

**EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS'
ACADEMIC WRITING PERFORMANCE AND
COLLABORATIVE LEARNING SKILLS IN A
BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

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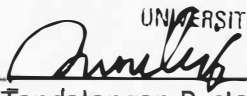
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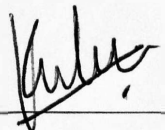
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you,

To my parents, for all the unconditional love.

To Dr. Tan Choon Keong, for staying during my downfall.

To Russell, for making everything possible.

Jadlyn Yau Xiang Ruei

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ABSTRACT

Research studies reveal that for ESL/EFL students entering tertiary level studies, academic success is dependent on successful academic writing. The purpose of this research is to examine the affordances of a Blended Learning environment in supporting the development of Collaborative Learning Skills to enhance academic writing in the context of a Higher Education Institution. The study involves 30 second-year students from various degree courses in Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The subjects are given short and long written tasks that are done individually and in groups, via in-class activities and online platform. The research design involves quantitative and qualitative data collection. Quantitative data is analysed using SPSS Version 22 and qualitative data is Atlas Ti Version 8. Quantitative data is collected via Pre- Essay Test and Post- Essay Test. Qualitative data is generated from observation and focus group interviews, and are used for data triangulation. The first research question looks at how Blended Learning promotes Collaborative Learning Skills in the writing process. Collaborative Learning Skills is measured via Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Affordances Model (Wang, Woo, & Chai, 2010), which analyses the affordances of ICT tools from three perspectives – (i) pedagogical, (ii) social and (iii) technological. Results showed that students are able to apply their pedagogical skills and knowledge in their academic writing. Google Docs analysis showed that students preferred to interact and socialise with their peers in producing writing assignments. From the observations done by the facilitator and interview transcripts, results showed that students were able to apply various Web 2.0 tools to communicate with their peers and to complete their writing tasks. Excerpts from the focus group interviews displayed evidences that supported the application of Collaborative Learning Skills amongst students in their writing process. The second research question explores to what extent does Blended Learning help in improving students' academic writing. Results from their writing assessments showed that there are improvements in terms of achievement score. The mean for pre-writing score is 8.07 (SD=1.99), while the mean for post-writing score has improved to 14.4 (SD=2.11). A paired-sample t-test analysis showed that the improvement is significant ($t = -5.471, p < .05$). The third research question looks at the potential issues in the implementation of Collaborative Learning Skills in the writing process. Results from focus group interviews showed that poor internet connection, the lack of response from peers during group work, and limited range of English vocabularies are the factors that influenced the students' motivation in conducting collaboration with peers. Based on the findings, in order to improve students' Collaborative Learning Skills, it is recommended that the practice of process writing should be done in groups or with peers starting from elementary level in order to curb the fear of student in understanding process writing alone. Future research should focus on the approach of getting students to explore process writing with their peers in their Zone of Proximal Development - to prepare them the fundamental skills required to produce writing task, before embarking on higher level of writing.

***MENEROKAI PRESTASI PENULISAN AKADEMIK PELAJAR UNIVERSITI
DAN KEMAHIRAN PEMBELAJARAN KOLABORATIF DALAM PERSEKITARAN
PEMBELAJARAN CAMPURAN.***

