THE EFFECT OF BLENDED LEARNING AND CRITICAL THINKING ON TERTIARY EFL ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING IN CHINA

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychological Association
AT	Activity Theory
CALL	Computer Assisted Language Learning
CCTDI	California Critical Thinking disposition Inventory
CCTST	California Critical Thinking Skills Test
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
CT	Critical Thinking
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MLA	Modern Language Association
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
POA	Production-oriented Approach
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
SoLAR	Society for Learning Analytics Research
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

LIST OF APPENDICES

KESAN PEMBELAJARAN TERADUN DAN PEMIKIRAN KRITIS DALAM PENULISAN ARGUMENTATIF EFL PERINGKAT TERTIARI DI CHINA

ABSTRAK

Dengan perkembangan pesat yang berlaku dalam dunia Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi (ICT), kaedah pembelajaran campuran itu menjadi luas dalam bidang bahasa Inggeris sebagai suatu pengajaran bahasa asing (EFL). Ini membolehkan daya maju pengajar bahasa Inggeris tertiari menggunakan platform dalam talian seperti WeChat dan Pigai.org bagi mengintegrasikan pengajaran secara bersemuka, pembelajaran dalam talian, dan juga latihan pemikiran kritis untuk meningkatkan penulisan argumentatif pelajar EFL. Disebabkan tiada wujudnya suatu standard tunggal bagi kewujudan pengadunan, banyak penyelidikan serta laporan berhubung dengan kes-kes pembelajaran yang sesuai perlu dijalankan. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan meneliti keberkesanan pembelajaran yang sesuai di samping mewujudkan pemikiran kritis dalam kalangan pelajar EFL supaya mereka dapat mencapai kecemerlangan dalam bidang penulisan argumentatif mereka. Pada masa yang sama, ia mengkaji faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi pencapaian pelajar dalam bidang penulisan argumentatif dalam suasana persekitaran pembelajaran yang bercampuran juga telah diuji dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini telah menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan campuran di kalangan 66 orang mahasiswa, tahun pertama yang membuat pengkhususan dalam bidang bahasa Inggeris di sebuah universiti di Chongqing, China. Pelajar-pelajar yang terlibat dalam kajian ini terdiri daripada dua kelas penuh. Mereka dipilih secara rawak dan dibahagikan kepada dua kumpulan. Satu kumpulan dikawal (N=33) sementara satu lagi adalah kumpulan eksperimen (N=33). Data tentang kemahiran berfikir kritis

dan prestasi penulisan telah diukur melalui penulisan argumentatif iaitu melalui ujian sebelum dan selepas projek ini dijalankan. Di samping itu data yang mempengaruhi faktor-faktor pelajar-pelajar berkenaan telah dibuat berdasarkan soal-selidik dan juga melalui temu bual separa berstruktur. Ujian-T dan korelasi Pearson telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data kuantitatif yang telah terkumpul daripada ujian-ujian bertulis dan soal-selidik. Pada masa yang sama pengekodan dan analisis tematik juga telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data kualitatif yang diperoleh daripada temu bual separa berstruktur. Selepas intervensi, peningkatan ketara didapati dalam markah penulisan dalam kalangan pelajar kumpulan eksperimen. Hasil daripada kajian ini juga menunjukkan korelasi positif yang nyata antara kemahiran berfikir kritis dan prestasi penulisan argumentatif pelajar EFL dalam suasana pembelajaran gabungan. Keputusan kualitatif memperlihatkan bahawa faktor-faktor dalaman (seperti faktor-faktor psikologi, objektif pembelajaran serta kemahiran) dan faktor-faktor luaran (seperti peraturan-peraturan, komuniti, pembahagian kerja dan peranti) telah mempengaruhi penulisan pelajar-pelajar EFL dalam konteks pembelajaran bercampur. Lebih-lebih lagi, dapatan-dapatan kajian semasa ini mengesyorkan bahawa faktor-faktor yang berpengaruh (seperti peserta, peraturan-peraturan, komuniti, pembahagian kerja dan objektif) dalam persekitaran pembelajaran bercampuran mempunyai darjah korelasi positif yang berbeza dengan prestasi punulisan pelajar. Dapatan-dapatan ini memberikan suatu gambaran perspektif baharu kepada pelajar-pelajar EFL dalam arahan menulis, di samping merangsangkan pengajar supaya lebih berfleksibel dalam gabungan pelbagai teknologi dan latihan pemikiran kritis dalam amalan untuk mempastikan kecekapan yang lebih baik dalam kalangan pelajar dalam bidang penulisan.

