

## An Exploratory Study of Students' Lived Experiences in a Blended-Flipped Writing Class

**Afef Ahmed Gasmi**

Middle East College

Al Rusayl, Muscat 124, Oman

### **Abstract**

During the past few decades blended instructional approaches have aimed to provide learners with an enhanced learning experience. Supported by a flipped approach to teaching, blended instruction provides an opportunity for an effective utilization of classroom time. This article reports the findings of a mixed-methods study which involved 57 students enrolled in Level 3 academic writing course offered as part of the General Foundation Program (GFP) in a non-public higher education institution in Oman. The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners in a blended flipped writing course with specific focus on their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of being instructed in this method. The study informs both EFL educators and learners, as well as other stakeholders, about this method of teaching and triggers further discussions of its potential and limitations in EFL instruction. This study utilized students' self-report questionnaire, teacher observation, and focus group interviews as data collection methods; and value thematic qualitative data coding and descriptive quantitative data analysis as data analysis procedures. The study revealed that despite the challenges of increased workload and technology-related difficulties, participants in the blended-flipped academic writing class experienced increased involvement, development and use of deep learning strategies, and maximization of learning through constant collaboration. The study recommends that further experimental studies are conducted to explore the potential of blended-flipped instruction in teaching other English language skills and the correlation between the learners' perceptions of this instructional model and their academic performance.

*Keywords:* Academic writing, blended learning, EFL teaching, flipped instruction, student involvement.

## Introduction

Blended teaching is an instructional model which has existed for several decades now. However, the way blending is conceived of and implemented by academicians differs in accordance with the educational environment as well as the emerging technologies accessible by both educators and learners. Overall, this concept is used to refer to any educational system which incorporates technology supported or computer mediated instruction in traditional face-to-face instruction (Graham, 2006). The major purpose of a blended educational system is to enhance students' learning experiences (Class, 2009) by exploiting available technologies to serve a variety of learning purposes.

Flipped instruction, on the other hand, is defined as a teaching approach in which the traditional order of activities is reversed (Yarboo, Arfstrom, McKnight, & McKnight, 2014). In this approach learners complete homework and review input materials prior to class and engage in discussions and other forms of meaningful interaction which involve higher order and deep thinking skills in class. Such instructional approach is believed to increase learners' levels of engagement and motivation, and ultimately leads to an ameliorated academic performance (Moravec, Williams, Aguitar-Roca, & O'Dowd, 2010). Several studies carried out by English as Foreign Language (EFL) educators including Han (2015), Hung (2015) and Wong & Chu (2014) proved that flipping English language instruction develops learners' autonomy, improves their learning attitudes and participation levels, and boosts their confidence as well as commitment levels.

The third Level of academic writing is a 12-week long course which is delivered to all students enrolled in the General Foundation Program (GFP) offered by Middle East College in order to equip them with the required language skills to cope with the demands of the undergraduate courses. In addition to academic writing, GFP students enrolled in third level take three other English language courses namely listening, speaking, and reading. Upon the successful completion of the four courses, students exit the program and are therefore qualified to pursue their undergraduate studies. The academic writing course aims to develop the students' capacity to compose different types of essays, specifically compare and contrast, description, and evaluation essays, and to produce different chart descriptions. The course also develops learners' vocabulary and grammar skills which are essential to produce the afore-mentioned types of writing successfully.

The academic writing course has for several years been taught mainly in a traditional face-to-face format which involved lecturing students about the different types of essay formats and the key vocabulary and grammar associated with such types, followed by writing practice which students often completed as homework due to time limitations. The potential of such instructional model to raise students' interest and motivation in academic writing and to enhance their performance in exams has been extremely limited. In fact, a close examination of students' exam results showed that the pass rate in this module did not exceed 45% in three different semesters in the 2014-2015 academic years. For instance, in the 2014 fall semester only 37% of the students enrolled in the academic writing course passed, while only 45% and 32% qualified to pass the course in the 2015 spring and fall semesters respectively. These results have raised the concerns of various stakeholders in the institution including instructors.

There is a general agreement among scholars and academicians that Arab-speaking EFL learners in general face several challenges in academic writing (Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014). Among many others, Al Mansour (2015) identifies six issues which students in similar contexts to Oman, specifically in Saudi Arabia, often face in the academic writing skill. These include the lack of ability to order ideas in a logical manner, inadequacy of vocabulary repertoire, limited knowledge of the topics to write about, poor grammar and spelling skills, as well as limited knowledge of English language written patterns. Such difficulties and others are also faced by Omani students which affects their understanding, involvement in the course, and exam results negatively.

