimental Group and Control groups had 40 students each and they were chosen as intact-groups. The Experimental Group was taught using the blended learning mode of task collaborative learning and the Control Group was taught using the conventional method over a period of eight weeks. The quantitative data were analyzed using the SPSS Program for Windows Version 25, in which ANCOVA test were applied for the inferential statistics. The findings from the quantitative data analyses indicated that the Experimental Group outperformed the Control Group in their overall scores in writing, focusing on topic, supporting details, coherence and cohesion, grammar and vocabulary. Also, students improved their writing skills through collaborative leaning. As such, this study has crucial pedagogical implications as it suggests that the blended learning mode of task collaborative learning can be used as an alternative method in China to improve students' Business English writing skills.

Keywords: Business English writing, blended learning method, conventional method, collaborative learning, Chinese vocational education

1. Introduction

Writing is considered the most basic but rather complicated language skill to be mastered, especially for business English major students. Communication skills in written form are one of the essential competencies to be mastered by these students as this will significantly support a person in his career and working life (Sulisworo, Rahayu, & Akhsan, 2016). In job applications especially, writing skills aid in improving the applicant's ability to use language correctly and accurately, in terms of vocabulary, layout of text, writing strategy and critical thinking skills (Shih, 2011). Therefore, writing is seen as the most difficult but most important skill for students to master. The current Business English courses can be seen in the course arrangements and examination systems at different levels.

Information technology with the Internet as the main source of content is developing rapidly. As such, teachers are not the only source of information. If teachers still continue with the traditional teaching methods, the above phenomenon is likely to continue indefinitely. Since the beginning of this century, the Ministry of Education has initiated the reform of college English teaching and the main feature of this reform is to change the traditional teaching model and implement the teaching model based on "Classroom + Computer". But the situation of teacher-centered classrooms cannot be shaken off although various multimedia technologies have been introduced. The teaching method of "chalk + blackboard" has changed to "computer + large screen projection", but the essence is nothing more than a teacher's "verbal indoctrination transformed into technical multimedia indoctrination" (Ao, Liu, & Jia, 2011).

Business learning at present depends on limited classroom time and it is difficult for the traditional classroom teaching method to adapt to the requirements of the new information age. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the

classroom, expand channels and promote the development of business English teaching with the help of information technology.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to evaluate whether there is significant effect in enhancing students' English writing skills in the blended learning method compare with conventional method. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate whether there is a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in overall performance in Business English writing?

2. To investigate whether there is a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in focusing on topic in business English writing?

3. To investigate whether there is a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in supporting details in business English writing?

4. To investigate whether there is a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in coherence and cohesion in business English writing?

5. To investigate whether there is a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in grammar in business English writing?

6. To investigate whether there is a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in vocabulary in business English writing?

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives three research questions are formulated:

RQ1: Is there significant effect between the mean score of the Experimental Group (Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (Conventional Method) in their overall performance for Business writing skills?

RQ2: Is there a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in focusing on topic in business English writing?

RQ3: Is there a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in supporting details in business English writing?

RQ4: Is there a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in coherence and cohesion in business English writing?

RQ5: Is there a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in grammar in business English writing?

RQ6: Is there a significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in vocabulary in business English writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Scaffolding Teaching Theory

Scaffolding teaching is one of the most mature teaching methods under the constructivist education theory. The core of the scaffolding theory is also the concept of "scaffolding". First, the construction of the "scaffolding" depends on identifying the students' "Zone of Proximal Development", so as to help them cross the "ZPD" and guide their development. Secondly, the "ZPD" is a dynamic area, and the "scaffolding" should constantly change accordingly to help students reach the next potential level of development. Third, the "Scaffold" is adjustable; teachers should build different scaffolds according to the specific learning situation of students and set different scaffolds in different learning stages. There are many ways to present the scaffold. In addition to direct presentation, more are presented through hints, templates, encouragement and partial answers (Hartman, 2002), so as to improve students' problem-solving ability and innovative consciousness. "Scaffolding teaching helps teachers create an active atmosphere between teachers and students, helps students acquire knowledge and skills, and fully complete writing tasks," (Kim, Y., & Kim, J., 2005, pp. 50-56).