THE EFFECT OF BLENDED LEARNING AND CRITICAL THINKING ON TERTIARY EFL ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING IN CHINA

ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), the blended learning method is widespread in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) instruction. It is viable for tertiary English instructors to utilise online platforms like WeChat and Pigai.org to integrate face-to-face instruction, online learning, and critical thinking training to improve EFL argumentative writing. As no single standard for blending exists, more research reports on blended learning cases are needed. This study aims to examine the effect of blended learning and critical thinking on EFL students' performance in argumentative writing, and the factors that influence students' argumentative writing performance in a blended learning environment were explored in the current study. This study used a mixed research method on 66 first-year undergraduates majoring in English at a university in Chongqing, China. These participants were from two intact classes randomly assigned to the control (N=33) and experimental (N=33) groups. The data on critical thinking skills and writing performance were measured by argumentative writing pre- and post-tests, and the data on influencing factors were measured through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The T-test and Pearson Correlation were used to analyse the quantitative data collected from writing tests and questionnaires. Coding and thematic analysis were employed to analyse the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. After the intervention, a significant improvement was found in the writing scores of the experimental group. The findings of this study also indicated a significant positive correlation between critical thinking skills and EFL argumentative writing

performance in a blended learning setting. Qualitative results showed that the internal factors (such as psychological factors, learning objectives, and skills) and external factors (such as rules, community, division of labor, and devices) influenced EFL students' writing in blended learning contexts. Moreover, the findings in the current study suggest that the influencing factors (such as subject, rules, community, division of labor, and object) in a blended learning environment have different degrees of positive correlation with students' writing performance. These findings provide new perspectives to EFL writing instruction, encouraging educators to be more flexible in blending different technologies and critical thinking training in practice to foster students' writing competence better.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

Due to globalization, it is essential to master the English language and use English to exchange information and culture (Haidar & Fang, 2019; Handayani & Aminatun, 2020). The deepening of globalization means that more and more foreign enterprises set up factories or business institutions in China, and more and more Chinese enterprises set up factories or stores abroad (Song, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). That is to say, the demand for Chinese to communicate in English is increasing (Wen & Zhang, 2020). At the same time, globalization also means that international trade is getting deeper and broader in businesses at all levels (Cibuc & Livitchi, 2020). Whether or not the companies establish factories in foreign countries, they are in contact with foreign companies in one way or another. In other words, increasing written exchanges are carried out through email, fax, and letters. The social requirements for undergraduates' writing ability in English are gradually rising (An, 2022). Therefore, how to improve students' English writing ability has become a vital part of tertiary English instruction in China (Kuang, 2021). Addressing the challenges of tertiary EFL writing instruction to align with the evolving demands of society has become increasingly critical in the field of Chinese tertiary EFL education (Zhao, 2019).

This chapter sets out the introduction of this research. It mainly introduced the background of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, and definition of key terms. This chapter ends with the organization of this study.

1.2   Background of the study

Writing is the most challenging of the four basic linguistic skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) (Celik, 2019). The capacity to master writing skills reflects students' comprehensive ability of language use, so the instruction of EFL writing is an essential component of English language teaching.

