



## CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH WRITING WITHIN BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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### abstract

This study reports a case study research in Writing Blended Learning Environment for higher education that enriched digital environment study especially in the pandemic of Covid-19. It examines the students' writing apprehension and their performance as perceived by a selected group of EFL students who enroll in professional writing class. Questionnaires were administered to three writing lecturers and fifty students of English Department, Universitas Tidar. The obtained data were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, while those obtained from the interview were analyzed qualitatively using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's model (2014). The findings show that there are many challenges faced by both the teachers and the students when they implemented this writing blended learning environment. Though, some challenges give not only the pitfalls but also positive contribution to the students' learning progress in their writing. The study found that the students need specific and intensive instruction, practice and feedback for improving their writing skill. It is also found that learning writing through writing blended learning environment is somehow interesting and also challenging in some covered topics and activities, while, lecturers still have their instructional and pedagogical roles in blended learning environment.

## INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century learning is a learning process that prepares students with the 21st century competencies where Information and Communication Technology (ICT) advances very rapidly. Students in this era must possess four competencies or skills which are commonly referred to as 4Cs, namely (1) Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, (2) Creativity and Innovation, (3) Communication Skills, and (4) Collaboration. These are developed through a learning process that applies the characteristics of 21st-century skills. The 21st-century learning builds individual learning abilities and supports their development as lifelong, active, and independent learners.

In the 21st century learning, the learning process is centered on students by emphasizing the ability to achieve Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). The cognitive domain was first proposed by Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) which was later revised by

Krathwohl (2002). The cognitive taxonomy then changes to (1) Remember, (2) Understand, (3) Apply, (4) Analyze, (5) Evaluate, and (6) Create. Cognitive processes demonstrated in Level 1 to 3 are classified as Low-Order Thinking Skills (LOTS), while those in Level 4 to 6 belong to Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

Law Number 12 of 2012 on Higher Education, particularly article 5a states the goals to be achieved by higher education, i.e., to develop students' potential to become human beings who are obedient to God, noble, healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, skilled, competent, and cultured for the sake of the nation. This goal is in line with the concept of the 21st century learning. The English Language Education Study Program (PBI), Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Tidar is one of the Teacher Training Institutions (LPTK) that produces educators (teachers). As a teacher producing institution, LPTK has a crucial function in enhancing the quality of education because undeniably, teachers have significant parts in improving the excellence of education.

To become a professional teacher, good writing skills are much needed. Writing is perceived as one of the major language skills that is compulsory to be mastered by prospective teachers. Writing according to Abbas (2006) is an activity to express someone's thoughts, ideas, and feelings through a written language. In other words, writing is an activity to communicate thoughts or feelings in a written mode to be understood by readers and functions as an indirect medium of communication. In accordance with Henry (2008), writing skills are language skills that are both productive and expressive used in an indirect or non-face-to-face communication.

Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) mentions five components of writing which include content, organization, vocabulary, diction (language use), and mechanics. Content is the topic discussed and how readers are guided to understand the topic that is written. Organization is the internal structure of a piece of writing that can present in various patterns such as comparative, deductive, analytical, sequential, etc. The vocabulary used by the writer can describe the breadth of their knowledge. Diction or language use is meant for sentence structures including phonology, morphology, and syntax. Meanwhile, mechanics is the use of capital letters, correct spelling, and punctuation.

In the 2017 Curriculum of the English Language Education Study Program, FKIP, UNTIDAR, writing skills are given to students of the 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> semester. These writing skills

are worth 18 credits with the following subject names: Writing Intensive Course (051112), Introduction to Paragraph Writing (051224), Paragraph Writing (052125), Introduction to Essay Writing (052226), Essay Writing (053127), Professional Writing (053229), and Undergraduate Thesis (054268). These writing skills are not something that is easy to master. As the highest language skill, it makes students experience problems in the writing learning process. The results of observations and interviews show that many students regarded writing as difficult and boring. It was hard for them to develop ideas and there were many more problems related to writing.

Linguistic constraints are also experienced by students in the writing process. According to Chaer (2012), linguistic elements in a language include phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Phonology is a linguistic branch that scrutinizes the sounds of language as well as the process of their formation and changes. Morphology, according to Soeparno (2002), refers to the branch of linguistics that concerns the grammatical arrangement or parts of words. Ramlan as cited in Tarigan (2009) states that syntax is a part of grammar which talks about the structure of phrases and sentences. Meanwhile, according to Chaer (2012), semantics examines symbols or signs that state not only meaning but also the relationship between one meaning to another meaning, and the association between words and the concept, or vice-versa.