In an attempt to address these concerns the researcher has adopted a blended and flipped instructional model which has shifted the lecturing aspect of the lessons outside class in order to create an opportunity for enrichment and further practice, and for more individualized instruction and assistance whenever required during class. This paper reports on the results of a study which aimed to explore the impressions of 57 students enrolled in a blended-flipped academic writing course and their perceptions of the biggest gains associated with this instructional model.

## Background

Krause (2005) argues that along with individual factors, the role which the instructor plays in students' learning is crucial. Several aspects of the instructor's role have been underscored in the literature since they either enhance or impede students' academic involvement and progress. Günüç and Kuzu (2014) and Hashim, Alam & Yusoff (2014) have emphasized on the value of both the amount and quality of teacher interaction on students' learning. Similarly, Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004) and Parsons & Taylor (2011) stress on the influence of the kind of rapport a teacher establishes with their students and argue that teacher's support and respect raise students' interest which influences their performance positively. Most importantly, it is argued that instructional models which support problem-based learning and encourage learner autonomy raise students' interest, increase their involvement, and yield better academic results (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Furthermore, it is believed that students' learning is reinforced when they are provided with ample opportunity to utilize higher order cognitive skills such as reflection, analysis, critical thinking, and so on (Coates, 2006). Added to that, recent research studies served to spotlight the significance of technology-rich educational settings for students' learning. According to Markwell (2007) and Parsons & Taylor (2011), such learning environments create opportunities for students to be challenged as well as encouraged to actively collaborate with each other which enhances their learning experience. Likewise, Brown, Thomas and Thomas (2014), Han and Finkelstein (2013), and Lock (2015) claim that the integration of technology in instruction increases students' engagement levels and promotes their academic achievement. Thus, along with adopting positive attitudes towards students, utilizing adequate instructional methodologies is of paramount importance for students' involvement and success. Blended learning and teaching and flipped instruction are two instructional approaches which scholars like Baepler, Walker and Driessen (2014), Davies, Dean and Ball (2013), Gruba and Hinkelman (2012), and Thorne (2003) advocate as models which affect students' learning positively. For this reason, the two approaches were adopted in this research study.

### **What is Blended Learning?**

The way blending learning is conceptualized has evolved in time. Early conceptualizations focused primarily on the integration of technology, specifically computers, in teaching. Such conceptualization is reflected in the definition offered by Graham (2006) who uses the term to refer to “systems that combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (p. 5). Other definitions; however, have emphasised on the spatial flexibility of a blended educational system which allows content to be accessed regardless of the location (Williams, Bland, & Christie as cited in Poon, 2013). On the other hand, the integration of the internet has been highlighted in Harrington (2010) and Isiguzel’s (2014) conceptualizations. The authors consider a blended system any system which incorporates both off-line and online activities. That said, it is clear that a uniform definition of what blended learning and teaching is; is yet to exist. For this reason, this study adopts a more generic conceptualization which considers a system in which off-line and technology-mediated instruction are merged and which comprises of synchronous and/or asynchronous learning activities a blended learning system (Diaz & Brown, 2010; Graham & Dziuban, 2008).

#### ***The psychological assumptions of blended learning***

Graham (2006) classifies blended learning systems into three major categories: enabling, enhancing, and transforming blends. Such learning blends are grounded in three important learning theories namely cognitive theory, constructivism, and behaviourism.

According to cognitive theorists, learner agency is essential in the learning process. In other words, a reciprocal relationship exists between the learner and the learning environment where the learner both reacts to and acts on the surrounding environment in a process of knowledge creation (Bandura, 1999). On the other hand, learning for social cognitivists is socially situated (Leondari, 2007). This means that learning is not only influenced by individual factors, but also by social factors (Niles, 1995). As a matter of fact, some scholars including Merklejohn (as cited in Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003, p. 231), Perkins (2006), and Smith (2009) claim that learning is predominantly a social act in which the learners construct knowledge as they interact with their teachers and peers.