In China, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching began due to the *Reform and Opening-Up* policy in 1978, when the College Entrance Examination was resumed (Wen & Zhang, 2020). From 1985 to 1986, the Chinese Ministry of Education promulgated the *Syllabus of College English* (Liu, 2022). Then, the Chinese College English Education Steering Committee published a textbook on college English in 1986 (Shi, 1999). Later, the English course received unprecedented attention in universities after implementing College English Test 4 in 1987 (Liu, 2020). However, EFL writing instruction has always been a weakness in teaching practice in China (Yan, 2019). Even though Chinese teachers and students invest a lot of time and effort in EFL writing, the results do not meet the needs of both instructors and learners (Shen & Bai, 2019). Therefore, it is urgent to have reform in English education.

In 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education promulgated the *Teaching Requirements of College English Curriculum*, which opened a new upsurge in college English teaching reform (Du, 2020). The main characteristic of the reform is to change the traditional teaching methods into computer-assisted classroom instruction. Then, universities were going to be equipped with networks and computers. Nevertheless, teachers have introduced various multimedia technologies regarding teaching methods, but cramming education-where students are pressured to memorize information quickly for exams rather than developing a deeper understanding- persists

in many classrooms (Jiao, 2021). The teaching way has only changed from "chalk and blackboard" to "computer and screen" (Zhou, 2021), which means it just transformed from teachers' oral infusion into the multimedia infusion.

In addition, traditional EFL writing is one-time writing, which means the initial draft is the final one (Zhang & McEneaney, 2020). Moreover, teachers are the only readers of students' writing texts, making students accustomed to receiving teachers' guidance and feeling that they are writing for teachers (Zhao, 2019). In the meantime, the number of writing texts that need to be corrected is too large for teachers, which leads to untimely feedback (Gupta et al., 2022). As a result, teachers spend much time correcting compositions, but the effect of EFL writing teaching is still not ideal (Shen & Bai, 2019). Due to the influence and limitation of traditional teaching methods of EFL writing, such as product approach and other factors, most instruction of college EFL writing in China has overemphasised the product and ignored the process for a long time, which is not beneficial to the comprehensive development of students' EFL writing skill (Mamad & Vígh, 2023; Shen et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2020).

The development of society determines the transformation of talent demand, which also promotes the further reform of education. In 2010, the Chinese Ministry of Education published the *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, which indicated that education should be reformed to cultivate students' critical thinking skills and creative ability and emphasised that the teaching methods should be reformed and strengthened with information technology. In the past, the teaching goals in China were mainly focused on the instruction of knowledge and skills, so the teaching method was teacher-oriented, which limited students' learning to textbooks. Although students in this learning mode have excellent

academic performance at school, they are at a loss when solving many practical problems after entering society (Ma, 2020; Munastiwi, 2021). In this situation, educators should re-examine the teaching objectives and methods moderately.

At the same time, with critical thinking described as one of the particular skills in the 21st century, it also has become a prevalent issue in education, and scholars have gradually realized the importance of critical thinking in EFL instruction (Saleh, 2019). Moreover, cultivating critical thinking can improve learners' comprehension ability and motivation (Paul & Elder, 2019) and promote learners' writing performance (Saedpanah & Mahmoodi, 2020). Nowadays, critical thinking skills have been part of the teaching objectives in many disciplines and courses. Nonetheless, the lack of class time and effective teaching methods is one of the common obstacles to developing CT skills in EFL writing courses in China (Fengteng & Mei, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020).

In this vein, Chinese tertiary English learning cannot depend on the limited class time. It is necessary to take full advantage of spare time. As the traditional classroom teaching method makes it hard to meet the requirements of students and unable to solve the problems brought by credit compression and class hour reduction (An, 2022), it is essential to enhance the EFL teaching method with the help of technology. Whereafter online learning platforms (such as MOOCs) come to the field of tertiary education (Si, 2019; Wang & Zhang, 2019; Yang & Feng, 2022). Technology has supported education in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 epidemic. However, the practice has proved that online learning has its limitations.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has relatively varied the teaching process and ways. To control the spread of the epidemic, schools around the world choose to adopt online learning to guarantee continuity. In the meantime, all Chinese universities