Kajian penyelidikan yang lepas menunjukkan bahawa kejayaan akademik pelajar universiti adalah bergantung kepada teknik penulisan akademik. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji *affordances* persekitaran pembelajaran teradun dalam pembangunan kemahiran kolaboratif bagi meningkatkan kemahiran penulisan akademik dalam konteks Institusi Pengajian tinggi. Kajian ini melibatkan 30 orang pelajar Tahun Dua dari pelbagai kursus ijazah di Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Pelajar diberi tugas penulisan pendek dan esei secara individu and berkumpulan aktiviti dalam kelas dan secara dalam talian. Reka bentuk kajian melibatkan pengumpulan data kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan SPSS Versi 22 dan data kualitatif dianalisis menggunakan Atlas Ti Versi 8. Data kuantitatif dikumpul melalui *Google Docs* dan transkrip temu bual. Data kualitatif yang dihasilkan daripada pemerhatian dan temu bual kumpulan fokus digunakan untuk triangulasi data. Soalan kajian pertama bertujuan untuk melihat bagaimana pembelajaran teradun dapat menggalakkan Kemahiran Pembelajaran Kolaboratif dalam proses penulisan. Kemahiran Pembelajaran Kolaboratif diukur menggunakan *Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Affordances Model* (Wang, Woo, & Chai, 2010) dari tiga perspektif - (i) pedagogi, (ii) social, dan (iii) teknologi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar dapat menggunakan kemahiran pedagogi dan pengetahuan mereka dalam penulisan akademik mereka. Analisis *Google Docs* menunjukkan bahawa pelajar lebih suka berinteraksi dan bersosial dengan rakan-rakan mereka dalam menghasilkan tugas penulisan. Dari pemerhatian yang dilakukan oleh fasilitator dan transkrip temu duga, hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar mampu mengaplikasikan pelbagai alat *Web 2.0* untuk berkomunikasi dengan rakan-rakan mereka dan untuk menyelesaikan tugas-tugas penulisan mereka. Petikan daripada temu bual kumpulan fokus menunjukkan bukti-bukti yang menyokong penggunaan Kemahiran Pembelajaran Kolaboratif dalam proses penulisan akademik mereka. Soalan kajian kedua menerokai sejauh mana pembelajaran teradun dapat membantu dalam meningkatkan penulisan akademik pelajar. Hasil daripada penilaian penulisan pelajar menunjukkan bahawa terdapat peningkatan dari segi skor pencapaian. Skor min pra-penulisan adalah 8.07 (SD = 1.99), manakala skor min pasca-penulisan telah meningkat kepada 14.4 (SD = 2.11). Ujian t menunjukkan bahawa peningkatan ini adalah signifikan ($t = -5.471, p < .05$). Soalan kajian ketiga melihat isu-isu pelaksanaan Kemahiran Pembelajaran Kolaboratif dalam proses penulisan. Hasil daripada temu bual kumpulan fokus menunjukkan bahawa akses internet yang lambat, kekurangan interaksi dalam talian daripada rakan-rakan semasa menjalankan kerja kumpulan, dan kosa kata Bahasa Inggeris yang terhad adalah faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi motivasi pelajar untuk berkerjasama dengan rakan-rakan. Berdasarkan hasil kajian, bagi meningkatkan kejayaan Kemahiran Pembelajaran Kolaboratif dalam kalangan pelajar, adalah disyorkan bahawa proses penulisan secara kumpulan harus bermula dari peringkat rendah bagi membendung rasa takut pelajar dalam memahami proses penulisan. Kajian masa depan harus memfokuskan kepada pendekatan yang dapat membantu pelajar meneroka proses penulisan akademik dalam *Zone of Proximal Development* demi menyediakan mereka

kemahiran asas yang diperlukan untuk menghasilkan penulisan akademik sebelum mereka meneroka tahap penulisan yang lebih tinggi.



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LIST OF SYMBOLS/ABBREVIATIONS

BL Blended Learning

CLS Collaborative Learning Skill

ZPD Zone of Proximal Development



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Good writing skill requires a range of linguistic ability which includes the knowledge of lexical, grammatical accuracy, strategies to plan and organise in order to form pieces that are able to convey a writer's intention and knowledge. Writing has always been one of the prime requirements to score well in the field of academic and research studies discovered that many tertiary-level ESL students in Malaysia demonstrated a lack of interest in writing (Noriah Ismail, Suhaidi Elias and Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri, 2010; Noriah Ismail and Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri, 2012), poor writing attitude, and not able to write critically (Noriah Ismail, Saadiyah Darus and Supyan Hussin, 2012). The ability to write determines the students' eligibility to further pursue their studies in higher education and poor academic writing has been a key factor in the failure of ESL students in meeting institutional literacy expectations.