This scaffolding teaching idea that reflects the subjectivity and interaction of students' learning comes from the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) theory and social constructivism theory proposed by Vygotsky in the 1930s. Vygotsky pointed out that every learner has two levels of development, namely the actual level of development and the potential level of development. The former refers to the student's current level of

intelligence, knowledge and problem-solving ability, and the latter refers to the ability achieved with the help of adults. It can also be the level that can be achieved in the process of interacting with peers, where the "ZPD" is the gap between the two development levels (Feeze & Joyce, 2002). The important enlightenment of this theory to teaching is that teachers should grasp the relationships between the current development level of students and their learning content, create the most recent development area for students, and use this as a starting point to build a scaffolding, and through cooperative learning, students should be introduced into a higher level.

2.2 Mayer's Multimedia Theory

The article "Multimedia learning: Are we asking the right questions?" published by Meyer in 1997 attracted widespread attention from researchers in many fields and opened a new era of multimedia research. Meyer's argument shows that "multimedia learning refers to meaningful learning by integrating a series of texts and pictures". In multimedia learning, students must perform cognitive processing based on multimedia teaching information. Multimedia teaching information refers to "information presented in words and pictures, with the purpose of promoting and helping learning." In the book "Multimedia Learning", Meyer elaborated on the cognitive learning process of multimedia learning and achieved fruitful results through a series of experiments. Based on experimental and theoretical research, he proposed three mechanisms for multimedia learning, namely, a dual-channel mechanism, a limited capacity mechanism, an active processing mechanism and several principles of information design. Meyer believes that the learning process of students in multimedia learning is active. During the learning process, the two channels of audiovisual perception are carried out at the same time. In the information processing of each channel, the capacity of the channel is not infinite. It is accepted though that the amount of information it carries is subject to certain restrictions. If the amount of information processed at the same time is too large, the capacity of the channel will be overloaded; this will affect the further organization and processing of information. Meyer's experiments and research on the cognitive theory of multimedia learning provides us with a solid theoretical foundation for further research and application in the future. In China, there is not much research on the cognitive theory of multimedia learning. Most of the teaching design is still based on the existing theories of Western scholars.

3. Data Analysis

In this part, the researcher conducted quantitative data analyses using ANCOVA to test 6 null hypotheses and answer research questions 1-6. The data recorded the subjects' mean scores on business English writing skills by focusing on attention paid to topic, supporting sentences, coherence and cohesion, grammar, vocabulary. The aim of ANCOVA analysis was to see the effects of the blended learning method and conventional teaching method on students' business English writing skills in the post-test. In the ANCOVA test, the pre-test was used as a covariate to eliminate the differences between the groups in the intervention.

3.1 Overall Performance in Business English Writing Skills

Ho_1: There is no significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in their overall performance in business English writing.

The ANCOVA test was conducted to study students' overall performance in business English writing in the pre-test and post-test. The results are shown in Table 1a and Table 1b.

Table 1a. Students' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test for Overall Performance in Business English Writing

Group	Pre-test	Post-Test
Experimental	Mean=71.98 , SD=4.53	Mean= 83.60, SD=3.6
Control	Mean=71.68 , SD=3.63	Mean= 75.35, SD=5.1

The findings in Table 1a indicate that in the pre-test the mean score of the Experimental Group in their overall performance in business English writing is 71.98 and the mean score for the Control Group is 71.68; both scores are almost the same. In the post-test the Experimental Group scored much higher (Mean=83.6, SD=3.6) than the Control Group (Mean=83.6, SD=5.1).

Table 1b. Results of the ANCOVA Test on Overall Performance in Business English Writing

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1418.255[a]	2	709.128	36.852	.000
Intercept	1080.269	1	1080.269	56.139	.000

PreOverall	57.005	1	57.005	2.962	.089
Group	1339.088	1	1339.088	69.589	.000
Error	1481.695	77	19.243		
Total	508202.000	80			
Corrected Total	2899.950	79			

a. R Squared = .489 (Adjusted R Squared = .476)

Results of the ANCOVA test presented in Table 4-3b indicate that the Experimental Group improved significantly compared with the Control Group in their overall performance in business English writing (F=69.59, df=1, p=.000). These results suggest that the blended learning method has a significant effect on the Experimental Group's overall scores in business English writing in the post-test compared with the Control Group. These findings reveal that the blended learning method helped to improve students' performance after the intervention. Therefore, the results fail to accept **Ho_1** and the Research Question 1 is answered.

3.2 Focusing on Topic in Business English Writing

Ho2. There is no significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in focusing on topic in business English writing.

The ANCOVA Test was conducted to examine the skill of 'focusing on topic' in the pre-test and post-test. The results of the test are shown in Table 2a and Table 2b.