4

had classes through online platforms during the time of home quarantine. As a result, technology has affected educational activities widely. Although online learning platforms have temporarily solved the dilemma of academic institutions, the effect of online learning is unsatisfactory. As a means of emergency treatment, online classes have rapidly broken the boundary between public education and home education in a short time, which brought problems of adaptation for teachers, parents, and students (Munastiwi, 2021). In terms of learning effect, students are affected by sociocultural factors such as motivation, self-regulation skills, and network environment (Heflin et al., 2017; Law et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020; Soleimani & Rahmanian, 2020), while teachers are unable to meet their own and students' expectations due to the obstacles in technology and adaptation (Bijeikienė et al., 2011; Ja'ashan, 2020; Rojabi, 2019). Through reviewing 25 papers, Abu Talib et al. (2021) reported the shortcomings of online learning models that were implemented during the epidemic of COVID-19, such as (1) widening the gap between privileged and underprivileged learners, (2) a lack of engagement of students that caused by low interest, stress, and distraction, (3) a lack of direct contact, (4) being interfered by the technical difficulties, (5) increasing stress, doubled workload as well as the disadvantageous impact on mental health.

This section has introduced the progress of English writing instruction in China and the integration of technology and critical thinking in education. The following section outlines the key issues and gaps in both practice and research that have motivated this study.

1.3   Statement of the problem

Within the contemporary educational area, despite the fact that EFL writing holds an essential position in the domain of language learning, EFL writing teaching faces many difficulties. With the development of technology, the ways learners acquire knowledge have undergone significant changes (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023), which means teachers are not the unique source of learning material (Setyowati et al., 2021). Traditional face-to-face teaching in China often struggles to stimulate learners' interest due to its over-reliance on textbooks and lectures, resulting in low motivation to learn (Li et al., 2022). Especially in resource-limited contexts, face-to-face instruction makes it challenging to integrate diverse and interactive learning materials, thus making it hard to meet students' individual learning needs (Attard & Holmes, 2022; Stevens et al., 2021). In addition, developing advanced thinking skills, such as writing and critical thinking, is an even weaker area in traditional face-to-face teaching. Students require more interaction and practice in these areas, according to Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT), and classroom environments often fail to offer sufficient chances, further limiting students' learning outcomes (Metcalf, 2003). Moreover, with the reduced English class hours in Chinese universities (An, 2022), students have much fewer interactions and English writing practice during the learning process, leading to unsatisfactory results in EFL writing.

To address these problems in traditional face-to-face instruction, ICT tools were introduced to language learning, especially during the pandemic period (Hebebci et al., 2020). However, online learning, while providing flexible learning opportunities, has limitations, such as lack of social presence, ease of distraction and isolation, privacy issues, and ignoration of individual differences (Al Rawashdeh et al., 2021; Bijeesh, 2017; Fawaz & Samaha, 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Palvia et al., 2018;

Talib et al., 2021). Single online learning is difficult for the current EFL writing instructions to meet the social demand for talents and the expectations of teachers and students (Alenezi, 2023; Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021).

Scholars and educators have tried to find a balanced approach that blends the technologies and traditional face-to-face teaching, aiming to take the merits of each. The blended learning, integrating ICT in the conventional instruction of EFL writing, could provide students with a lot of possibilities to promote writing ability, such as providing chances for interaction, knowledge application, and interactions for students, as well as assisting teachers to save time on evaluating students' EFL writing ability (Gulnaz et al., 2019; Inderawati et al., 2019). Students immensely enjoyed and benefited from blended language courses (Chen, 2021; Fisher et al., 2021; Liu, 2013; Williams & Beam, 2019). However, some studies suggest that students' outcomes did not make progress in blended learning contexts (Ja'ashan, 2020; Tosun, 2015). The gap between the potential and actual effectiveness of blended learning underlines the crucial problem in language education, which needs to be addressed. The expected outcomes are not fully realised in writing learning due to various challenges, which may include inadequate integration of online and face-to-face components (Huang, 2016; Inderawati et al., 2019), lack of teacher training in blended learning (Jannah, 2018; Su et al., 2024), insufficient student engagement (Vavasseur et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021), or technical limitations (Kumar et al., 2021; Osadcha et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). According to Engeström's (1987) Activity Theory, the learning outcome is affected by several elements, including tools, subject, object, rules, community, and division of labor in learning activities. Therefore, Further exploration is necessary to understand what factors influence students' learning outcomes and the relationship between these factors and writing performance in blended learning environments. By