It is undeniable that writing is one of the most difficult skills for students to acquire as it requires the readers to comprehend and interpret what has been written (Nik et al., 2010). Nik et al. (2010) have also gathered evidences showing Langan (1982) and Gunning (1998) concluded that writing is complex and abstract than spoken language – studies that demonstrated writing appears to demand a great deal of skills (Raimes, 1991; Horbacauskiene and Kasperaviciene, 2016) and conventions such as readiness towards writing and grammatical proficiency to become a proficient writer. In the context of Malaysia, English language functions as second language. While research studies showed adult native speakers find writing is

is difficult, it is definitely challenging for non native speakers to come up with good writing content (Noriah Ismail and Suhaidi Elias, 2010). The lack of writing skills is still a prominent issue at university level and ESL students at tertiary level face issues of not being able to engage in the essence of writing, which eventually lead to poor grades in their assignments. Noriah et al. (2010) also pointed out that anxiety or writing apprehension and students' attitude towards writing have also resulted in poor writing quality.

Writing proficiency develops over time and it requires an association of ideas and knowledge to be in the process of planning, evaluating, and revising in an iterative matter. In the manner of globalisation, teaching and learning has become more challenging and technology has become an important factor and tool to assist and supplement teaching and learning. Research studies also revealed that Y and Z generation are getting accustomed to the use of technology in their daily lives, including learning and heavily relying on the use of technology and gadgets to get the desired information instead of seeking help from teacher (Latisha Asmaak Shafie et al., 2010). Such practice has called for a paradigm shift from conventional teacher-centred chalk-and-talk classroom to a hybrid learning environment in which digital tools are accounted for teaching and learning. However, Nobles and Paganucci (2015) also revealed that with just the use of digital tools and creating online writing environment do not directly increase student's learning, but the methodology and pedagogy behind in manipulating the functions of digital tools to improve students' writing quality. Getting towards the appropriate use of digital tools and online writing environment would change the perception of students towards the practice and learning of writing. Perception influences the attitude and motivation of the students (Noriah et al., 2010; Wingate, 2010; Woo et al., 2011; Nobles and Paganucci, 2015, Horbacauskiene and Kasperaviciene, 2016) and studies have revealed a positive impact that by connecting the impact of digital tools and online writing environments to students perception, it creates panacea for educational ills (McGonigal, 2011; Nobles and Paganucci, 2015).

Rapid technological change has created doors for the means of liberalisation of global information and global learning and Ministry of Education Malaysia

consistently encourages the use of ICT in classrooms, aiming to elevate teaching and learning standard and quality of education (Irfan Naufal Umar and Amat Sazali Abu Hassan, 2015). By creating a hybrid learning environment, it allows teaching and learning to take place inside and outside of classroom. Such flexibility promotes individualistic learning which also able to cater to different learning styles of students. Mazni (2002) concluded that the exploration and integration of ICT in classroom allowed students and teachers to recognise and explore the potentials and feasibilities in applying ICT in teaching and learning. However, in Irfan Naufal Umar and Amat Sazali Abu Hassan (2015)'s studies, there is still a need to raise teacher's ICT level in their teaching practice.

With respect to the growing emphasis on the need to enable support for the acquisition of knowledge and information as well as the development of skills and necessary resources in the engagement of social and technological changes, these shifts demand for new educational approaches and pedagogies (Klamma et al., 2007; Fischer and Konomi, 2007) that could foster lifelong learning. McLoughlin and Lee (2007)'s studies revealed that the rapid expansion of technologies created communities that promoted collaboration and knowledge sharing and acquisition amongst people. With the amount of potential present technology can offer, such phenomenon creates possibilities for other disciplines that fall under the umbrella of technology to interact with language learning. Several disciplines such as Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) (Koschman, 1994; Heejeon, 2011; Lin et al., 2016), Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Zaini and Mazdayasna, 2014), e-Learning (Yilmaz, 2017), and Blended Learning (Ferriman, 2013; Ling and Muuk; 2015) have contributed to ESL research. The role of web 2.0 technology was apparent in the mentioned studies through the creation of environments that support social constructivism, featuring elements such as creating interaction and engagement among learners, opportunities for collaboration and self regulated learning; allowing learners to make choices to the approaches and learning styles that fit them best. However, research in developing teaching and learning writing activities using electronic materials and web 2.0 platforms is still rare in ESL context, especially a hybrid learning environment that allows synchronous and asynchronous learning of writing to take place. Very little is done to recognise the challenges in

teaching and learning especially in reality the society is diversified with various characters and ways of living (Duta and Martinez-Rivera, 2014). Hence, this study aims to create a Blended Learning Environment (BL) environment that addresses students' writing needs in all stages of the writing process.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