Blended learning is also rooted in constructivist, specifically social constructivist, views of learning which advocate collaboration, dialogue, and cooperation as the basis for learning to take place (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Although their effect has reduced in intensity with the rise of cognitivist and constructivist views, early behaviourist theories of learning are still reflected in learning blends which encourage repetition as well as regular training as a method to internalize information (Higgins & Johns, 1984) and ultimately to aid learning.

The principles of the three learning theories discussed above encourage the adoption of certain teaching pedagogies especially cooperative learning, learner-centred, and active learning pedagogies.

#### ***The implications of blended learning psychologies for pedagogy***

First, cooperative learning refers to a learning situation in which a group of students support each other to achieve a specific shared objective. This instructional method is based on social constructivist principles of learning and is believed to boost learners' motivation (Stacey,

1999); increase retention (Perkins, 2006), and to enhance the learners' academic learning experience (Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999). What is more, Johnson and Johnson (2014), Stacey (1999) argue that creating opportunities for learners to collaborate and cooperate with each other helps them to develop their interpersonal skills and to grow cognitively.

Second, learner-centred teaching is one of the implications of cognitive learning theories on pedagogy. It places the learner in the centre of the teaching-learning process and ensures individual learners' differences, learning styles and preferences, as well as cognitive abilities are taken into consideration in the design and implementation of a blended learning atmosphere. In addition, this instructional method ensures that learners in a blended system receive input through various means like digital and printed formats (Graham, 2006) and are given the opportunity to exercise agency over their learning (Cottrell & Robison, 2003).

Finally, blended systems encourage active learning pedagogies as well. Active learning engages students in reflective activities on a regular basis and requires them to frequently evaluate their own understanding as well as degree of skill at dealing with the key concepts in the discipline (Collins as cited in Edwards, 2015). In active learning, knowledge is not fed into the learners' brains but rather is attained through participation and contribution to a variety of activities inside and outside class such as information gathering, reflection and problem solving, which enable them to remain mentally active in their own learning and consequently to maximize their learning experience gains (Laurillard, 2009).

#### ***Potential and limitations of blended EFL learning***

Blended learning has recently emerged as a substitute to the stand-alone traditional models of instruction (Poon, 2013) and has been facilitated by the spread of digital technologies, the proliferation of the internet, and the rise of a digital native student population. Blended EFL learning is not a novel practice and the potential of technology integration in English language learning has been discussed extensively in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) literature (Levy, 2009).

Among several other benefits, Egbert, Paulus, and Nakamichi (2002) list ten major benefits of CALL technologies. The authors argue that CALL technologies can:

- support experiential learning and practice in a variety of modes,
- provide effective feedback to learners,
- enable pair and group work,
- promote exploratory and global learning,
- enhance student achievement,
- provide access to authentic materials,
- facilitate greater interaction,
- individualize instruction,
- allow independence from a single source of information,
- and motivate learners. (Egbert, Paulus & Nakamichi, 2002, p. 109)
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Conversely, it is argued that technology integration per se does not guarantee the achievement of such benefits. Gruba and Hinkelman (2012) point out that "the integration [in



language classrooms] is best achieved if it is purposeful, appropriate, multimodal and sustainable" (p. xv). In other words, an instructor in a blended language classroom should select actions, tools, and networks in a principled and informed manner which gives the time, location, and group being instructed special consideration.

The blended academic writing course the study focuses on was designed in order to enhance the students' learning experience by engaging them more actively in their learning process not only through the integration of various technologies, but also through the implementation of a flipped approach to instruction.

### **Definition of Flipped Teaching**

Flipped instruction is considered one type of blended systems which incorporates technology in face-to-face and online instruction in order to engage students in complementary learning tasks before, during, and after class (Diaz & Brown, 2010). Strayer (2012) defines flipped teaching as a model of instruction in which:

- content is transmitted to learners prior to class through different technologies and modalities
- learners are involved in various learning tasks which target their lower-order thinking skills such as comprehension and remembering before class
- learners are engaged in enriching learning activities which target their higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and creation inside class
- technology is integrated in pre, in-class, and out-of-class learning activities in a regular and systematic manner

Several authors have highlighted the positive impact of the flipped instructional design on the teaching-learning process. According to Velegol, Zappe, and Mahoney (2015), flipping allows teachers not only to cover large content areas in short time but also to enhance learners' understanding by involving them in more interactive tasks in class instead of spending much of class time in lecturing. Mok (2014) argues that this model of instruction also enhances learners' motivation and involvement in the course. Furthermore, some researchers including Baepler et al. (2014) and Schlingensiepen (2014), to name but a few, claim that the flipped instructional model ameliorates students' learning outcomes and pass rates. By contrast, flipped instruction is not challenge-free since it necessitates students' buy-in (Strayer, 2012), teacher and student adequate technology skills (Kim, Kim, Khera, & Getman, 2014), and constant access to technology, specifically to the internet (Missildine, Fountain, Summers, & Gosselin, 2013).