identifying and addressing these factors, instructors can work to narrow the gap and maximise the benefits of blended learning in EFL writing instruction.

However, Chinese students' lack of critical thinking skills has been reflected in their EFL writing works (Tao, 2020). As CT skills are higher-order thinking skills that accompany and guide the EFL writing process, it is essential to involve CT training in EFL writing courses, as EFL learners must possess both writing and CT skills. (Murtadho, 2021). However, the present situation of CT in learning practices is not satisfactory due to a poor understanding of CT skills (Guo & Zhan, 2023). Additionally, EFL teaching in China has long emphasised linguistic and cultural dimensions while neglecting the cultivation of CT skills (Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, previous studies (Hasanah & Malik, 2020; Lu, 2021; Yennita & Zukmadini, 2021) indicate that the blended learning context can improve CT skills effectively in different aspects.

Meanwhile, focusing on CT is crucial because it is a foundational skill supporting many learning aspects, especially in writing. Students with good CT can analyse information, evaluate evidence, construct arguments, and organise logical compositions, leading to improvement in writing quality and performance (Marashi & Akbar-Hosseini, 2019; Nejmaoui, 2018; Saedpanah & Mahmoodi, 2020). Thus, blended learning contexts could develop students' CT and directly enhance their writing performance by enhancing CT skills.

Therefore, to improve the quality and effectiveness of EFL writing instruction, this study designed and implemented a blended learning integrated critical thinking training in EFL writing instruction based on SCT and Activity Theory, aiming to explore their effect on EFL students' argumentative writing performance in

Chongqing, China. Also, by investigating the internal and external factors influencing the effectiveness of blended learning and the relationship between these factors and writing performance, this study attempts to provide suggestions and references for future EFL education.

1.4   Research objectives

The present study mainly aims to investigate the use of a blended learning approach in EFL writing teaching and learning at a university in China. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

1. Examine the effect of blended learning on EFL students' overall argumentative writing performance in Chongqing, China.

2. Identify the relationship between argumentative writing performance and critical thinking skills.

3. Explore the internal and external factors influencing EFL students' argumentative writing performance in a blended learning setting.

4. Examine the relationship between the influencing factors and EFL students' argumentative writing performance in a blended learning setting.

1.5   Research questions

The present study hypothesised that the blended learning approach could significantly enhance the EFL students' writing ability. Therefore, the research questions below aim to guide this study:

1. What is the effect of blended learning on EFL students' overall argumentative writing performance in Chongqing, China?

2. What is the relationship between students' argumentative writing performance and critical thinking skills?

3. What are the internal and external factors that influenced EFL students' argumentative writing performance in a blended learning setting?

4. What is the relationship between the influencing factors and EFL students' argumentative writing performance in a blended learning setting?

1.6 Scope of the study

This study is limited to Chongqing higher education institutions only. As a major city in southwest China, Chongqing has a representative student group. Studying undergraduate students in Chongqing can provide valuable insights into understanding EFL students in Southwest China. Therefore, the scope of this study focused on undergraduate students majoring in English in Chongqing, China.

There were 66 participants at Yangtze Normal University in this study. With more than 22,000 students, Yangtze Normal University is one of the universities with the largest number of students in the region, and about 80% of the students come from Chongqing, China. This setting provides a large and representative sample of students to examine the impact of blended learning on argumentative essay writing performance in Chongqing China.