To be competent in writing is a challenging task especially for students who show less interest, motivation, and the lack of necessary lexical knowledge as well as academic knowledge needed to pen the right information on papers that determine their overall academic performance (Horbacauskiene and Kasperaviciene, 2016). This study involved 30 second-year university students who took Academic Reading and Writing class and the sampling method was decided by students' English proficiency level. Students who scored below Band 3 in Malaysian University English Test (MUET) were required to take this course and those who scored below Band 3 did not have the sufficient lexical knowledge to write and converse in English language adequately. At tertiary level, students are expected to master the competences needed in order to produce different kinds of written documents in regards to a particular discipline (Wingate and Tribble, 2012). Hence, the selected students also faced difficulties in scoring well in their assignments in their respective courses as most of the courses were taught and written in English language. Despite being equipped with general understanding towards grammar rules and language structures, not many ESL students are able to perform at the expected levels of them. Students' general understanding towards the grammar rules were also heavily affected and influenced by their L1, which was Bahasa Malaysia, and this did not only happen to the selected sample, it was also a common issue for most of the students in Malaysia. With such influence and improper conduct of the right usage of English grammar, students eventually adapted the wronged form of grammar structure and the outcome of it resulted in poor delivery of English language. Factors such as the vast amount of information available on the internet has also appeared to be overwhelming for students to grasp and select the necessary information (Noraini Said et al., 2010).

In a local study conducted by Noriah Ismail and Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri (2012), the lack of ideas and having writer's block are quite common among students and such trend resulted in the lack of interest in writing that had led to students' low performance in academic writing at tertiary level. Their study also pointed out that students often fail due to the lack of in-depth content needed in their essays and it was a surprise to discover with the availability and the emergence of online writing tools, there were teachers who chose to stick to conventional or old-fashion teaching aids (Wan Huraini Osman and Anna Lyn Abu Bakar, 2009; Noriah Ismail et al., 2010; Noriah Ismail, Supyan Hussin and Saadiyah Darus, 2012).

Studies also revealed that despite wikis, blogs, Google docs, and online forums act as a form of new technological affordances in promoting collaborative work (Limbu and Markauskaite, 2015), studies however showed that such teaching and learning effort still present a less positive student experience in learning. In response to that, Noraini Said et al. (2010) believed that by creating a writing support that could cater to specific writing needs, students are able to experience the flexibility and ease of access in learning that would potentially shape their belief in learning writing, and Hodges (2002) believed that students should learn to work on collaborative writing with teacher and peers before they become autonomous in writing.

It was believed that blended learning could maximise the advantages and experiences of teaching and learning through the integration of traditional face-to-face learning and online learning (Wang et al., 2009; Lin and Yang, 2013). Allan (2007) suggested tools such as PowerPoint, interactive whiteboards and audience response systems, virtual communication tools, web forms and videoconferencing; social networking sites such as virtual worlds, weblogs, and wikis; e-Learning systems such as group collaboration software are able to supplement and assist teaching and learning process and the usability of these tools were further supported by Higgins and Gomez (2014) to be used in blended learning. Ling and Magdaline Anak Muuk (2014) conducted a local research by getting teachers to attempt on blended learning with the use of technology tools stated above as literature reviews showed there were very few studies on blended learning that takes place especially in the context

of English subject in Malaysia. The results showed that despite technology tools were indeed used by teachers in classroom as a form of blended learning, there was no e-Learning system tool used by English teachers.