That said, the design of the academic writing class in focus integrated the principles of blended and flipped language instruction in a systematic manner in order to achieve the learning goals of the course and at the same time to provide students with a transformative learning experience (Graham, 2006) which raises their interest in the course and improve their performance.

### **Design of the Blended-Flipped Academic Writing Class**

The academic writing class comprises of three main phases: pre, in, and post-class phase. Each of the three phases engages students in various learning activities which are well-integrated and which complement each other.

### *Pre-class activities*

The main goal of the activities which students completed before class was to introduce key concepts in the discipline such as thesis statement, topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence, and so on. These concepts were often introduced through YouTube videos and/or recorded Power Point presentations that served the purposes of the different lessons. Added to that, students completed short quizzes to check their understanding of the content they viewed. Students also engaged in discussions in a virtual learning environment (VLE) called Edmodo which was utilized to record all the teacher and student activities such as sharing materials, concerns, and ideas. The discussions included, but were not limited to, sharing information about specific essay topics to be discussed later in class.

### *In-class activities*

The activities which students engaged in inside class were connected with the activities they completed outside class and actually supported each other to maximize learning. These activities targeted the students' higher-order thinking skills such as analysis of sample essays, the evaluation of different aspects of writing like the use of cohesive devices, the creation of different kinds of writing for a variety of purposes, etc. Mobile phone applications and programs like PADLET and Socrative were used inside the class as brainstorming and knowledge checking tools respectively. Such tools served to engage students in reflective and self-assessment activities. Every face-to-face meeting with the students ended with the production of a first draft of one type of writing either individually or in groups. The first draft is thoroughly checked by the instructor who provides detailed feedback about the students' performance in terms of accuracy, coherence, and cohesion, and lexis.

### *Post-class activities*

After class students reflect on their mistakes, figure out possible ways to improve the various aspects of their writings, type the second draft in a Microsoft document and use the spell-checker to correct their spelling mistakes. The second draft is then submitted in the assignment centre available in the VLE before the next class starts.

## **Research Methodology**

The current study adopted a mixed-methods design and convenience sampling as participant recruitment strategy. It involved 57 participants (38% males & 61% females) who studied in full time (56%) and part-time (44%) mode. The majority of the participants' age falls in the 18 to 23 (61%) and 24 to 29 (25%) age category. About 11% and 4% fall in the 30-35 and 41 and above age categories. Most of the participants reported having either very good (35%) or good (47%) language skills. Overall, the participants' technology skills were good (62%) and even excellent for some of them (30%). The study participants were taught using the blended-flipped instructional method in the academic writing course for a total of 50 hours (5 hours per week) which extended over a period of 10 weeks.

## **Data Collection Instruments and Procedures**

The purpose of this study was to explore the participants' lived experiences in the blended-flipped academic writing course as well as their perceptions of the most significant gain from being instructed using this method. The following questions were posed to achieve this purpose.

1. What are the students' impressions of studying in a blended-flipped academic writing course?

2. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of studying in a blended-flipped academic writing course?
3. What are the students' impressions of the biggest gain of studying in a blended-flipped academic writing course?

Multiple methods were used to collect data namely teacher observation, focus group discussions, and self-report questionnaires. Participants were observed twice during the 10-week period, one time before the mid-term exam (in week 7) and a second time after the mid-term exam. Observations were recorded in the form of a checklist of the tasks which participants completed outside class, as well as their level of involvement in the lesson and the various activities during class.

The self-report questionnaire focused on what participants perceived they gained most in the blended-flipped academic writing class and was administered upon the completion of the course in week 10. The return rate was 100%. The survey instrument comprised of a total of 14 items which were measured on a 6-point Likert scale each, ranging from 6 which is positive (very much) to 1 which is negative (not at all) with so-so forming the middle category. The scale demonstrated a high level of internal reliability ( $\alpha=.92$ ).