Focusing on this specific population, this study allows for an exploration of the effect of blended learning and critical thinking training on EFL students'

argumentative writing performance. Moreover, considering the importance of argumentative writing in English exams in China, this study aims to assess the overall performance of argumentative essays (Huang & Zhang, 2020). However, the narrow choice of the target population and writing genre has precluded any totality of generalizability of the findings in representing the EFL students' writing performance as a whole.

1.7   Significance of the study

The present research attempts to address the effect of the blended learning integrated critical thinking training on EFL writing performance, particularly in argumentative writing, at the university level in mainland China. This study also aims to explore the factors that influence EFL students' writing outcomes in the blended learning environment. Therefore, this study can contribute to the development of EFL writing instruction and blended learning and provide valuable insights for technology integration and educational policymaking.

Firstly, a study on the effect of blended learning on EFL students' writing performance can provide insight into using blended writing instruction. By analysing students' writing performance in blended learning contexts, educators and stakeholders can align teaching strategies with individual differences and provide more precise learning support. Moreover, the study on the effect of blended learning helps to enhance the level of combining instruction with technology, which is crucial for developing students' learning outcomes and could provide teachers with more experience regarding effective use of modern technological resources.

Secondly, the research on the effect of blended learning can provide strong support for educational policy and decision-making. Based on the research findings,

policymakers can formulate policies to guide schools and educational institutions in better using the blended learning approach to improve the quality of EFL writing instruction and enhance learning outcomes. Additionally, the study on which factors influenced learners' writing outcomes in the blended learning environment from learners' perspectives can help instructors optimise pedagogical design to meet learners' needs and increase their engagement, motivation, and subject interest.

Lastly, this research on the relationship between critical thinking and EFL writing achievement can provide evidence for integrating critical thinking training into language learning and offer new perspectives on the development of EFL writing instruction. Moreover, the results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of EFL writing instruction and the refinement of teaching methods. In addition, as critical thinking is one of the crucial aims in the ongoing college English teaching reform in China, it holds vital practical significance to integrate critical thinking training into tertiary EFL writing courses to realise educational reform goals. The present research findings can serve as a valuable reference for further research in this field.

1.8   Definition of key terms

In this study, some terms may express different connotations in different contexts. Therefore, to avoid conceptual confusion and misunderstanding, the definitions of key terms are provided as follows.

Argumentative writing refers to a genre of writing that students needs to clearly take their stand and give adequate real evidence to support the claim to convince the reader to accept or reject the appeal (Ka-Kan-Dee, 2015). According to

Toulmin's basic conception of argument, it contains four crucial factors: a claim based on some evidence, a warrant explaining how the evidence supports the claims, a reason that supports the warrant, and rebuttals (Maekong, 2017).

Blended learning refers to a learning mode that integrates a few learning approaches and technologies, containing face-to-face instructions in the classrooms, online synchronous and asynchronous lessons (Alowedi, 2020). In this study, students have physical instruction in the classrooms and use WeChat and Pigai.org as the online platforms to conduct online learning.

Critical thinking skill is defined as an instrument of exploration that encompass explanation, analysis, assessment, reasoning, and self-regulation (Facione, 1990). In EFL writing, it includes expressing claims clearly, providing relevant evidence and reasons, constructing logically rigorous arguments, and drawing reasoned conclusions. These skills are reflected in argumentative writing and are measured through assessment criteria with the components of claim, evidence, argument, reason, and conclusion.

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) refers to speakers use English as an additional language in a non-English country. EFL context means that English is not the host language (Hyland, 2003). For instance, a Chinese student who learns English in their native China would be in an EFL environment. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching occurs when English is taught in an environment where a language other than English is the native language.

Face-to-face instruction refers to in-person teaching where instructors and students interact directly in a physical setting (Adera & Fisher, 2019).