Table 2a. Students' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test for Focusing on Topic in Business English Writing

Group	Pre-test	Post-Test
Experimental	Mean=14.33, SD=.92	Mean=16.93, SD=.94
Control	Mean=14.25, SD=.81	Mean=15.20, SD=1.1

Findings in Table 2a indicate that in the pre-test the mean score of the Experimental Group for focusing on topic is 14.33 and the mean score for the Control Group is 14.25; both are almost the same. In the post-test the Experimental Group scored much higher (Mean=16.93, SD=.94) than the Control Group (Mean=15.2, SD=1.1).

Table 2b. Results of the ANCOVA Test on Focusing on Topic in Business English Writing

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	61.973[a]	2	30.987	30.312	.000
Intercept	49.014	1	49.014	47.947	.000
PreFOT	2.461	1	2.461	2.407	.125
Group	58.341	1	58.341	57.071	.000
Error	78.714	77	1.022		
Total	20781.000	80			
Corrected Total	140.688	79			

a. R Squared = .441 (Adjusted R Squared = .426)

Results of the ANCOVA test presented in Table 2b, indicate that the Experimental Group performed significantly better than the Control Group in their focus on topic in business English writing (F=57.07, df=1, p=.000). These results suggest that the blended learning method had a significant effect on students in the Experimental Group compared with the Control Group, after intervention. Therefore, the results fail to accept null hypothesis 2 (**Ho_2**) and Research Question 2 is answered.

3.3 Supporting Details in Students' Business English Writing

Ho3. There is no significant difference between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in providing supporting details in business English writing.

The ANCOVA Test was done to examine the effects of providing supporting details in the pre-test and post-test. The results are shown in Table 3a and 3b.

Table 3a. Students' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test for Supporting Details in Business English Writing

Group	Pre-test	Post-Test
Experimental	Mean=14.48, SD=1.11	Mean=16.85, SD=.89
Control	Mean=14.48, SD=.96	Mean=15.13, SD=1.11

Findings in Table 3a indicate that in the pre-test the mean score of the Experimental Group for providing supporting details is 14.48 and the mean score for the Control Group is 14.48; both are the same. In the post-test the Experimental Group scored much higher (Mean=16.85, SD=.89) than the Control Group (Mean=15.13, SD=1.11).

Table 3b. Results of the ANCOVA Test on providing Supporting Details in Business English Writing

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	60.178[a]	2	30.089	29.398	.000
Intercept	86.133	1	86.133	84.155	.000
PreSD	.666	1	.666	.650	.422
Group	59.513	1	59.513	58.146	.000
Error	78.809	77	1.023		
Total	20587.000	80			
Corrected Total	138.988	79			

a. R Squared = .433 (Adjusted R Squared = .418)

Results of the ANCOVA test presented in Table 3b indicate that the Experimental Group performed significantly better than the Control Group in providing supporting details (F=58.15, df=1, p=.000). These results suggest that the blended learning method has a significant effect on the supporting details provided by students of the Experimental Group compared with the Control Group in Business English writing, after intervention. Therefore, the results fail to accept null hypothesis 3 (**Ho_3**). Research Question 3 is answered.

3.4 Coherence and Cohesion in Students' Business English Writing

Ho4. There is no significant difference between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in displaying coherence and cohesion in business English writing.

The ANCOVA Test was done to examine the effects on coherence and cohesion in the pre-test and post-test. The results are shown in Table 4a and Table 4b.

Table 4a. Students' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test for Coherence and Cohesion in business English writing skills

Group	Pre-test	Post-Test
Experimental	Mean=14.53, SD=1.06	Mean=16.85, SD=1.11
Control	Mean=14.45, SD=.96	Mean=15.3, SD=.74

Findings in Table 4a indicate that in the pre-test the mean score of the Experimental Group for *displaying* coherence and cohesion in writing is 14.53 and the mean score for the Control Group is 14.45; both are almost the same. In the post-test the Experimental Group scored much higher (Mean=16.85, SD=1.11) than the Control Group (Mean=15.3, SD=.74)

Results of the ANCOVA test presented in Table 4b indicate that the Experimental Group performed significantly better than the Control Group in displaying coherence and cohesion in business English writing (F=53.74, df=1, p=.000). These results suggest that the blended learning method has helped the Experimental Group to improve significantly compared with their counterparts who were taught using the conventional method. Therefore, the

results fail to accept null hypothesis 4 (**Ho_4**) and Research Question 4 is answered.