Based on the interview results with several writing lecturers in English Language Education Study Program, FKIP, UNTIDAR, it is known that most students did not pass the writing course, so they have had to retake the subject. In addition, the coordinator of the English Language Education Study Program mentioned that some students could not graduate on time (4 years) because of some difficulties when writing their undergraduate thesis. There are so many problems and impacts faced by students because of their lack of writing skills.

To overcome these problems, there must be innovations that can bridge the gap between students' current learning level and the desired level of English writing skills as required by the study program. One solution is by utilizing ELITA (E-Learning UNTIDAR). It is one of the Moodle-based learning platforms in Universitas Tidar which is designed to provide online learning services for lecturers and students with a strong, safe, and integrated system to create a personalized online learning environment. With the existence ELITA, online learning and hybrid learning or better known as blended learning have begun to grow in Universitas Tidar.

Blended learning incorporates the benefits of offline learning and online learning (Semler as cited in Maya (2020)). While ELITA is supposed to be a platform to increase blended learning, what happens in PBI, FKIP, Universitas Tidar is that ELITA is limitedly used for uploading materials, taking quizzes, and collecting student assignments. The interaction between lecturers and students is not as well established as that in in-person learning.

Considering the fact that blended learning in English Writing course is not yet well implemented even though ELITA, it is crucial to find a more effective writing learning model that can facilitate teaching and learning in a blended learning environment. To be able to develop such a model, carrying out a needs analysis is a prerequisite step before the stakeholders can decide which model to adapt or adopt. Therefore, this study focuses on investigating some aspects related to the obstacles encountered by both the lecturers and students when carrying out the English writing teaching and learning process in a blended learning environment. By doing so the solutions to the problems offered will be right on target, particularly in developing a writing learning model to improve students' writing skills in a blended learning environment. Therefore, this study focuses on the subsequent research questions:

1. What are the obstacles faced by the lecturers when teaching English writing skills to students in a blended learning environment?
2. What are the obstacles faced by students when learning English writing skills in a blended learning environment?

## **METHOD**

This study on the need analysis for the Development of Student Writing Skills Learning Model in a Blended Learning Environment serves as the basis of a research and development study that will be carried out at a later stage. This study was carried out from May to September 2020. The research design used was the case study method, which is carried out to focus on a specific case to be carefully observed and analyzed, so that more comprehensive, valid, reliable, and objective data will be obtained.

## Participants

This study was carried out at the English Language Education study program, FKIP, Universitas Tidar. This research involved three writing lecturers and fifty students. The research samples were taken using a purposive sampling technique, in which the researchers limited the participants to 1) lecturers who taught writing in the blended learning context, and 2) students who took writing courses in the blended learning context. The followings are some demographic information about the research subjects.

Table 1. Participants' Gender

Gender	Number
Male	34
Female	16
Total	50

Table 2. Participants' Age

Age (year-old)	Number
20	29
21	12
22	6
23	3

## Data Collection and Instruments

The data were obtained both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire to identify the obstacles experienced by students in the teaching and learning process of English writing skills in a blended learning environment. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were obtained using semi-structured interviews to find out lecturers' and students' experiences during the writing classes in a blended learning environment.

## Data Analysis

As this study collected data from questionnaires and interviews, the researchers employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. The data obtained from the questionnaires were quantified using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Meanwhile, the data from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively using the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). First, the data were organized, reduced, and reconfigured in the data reduction phase. Then, through the data display phase, the data were arranged to find themes that would make it possible for the researchers to draw conclusions. Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification phase, the

condensed data were then analyzed to find what they really meant and to assess their implications.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The results summarize the information on the obstacles faced by the lecturers and students when learning writing in a blended learning environment.

### **Obstacles faced by the lecturers when teaching writing skills to students in a blended learning environment**

The administration of the questionnaire was to identify the need analysis for the development of the learning model to conduct professional writing class in a blended learning environment. The results of the given questionnaire helped the researchers understand the situations and the obstacles that the lecturers might face during the teaching-learning process such as in giving feedback and classroom management in the blended learning environment

#### **Giving feedback**

The lecturers found it difficult to provide students feedback due to a large number of students in each class with around 25-30 students and these cause the lecturers to have rarely given any feedback on assignments, quizzes, and tests.

#### ***Classroom management in the blended learning environment (ELITA)***

The lecturers faced problems to manage their participating classes with the blended learning environment (ELITA) since the lecturers could not monitor the entire online learning process in some asynchronous meetings. However, these lecturers played their roles as facilitators, instructors, supervisors, and evaluators.