The focus group interviews involved seven to eight participants in each session and each one lasted for about 25 minutes. The interviews were conducted a week after the course ended following a schedule set for the purpose in collaboration with the participants. The interview questions required participants to describe their overall learning experience in the blended-flipped academic writing course with specific focus on the benefits as well as challenges they faced as a result of participating in the course.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The main purpose of the study was to explore the participants' perceptions and lived experiences in the blended-flipped academic writing class. Thus, several qualitative and quantitative analytical procedures were followed to ensure the major themes the data was trying to express were captured.

First, the focus group interviews data was transcribed, then value coding was performed focusing on the participants' attitudes and beliefs about the instructional model adopted in the course. Adu (2013) argues that value coding is the best coding procedure to follow in order to be able to capture the participants' realities and to answer exploratory types of research questions. However, multiple coding methods could also be applied to the same data set in order not to miss any significant ideas (Adu, 2013). This is why 'themeing' was also used in this study. Phrases and sentences were used to capture the essence of some of the data (Saldana, as cited in Adu, 2013). The codes were then sorted and grouped into identical categories which allowed the generation of the following themes: (a) involvement; (b) deep learning; (c) cooperation; (d) workload, and (e) technology.

Second, the quantitative data was first fed into SPSS quantitative data analysis software and then descriptive analysis was performed on the data to identify the item means, median, and



standard deviations. The results obtained from the analysis were compared with and linked to results obtained from the focus groups and teacher observations.

### **Findings and Discussion**

To begin with, it is of paramount importance to obtain a general understanding of the participants' overall perceptions of this learning atmosphere, before discussing the specific benefits they obtained and the challenges they faced, as well as their perceptions of the most significant gain from being taught in this manner.

Generally speaking, students who enrolled in this course soon realized that the blended-flipped teaching method differed considerably from the traditional method they were accustomed to either in school or in previous foundation levels. Despite the challenges which they reported, and which will be discussed below, the participants felt that the method was 'positive', 'useful', 'successful', and 'great'. In fact, they believed that blended-flipped classes were 'better' than classes taught in the traditional method and that their experience in those classes was 'excellent'. The themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis and which depict the participants' impressions of the benefits of this instructional model and its challenges are discussed below.

#### ***Involvement***

The theme of involvement describes the level of behavioural engagement which students experienced while studying in the blended-flipped classroom. Involvement was first reflected in the amount of time the majority of students reported they had spent preparing for the writing class (between 5 and 15 hours per week). Moreover, students realized the difference between the blended-flipped teaching-learning model and the traditional model and the necessity to prepare before coming to class on a regular basis. The teaching activities which students engaged in were very well-structured and integrated and required students to prepare in advance to be able to cope with the demands of the in-class as well as the post-class activities. One of the participants commented "I learned how to prepare for class before I attend it so that I don't face difficulties if the teacher asks me questions and to understand". Another participant added "...now if I don't prepare I will be lost in class. Before if I didn't prepare the teacher will explain to us before we start to write but now it's different". Furthermore, the students realized that they have to be active participants in their learning process. One of them commented "it's our responsibility to prepare before coming to class". This shows that the teaching model adopted encouraged student self-reliance and autonomy.

Added to that, the research participants recognized that the method used in the writing class improved their learning. One of the participants explained that since reviewing the study materials before attending class was compulsory, they were able to understand the lessons better and found dealing with the tasks inside the class much easier. In fact, the researcher observed that the students who completed the assigned pre-class tasks participated more actively in in-class activities and were more comfortable than their counterparts. What is more, those students assisted their group members during the lesson to understand and to complete the tasks successfully. This entails that the cognitive load, i.e. the mental effort which students put inside class was lower in the blended-flipped writing class. This was also facilitated by the fact that students should access the learning materials after class as well. One of the participants

acknowledged “It was nice since we watched videos and when we faced issues later on we could go back to them to check the lesson unlike the traditional way...we cannot bring the past back”. In line with this, another participant explained “my notes are available with me and I always use them when I write essays and even when I write in another subject”. It appears that this blended-flipped instructional model allowed the participants to be more involved in the academic writing class in the sense that there was an increase in the time the participants spent preparing for the module and at the same time a reduction in the students' cognitive load inside the class, which resulted in reducing the pressure they used to face in the academic writing class. The feeling of comfort and relaxation aided learning.