Online learning refers to a process in which students use digital technologies and online platforms to get learning materials, external support, and interactions with teachers and other learners (Means et al., 2009).

Writing performance refers to the scores of the students gained from the writing pre- and post-tests (Sovakandan, 2017). In this study, grading contains five components: content, style, language use, organization, and mechanics.

1.9   Organization of the study

There are five chapters in this study.

Chapter One is an introduction to the present study. It frames the background of the study, the problem statement, the research objectives, the research questions, and the significance of the study. Furthermore, this chapter presents definitions of key terms used in this research.

Chapter Two presents a broad view of related research. The contents involved in this chapter are EFL writing, blended learning, and sociocultural theory. In addition, this chapter gives the conceptual framework of the present research.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in the present paper. The research design, research variables, participants, instruments, validity and reliability, pilot study, and data analysis tools used in this study are introduced in this chapter.

Chapter Four provides the results and analyses of quantitative and qualitative data collected through writing tests, questionnaires, and interviews.

Chapter Five summarizes the critical findings and discusses the results based on relevant literature, followed by the implications, limitations, and directions for further research. It concludes with a conclusion.

1.10   Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the study, outlining the key components that form the basis of this study, including an introduction to the background of the study, statement of the problems, objectives of the research, research questions, scope of the study, significance of the study, definition of key terms, and the organization of the study.

The background of the study describes the challenges and opportunities for teaching English writing in China. The statement of the problem identified specific gaps in the existing literature and practice, leading to the formulation of the research objectives and questions that guided the study. This study aimed to examine the effect of blended learning and critical thinking on EFL students' performance in argumentative writing and the factors that influence their writing performance. The scope of the study defines the boundaries of the study, while the significance of the study emphasizes its theoretical and practical significance for the teaching and learning of English writing. Key terms are defined to ensure clarity and the organization of the study is outlined to provide a roadmap for subsequent chapters.

This chapter sets the stage for exploring the research, providing the necessary context and direction for the study. The next chapter is a literature review.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

This chapter overviews the present study's related literature, past research, and theoretical background. To this end, this chapter discusses the recent findings and initiatives about EFL writing, factors influencing EFL writing, different teaching methods of EFL writing, advantages and difficulties of blended learning in EFL writing instruction with an analysis of related theories and approaches. Finally, the conceptual framework for the present research is provided.

2.2   EFL writing

This part of the writing elaborates related subtopics of EFL writing, including the concept of writing and writing skill, teaching methods of EFL writing, the process-based approach to writing, writing and critical thinking, argumentative writing and critical thinking, assessment models of critical thinking, EFL writing in Chinese classrooms, and sociocultural factors affecting EFL writing.

2.2.1   Concept of writing and writing skill

Writing is a vital language ability for EFL learners (Gallagher, 2023). It has been defined as a process, a product, or a combination of them. Writing is often considered a product through the characteristics that the product should have, such as containing content areas in sufficient depth, using a specific technical vocabulary, and being well-structured (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Similarly, Brown (2001)

defines writing as "the graphic representation of spoken language" (p. 335), which also means that writing is a productive ability. Furthermore, Mulyadi and Wijayatiningsih (2020) believe that writing is a producing activity that contains continuous and recursive phases and that readers can comprehend writing products adequately.

As a productive activity, writing shall have a process. Hayes (2012) pointed out that writing can be considered a complex and cyclical process that includes planning, writing, editing, evaluating, and revising. This process may depend on familiarity with these activities or confidence in participating.

However, writing is not only a product or a process but also a means of direct communication with others (Jayanti, 2019). According to Hyland (2003), writing is not just creating sentences continuingly or describing reality accurately but communicating meaning with particular readers. Bathia (2004) and Swales (1990) also claim that the interaction associated with institutions and communities of practice should be emphasized in the concept of writing.