#### ***Obstacles faced by the students when learning in a blended learning environment***

The questionnaire results informed the students' perceptions of the Professional Writing learning activity within the blended-learning environment:

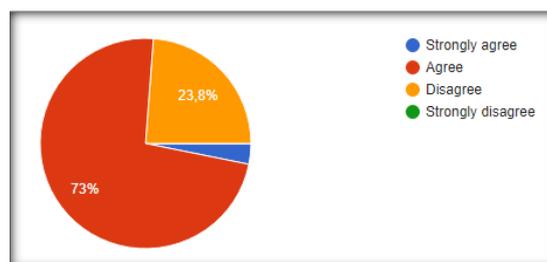


Figure 1. Professional Writing learning activities in Blended Learning Environment (ELITA) are diversified and exciting

Figure 1 shows that most of the students (73%) agreed, and 3.2% strongly agreed that the Professional Writing activities were relatively diversified and exciting, while less than a quarter (23,8%) disagreed with the statement.

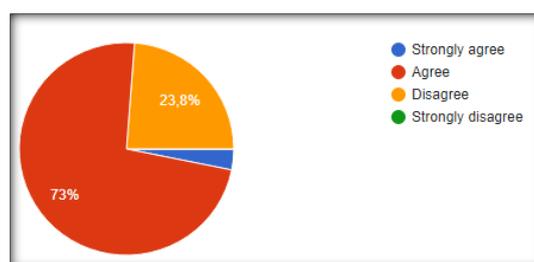


Figure 2. Professional Writing learning activities in Blended Learning Environment (ELITA) are relevant and exciting

Based on the questionnaire results, the course's learning outcomes, 73% of students and 3.2% both agreed and strongly agreed that the learning process was already in line with the learning outcomes, while 23.8% of students disagreed with the statement.

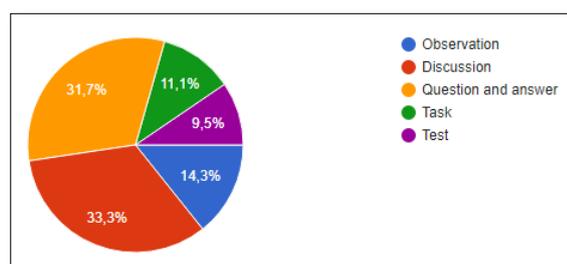


Figure 3. The most favorite activities in Professional Writing learning activities in Blended Learning Environment (ELITA)

Figure 3 describes the learning activities that most the students like in the Professional Writing course in its integration with ELITA with 33.3% of the students preferred discussion and 31.7% favored for questions and answer, while the other activities such as observation,

test, and task were not relatively chosen by the students, with 14.3%, 9.5%, and 11.1%, respectively.

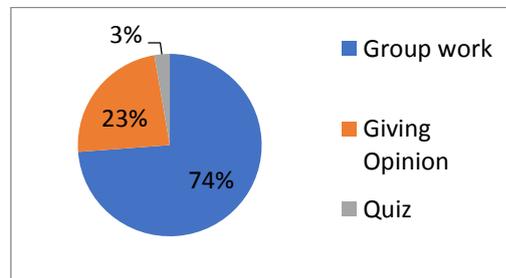


Figure 4. Other activities in Professional Writing learning activities in Blended Learning Environment (ELITA)

Figure 4 gives information the most preferred activities in the Professional Writing course were group-work and giving opinion with 74% and 23%, respectively, while quiz as the most required is not favorable by the students (3%).

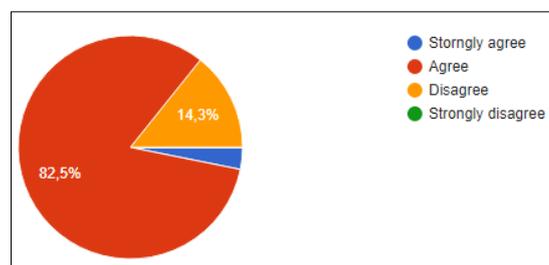


Figure 5. I think the Professional Writing learning activities in ELITA are closely related to the Blended Learning Environment

Figure 5 contends the proximity between the Professional Writing course and the characteristics of Blended Learning Environment (ELITA). Most of them agreed 82.5% and strongly agreed (3.2) with the statement, while 14.3% rejected it.

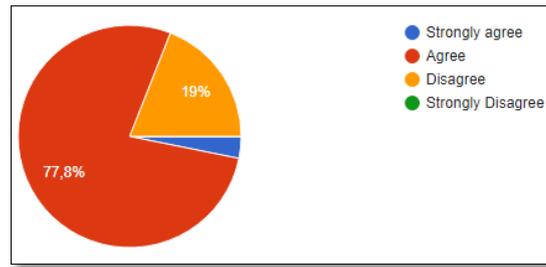


Figure 6. My willingness to express my idea in Professional Writing has increased

Figure 6 on the students' inclination and willingness to express ideas in the Professional writing course informs that 81% of the respondents contend that the course had improved their learning motivation, while only 19% disagreed with the statement.