### *Deep learning strategies*

The theme of deep learning strategies describes the various deep learning, as opposed to surface learning, strategies which the blended-flipped teaching method enabled the participants to use. First, as the participants reflected on their experience in this class, they pointed out that dealing with different kinds of materials in audio, video, and printed formats and understanding them necessitated that they utilize various thinking skills and strategies such as identifying key information, summarizing it, keeping a note of them, and remembering them for future use in and after class which, they reported, were not used to in previous levels where they were taught mainly in the traditional method. One participant explained “I used my own way to summarize the main ideas in lessons and write down all the interesting points...unlike in level 2 when I got it ready from the teacher”.

Reflection was another deep learning skill which the participants reported they had used in the blended-flipped writing class. First, the participants reflected on the best ways they learned and utilized that knowledge to enhance their learning experience. For instance, one of the participants pointed out that the teaching method suited her learning style best and explained “I like to know what the lesson is about before coming to class and I like to prepare before class”. Another participant explained that she was ‘auditory’ and therefore listening to people explaining content in the videos she watched was extremely useful. In addition, the participants admitted that they started to reflect on their own performance in the module in light of their performance in the quizzes taken before class and the thorough feedback they received inside the class, which led them to put more effort to better their understanding. For instance, one participant said “The quiz helped us to know which information we did not understand, and we could then ask you”. Likewise, another participant reported “...the fact that you gave us our essays back with feedback and mistakes to correct was good...we knew what our mistakes were exactly. That was useful”.

Moreover, increased interest in and development of research skills was also reported by the participants in the blended-flipped writing class. This particular theme is also connected with the theme of involvement since involved students put additional effort in preparing for the class. The participants explained that they “used to watch the video and search the internet for additional information” which they used to check their understanding and consequently to retain the information contained in the study materials.

### ***Cooperation***

This theme describes how the participants worked with each other prior and during the academic writing class in order to achieve different purposes. Unlike in the traditional class in which students normally complete homework after class, the blended-flipped method allowed students to work together before and during class. Students reported that this was facilitated by the utilization of technology, specifically the VLE (Edmodo). Before class, the participants reported cooperating to understand the lesson materials. They pointed out that they assisted each other to identify the most important information in the materials they reviewed. One of the participants explained "...I also asked my classmates and they explained things to me".

Furthermore, one of the participants emphasised the usefulness of the discussions they engaged in prior to class in the discussion forums created for the purpose. The participants also commented that they learned better when they completed the learning tasks in pairs, in small groups, and as a whole class during the lesson. For instance, one of the research participants explained that the class brainstorming tasks on PADLET which took place prior to essays writing were extremely useful and stated that "it helped me personally because it made me think of different ideas and understand more".

The participants also realized that the out-of-class activities in this instructional model required them to use low order thinking skills. By contrast, doing in-class tasks such as writing the essays necessitated the use of higher order skills. Being taught in this manner, the participants pointed out, was easier and gave them the opportunity to "help each other understand". The participants explained that if done otherwise, they will not "have anyone to ask" and that "even if [they] had someone, he/she would not know what is required exactly".

The researcher also observed that group work facilitated collaboration and maximized learning. It was clear that students supported each other to put the knowledge they acquired outside class in practice when completing the in-class activities. Furthermore, some of them played leadership roles within their groups ensuring that ambiguities are cleared and that all the group members understand and complete the tasks successfully.

### ***Workload***

The theme of workload describes the participants' impressions of the amount of work they had to complete before and after class. It is apparent from the participants' responses that the workload in the blended-flipped writing class was the biggest challenge the participants faced. The workload in this class was apparently higher compared with what the students were used to in the traditional classes they attended in level 2 as evidenced by one of the participants' statements "there was not plenty of time to watch the video daily and solve the quiz, or to summarize the lessons because we have more than one module". Due to time constraints, some of the participants explained that they had to review the study materials while driving to college and participate in discussions just a short time before attending class. This seems to have increased the level of stress among the participants as voiced by one of them who said "...honestly there is a lot of pressure especially as part-time students since we are busy throughout the day and all the time".

On the other hand, despite the increased workload and stress level, the participants expressed their satisfaction with this instructional model which they felt benefited them a lot since it helped them to become “more focused”, “more careful and attentive to the choice of words and how to use them”, “learn how to write”, and facilitated their understanding and revision”. The researcher’s observation confirms the participants’ claims since it was clear that the performance of participants who were more regular in completing all the pre- and post-class activities improved as they progressed in the course. One of the participants commented “my level improved from my experience in level 3...I did not know at all how to write an essay...I feel I have benefited a lot”.