Table 4b. The Results of the ANCOVA Test on Coherence and Cohesion in Business English Writing

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	49.778[a]	2	24.889	28.278	.000
Intercept	73.642	1	73.642	83.670	.000
PreCC	1.728	1	1.728	1.964	.165
Group	47.302	1	47.302	53.743	.000
Error	67.772	77	.880		
Total	20790.000	80			
Corrected Total	117.550	79			

a. R Squared = .423 (Adjusted R Squared = .408)

3.5 Use of Grammar in Students' Business English Writing

Ho5. There is no significant effect between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in the use of grammar in business English writing.

The ANCOVA Test was done to examine the effect on grammar in the pre-test and post-test. The results are shown in Table 5a and Table 5b.

Table 5a. Students' mean score in the pre-test and post-test for Grammar in Business English Writing

Group	Pre-test	Post-Test
Experimental	Mean=14.23, SD=.86	Mean=16.45, SD=.85
Control	Mean=14.2, SD=.85	Mean=14.8, SD=1.18

Findings in Table 5a indicate that in the pre-test the mean score of the Experimental Group for grammar is 14.23 and the mean score for the Control Group is 14.2; both are almost the same. In the post-test the Experimental Group scored much higher (Mean=16.45, SD=.85) than the Control Group (Mean=14.8, SD=1.18).

Table 5b. The Results of the ANCOVA Test on Grammar in Business English Writing

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	57.195[a]	2	28.598	27.679	.000
Intercept	44.339	1	44.339	42.915	.000
PreG	2.745	1	2.745	2.657	.107
Group	54.078	1	54.078	52.341	.000
Error	79.555	77	1.033		
Total	19668.000	80			
Corrected Total	136.750	79			

a. R Squared = .418 (Adjusted R Squared = .403)

Results of the ANCOVA test presented in Table 5b indicate that the Experimental Group performed significantly better than the Control Group in the use of grammar in business English writing (F=52.34, df=1, p=.000). These results suggest that the blended learning method has a significant effect on the use of grammar by students in the Experimental Group compared with the Control Groups, after intervention. Therefore, the results fail to accept null hypothesis 5 (**Ho_5**) and Research Question 5 is answered.

3.6 Vocabulary in Students' Business English Writing

Ho6. There is no significant difference between the Experimental Group (using Blended Learning Method) and Control Group (using Conventional Method) in the use of vocabulary in Business English writing.

The ANCOVA Test was done to examine the effects on grammar in the pre-test and post-test. The results are shown in Table 6a and Table 6b.

Table 6a. Students' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test for Vocabulary in Business English Writing skills

Group	Pre-test	Post-Test
Experimental	Mean=14.43, SD=.12	Mean=16.53, SD=.91
Control	Mean=14.38, SD=.15	Mean=14.93, SD=1.21

Findings in Table 6a indicate that in the pre-test the mean score of the Experimental Group in vocabulary is 14.43 and the mean score for the Control Group is 14.38; both are almost the same. In the post-test the Experimental Group scored much higher (Mean=16.53, SD=.91) than the Control Group (Mean=14.93, SD=1.21).

Table 6b. The Results of the ANCOVA Test on Vocabulary in Business English Writing

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	51.510[a]	2	25.755	22.424	.000
Intercept	92.394	1	92.394	80.443	.000
PreV	.310	1	.310	.270	.605
Group	50.980	1	50.980	44.386	.000
Error	88.440	77	1.149		
Total	19922.000	80			
Corrected Total	139.950	79			

a. R Squared = .368 (Adjusted R Squared = .352)

Results of the ANCOVA test presented in Table 6b, indicate that the Experimental Group performed significantly better than the Control Group in vocabulary used in business English writing (F=44.39, df=1, p=.000). These results suggest that the blended learning method has a significant effect on the vocabulary of students of the Experimental Group compared with the Control Group in Business English writing, after intervention. Therefore, the results fail to accept null hypothesis 6 (**Ho_6**) and Research Question 6 is answered.

4. Conclusion

According to the findings, the students who were taught using blended learning method display significant improvement in business English writing skills compared to those who were taught using the conventional method. These findings suggest that using the blended learning method helps students to overcome difficulties and improve their business writing skills. Besides, this method also shows significant improvement in their focus on the topic, support details, coherence and cohesion, grammar and vocabulary component. Therefore, the findings indicate that using the blended learning method for teaching business English writing skills can help students better learn the process of writing compared with the conventional method.

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