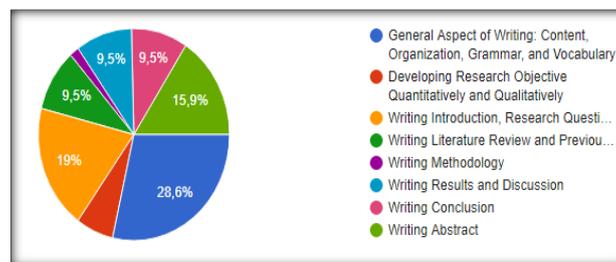


Figure 7. The part that the students like the most in Professional Writing learning

Figure 7 discusses the topics that most students like in the Professional Writing course. 28.6% of the students and 28.6% of the students loved how they were taught some general aspects of writing such as the contents, organization, grammar, vocabulary while teaching on the introduction parts (these include topics, research questions, and the aims of the research). Meanwhile, teaching on abstract was favored by the respondents with 19% and 15.9%, respectively. Unfortunately, the students did not like the other prominent topics. These cover some topics on developing research objectives qualitatively and quantitatively (9.5%), writing a literature review and a previous study (9.5%), writing methodology (1.6%), writing results and discussion (9.5%), writing conclusion (9.5%).

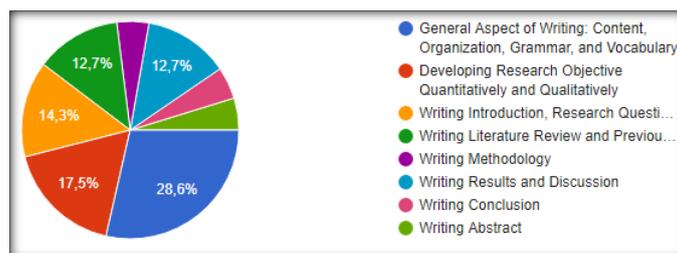


Figure 8. The most stimulating part of Professional Writing learning

Figure 8 asks the most stimulating topics to learn that most students like in the Professional Writing Course contends the students consider teaching on the general aspect of writing (these include content, organization, grammar, and vocabulary) with 28.6%. Meanwhile, meetings on developing research objectives and introduction (topics, research questions, and the aims) were about 17.5% and 14.3%. Not to mention, topics on writing a literature review – previous study and results-discussion were equally stimulating with 12.7% for each, and the students did not consider the remaining topics such as methodology, conclusion, and abstract with 4.8% for each.

The findings of the study showed remarkable results in understanding the students' problems in a blended learning environment using ELITA. These include two major obstacles, namely problems with (1) technology as learning media and 2) learning process. Problems with the practice of technology as learning media are often associated with some pivotal factors that inhibit from having synchronous teachings. Despite the advancement of technology that may lead to a successful learning, this causes difficulty for the participants who are from rural areas due to the archaic mobile phones, limited data plan, and instable internet connection that hinder from the synchronous teaching. These pitfalls of technology as learning media are to assert Torre (2019) findings that pinpoint the stability of internet as a key feature in conducting synchronous teaching. She contends that instability or even absence of internet connection may hinder from the direct interaction between lecturers and students. These similar problems are also identified in some studies (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018; Gopalan, Bracey, Klann, & Schmidt, 2018) that assert “insufficient access to technology” and “inequality technological accessibility.”

The findings of the study also indicated the problems that were led by students' misinterpretation toward the topics. Students misunderstood the lecturers' answers in the

question and answer session, and the lecturers did not understand the problems well. The changes from face-to-face learning to online learning hinder them from direct communication which later affects the students' comprehension. Berge synthesizes the hierarchy of communication barriers as the results of the use technology in distance learning. He mentions seven levels of these communication barriers as: access, acceptance, collaborative, cultural/social, contextual, personalization, and biochip (Berge, 2013). If an interaction between lecturers and students is hindered from the access level, it means that it affects the students' biochip stage that may procrastinate from the ability to comprehend and synthesize the learning materials.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study was carried out with a case study research to investigate the obstacles that lecturers and students might have in a Writing Blended Learning Environment. These results of the study inferred that both lecturers and students had similar concerns on the use of technology as media and it affected the quality of teaching learning process. Lecturers informed how they were challenged to give thorough feedback and managing the classroom ambience within the blended learning environment, while students indicated the need of advancement and improvement of the learning process particularly on the thorough individual feedback. Despite its weakness, the teaching learning process are captivating the students' attention and lecturers deliver their instructional and pedagogical roles in a proper way.

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