### ***Technology***

The theme of technology describes the hardware and software the participants utilized in the blended-flipped writing class. The participants reported that dealing with technology in this class constituted a major challenge especially for the participants who were living in the hostels. First of all, constant access to the internet and to a computer was essential in the blended-flipped class where most of the materials were in digital format and therefore accessible only through the VLE and where the majority of the out-of-class tasks were performed online. However, that was not always the case. One of the participants reported having to spend more time in the college after classes to be able to complete the required tasks because the internet connection in the hostel was too slow.

Second, one of the participants perceived the utilization of technology in teaching negatively. The participants complained that she hated using technology and explained that she preferred pen and paper to study. Involving students whose attitude towards technology is negative constitutes a challenge both for the instructor and for the student. All the same, some other participants admitted that their technology skills, including their English language typing skills, developed a lot in the writing class.

Third, it was also observed that some students did not have the necessary basic technology skills to be able to perform simple processes like creating an account, logging on to the VLE, resetting a password, replying to comments, and contributing to discussions. This is why training was essential to assist them.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, the participants responses to the survey showed that they have gained quite a lot from being taught in this method and that their interest in the writing module was to a certain extent greater than before ( $M=4.30$ ). This aligns with findings from other research studies which indicated that students’ attitude towards blended English language courses is generally positive (Chen, 2015; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). In order to explore what the research participants perceived of as the biggest gain, quantitative descriptive data analysis was performed to the survey data. What is interesting in the results is that they support the qualitative data findings which showed that increased involvement was the biggest gain of being instructed using the blended-flipped model. Three items in the scale measured participants’ involvement with the writing class namely hard work to ensure comprehension, perseverance when faced with difficulties, and extra care when dealing with the various tasks assigned to them. The means of the afore-mentioned items were 4.96, 4.93, and 4.88 respectively. The mean score of the three items was 4.92. In fact, researchers including Mok

(2014), Moravec et al. (2010), and Shahrokni & Talaeizadeh (2013) argue that a blended model of instruction impacts positively on the involvement of students. To a smaller degree, the participants also felt that the instructional model followed in the writing class allowed them to employ deep learning strategies and to develop new skills ( $M=4.66$ ), which is in line with findings from the qualitative data analysis.

To summarise, both the qualitative and quantitative data analysis revealed that overall students were quite involved in the blended-flipped academic writing class which, according to them constituted the biggest gain from being instructed in this manner. Developing new skills including technology and deep learning skills were also reported as important gains of this instructional approach.

### **Limitations and Implications of the Study**

Despite the participants' encouraging responses, the study has two major limitations. First, although the participants conceptualized of the blended-flipped instructional model in light of their previous learning experience in traditional classes, an experimental design which exposes students to both methods of teaching within the same semester would enable them to develop a clearer image of what a traditional academic writing class looks like, and consequently to be more confident when describing their experiences in the blended-flipped class.

In addition, it could be of great help to both academicians and researchers to identify the impact of blended-flipped instruction on students' performance in exams. Although a causal relationship is difficult to establish in this case this would help depict a clearer image of how student performance could be influenced by this instructional model. An investigation of the correlation between the participants' perceptions of this model of instruction and their performance is also recommended. This instructional design was implemented over a short period of time. Thus, an exploration of its impact on student perceptions and specifically involvement, over a longer period of time is desirable.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, we could conclude that despite the increased workload and technology challenges they faced, overall the participants had positive impressions of blended-flipped instruction. The qualitative and quantitative study analysis indicated that this instructional model can enhance the involvement of EFL students with academic writing. Moreover, it creates opportunities for cooperation and helps develop students' 'deep' rather than 'surface' learning strategies. Technology challenges; however, should be carefully considered by educators in the design of a blended-flipped writing class, as limited access to technology, especially the Internet, could be counterproductive and could have debilitating effects on students.

### **About the Author:**

**Afef Ahmed Gasmi** is a senior EFL lecturer at Middle East College, Oman. Her areas of interest include syllabus design, English language assessment, and program evaluation. Her research interests involve technology-assisted language instruction and assessment. She is particularly interested in exploring the impact of technology integration on the engagement and academic performance of EFL learners?



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