Cabelle (2007) suggested that in order for effective collaborative learning environment to take place, the learning environment has to be customised. To break down perception barriers on getting the right information to be used in academic writing, Noraini Said et al.'s (2010) study suggested that by creating an ESL writing support tool, it would be able to curb students' doubts towards the quality of information and sources, and the design of the ESL writing tool should address the stated issues and increase students' confidence towards the use of digital writing tools. However, the findings from Noraini Said et al.'s (2010) studies were insufficient to illustrate an extended effort and foundation in designing a customised supplementary online writing platform. Hence, this study attempts to address the gap in the research studies by integrating two elements, i) a digital writing tool/platform/environment that could potentially foster ii) collaborative learning skill to bridge students in learning writing. Such combination provides synchronous and asynchronous learning and puts students in a learning environment that allows students to foster the habit of discussing, negotiating, and further create opportunities to deepen their level of comprehension as well as practice on joint meaning-making (Dye et al. 2010, cited in Limbu and Markauskaite, 2014).

Other literatures also highlighted the need to encourage students to stay motivated in using e-Learning (Noraini Said et al., 2010; Ramakrisnan et al., 2012) and Ferriman's (2013) study revealed that there is a need to find out ways to leverage on the existing condition of online writing supplementary platform, and focus on being selective in order to focus on the quality of the information available on the internet. To improve students' writing quality and experience, a number of research found that collaboration leads to better writing performance (Hirvela, 1999; Storch, 2012; Storch, 2013; Li and Kim, 2016; Li and Zhu, 2017) as it enhances the frequency of knowledge transfer among peers and Watanabe (2008) found that through collaboration, higher and lower proficiency students were able to learn from each other through ideas sharing and equal contribution toward the shared writing task.

Previous research studies have also suggested potential investigation into peer interactions in relation to their writing development in an online writing environment (Noriah Ismail, Supyan Hussin, and Saadiyah Darus, 2012). Therefore, this study attempted to explore university students' academic writing performance and collaborative learning skill via a blended learning environment.

In this study, an online writing platform hosted on a Learning Management System (LMS) called CourseNetworking (theCN.com) was developed based on a Blended Learning (BL) approach to supplement the Academic Reading and Writing course – a 14-week course in *Universiti Malaysia Sabah*, Malaysia. This platform aimed to create a self-regulated learning environment that could potentially promote collaboration amongst peers in learning writing as well as to create a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) to support students' academic writing process. Blended Learning (BL) approach especially in the context of English courses in *Universiti Malaysia Sabah* was fairly applied and majority of the English language courses were carried out via conventional face-to-face method. As pointed out by Ramakrisnan (2012), global higher institutions were trending into engaging technology inside a traditional classroom, which made possible for this study to explore the possibility of Blended Learning (BL) approach in the respective context and address gaps found in previous research studies.

1.3 Objective of the study

This study contains three objectives. The first objective of this study is to explore whether Collaborative Learning Skill (CLS) take place in the writing process in a Blended Learning (BL) environment in the context of a higher education institution. The second objective of this study is to find out the extent of implementing Blended Learning (BL) approach in a conventional face-to-face academic writing classroom to enhance students' academic writing performance. The third objective of this study is to examine the affordances and challenges faced by students throughout their collaboration with peers during the stages of writing process in a Blended Learning (BL) environment. Hence, the specific objectives are as below:

- i. To explore whether Collaborative Learning Skill (CLS) take place in the writing process in a Blended Learning (BL) environment in the context of a higher education institution;
- ii. To find out the extent of Blended Learning (BL) approach in enhancing students' academic writing performance;
- iii. To find out the affordances and challenges faced during the writing process with the presence of Collaborative Learning Skill (CLS) in a Blended Learning (BL) environment.

The researcher aimed to explore Collaborative Learning Skill (CLS) during the stages of writing process and hoped to explore the effect of Blended Learning (BL) approach throughout students' academic writing development. Evidences such as interview and students' face-to-face and online interactions as well as pre- and post- writing tests results were gathered to find out the impact of Blended Learning (BL) in supporting their learning and writing experiences.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions served as guidance in this study. The questions are curated based on the three specific objectives presented in the previous section:

- i. Does Collaborative Learning Skill (CLS) happen in the writing process in a Blended Learning (BL) environment?
- ii. To what extent does Blended Learning (BL) help in improving students' academic writing performance?
- iii. What are the affordances and challenges faced in implementing Collaborative Learning Skill (CLS) in Blended Learning (BL) environment?