In addition, writing is also defined as a way of learning and thinking more than a medium of communication. It may include thinking, observing, and producing phrases, sentences, and paragraphs simultaneously (Taufikurohman, 2018), as well as the proper employment of punctuation marks and spelling at the same time (Agustine et al., 2023; Gathumbi & Masembe, 2015). Moreover, the connection of thoughts, proper use of discourse structure, and originality of content are vital elements of advanced writing skills (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Still, the different cultural backgrounds between L1 and English challenge EFL learners.

Writing is one of the most challenging language abilities for native and non-native learners because many issues, such as content, organization, mechanics, readers, and objectives, need to be handled. (Haerazi et al., 2020; Huang & Zhang, 2020; Rass, 2001). Hyland (2013) claims that writing skill means "to produce a contextually correct form of language, following prescribed patterns at either sentence or discourse level" (p. 6). It is an all-around ability connected with the macro and micro levels of goal, complicacy and so on (Saedpanah & Mahmoodi, 2020). However, Said (2018) believes writing skills can be transmitted via culture or taught through regular instruction.

As seen from the above definitions, many factors influence EFL writing. Studies of EFL writing indicate that university students have a lot of problems with EFL writing skills, including insufficient linguistic proficiency, L1 interference, weak content organization, mechanics, expression difficulty of ideas, lack of ideas, and writing anxiety, which impede their progress on academic achievement (Ahmed, 2019; Alharbi, 2019; Astrini et al., 2020; Bakeer, 2018; Toba et al., 2019). Stressing the problems EFL learners face, it is necessary to emphasize improving teaching methods in EFL writing.

2.2.2 Teaching methods of EFL writing

Various teaching methods for EFL writing have been presented in studies of EFL writing, such as product-based, process-based, and genre-based. Silva (2012) sorted out four influential teaching methods of EFL writing, including controlled

composition, current-traditional rhetoric, process approach, and English for academic purposes.

Controlled composition, also called guided composition, is rooted in the oral approach pioneered by Charles Fries (Silva, 1987). The concept of controlled composition points out that language learning involves cultivating a habit, and language teaching begins with oral language instruction. As a result, writing is often considered secondary and viewed as, at most, an assisting means of oral language learning. Pincas (1962), a representative figure in controlled composition, strongly opposed any form of free writing training. She argued that such practices contradicted the scientific concept of habit cultivation.

Moreover, she explained that the writer is a handler of language structure, and the reader is regarded as an editor and proofreader throughout the process. Teachers only care about the language form of written texts but not the quality of the writer's thought and expression. The written text is regarded as a collection of words and sentences, becoming a language training tool. According to Silva (2012), even though the controlled composition was only mentioned occasionally in the professional literature at that time, its impact on EFL writing courses and textbooks still exists.

By the middle of the 20th century, EFL writing researchers found it increasingly necessary to cultivate learners to write longer texts. The controlled composition approach could not meet the needs of language teaching. People need an intermediate instruction model that connects controlled writing and free writing.

In this situation, the current traditional rhetoric in writing instruction fills this gap. This teaching method combines the current traditional rhetoric in L1 writing instruction with Kaplan's comparative rhetoric theory, which believes that it is necessary to provide learners with a space for writing practice (Kaplan, 1966). According to Silva (2012), the principal focus of the current traditional rhetoric in L2 writing is the logic in structure and arrangement of various discourse forms in paragraphs. Researchers studied the components of paragraphs (such as topic sentences, supporting sentences, closing sentences, and different transition sentences). They researched the various modes of paragraph advancement (such as comparison, contrast, illustration, traceability, definition, and classification). Another interesting point is the larger discourse structure, such as instruction, body, and conclusion. Expository writing is generally considered the most suitable model of discourse organization for second-language writers at the university level in the middle of the 20th century (ibid).

Since the 1970s, there has been a revolution in process writing by Western scholars. With the deepening recognition of the nature of writing, instructors' tendency turned from teacher-oriented teaching to student-oriented teaching in writing instruction. Students were encouraged to constantly reflect and revise their work, while teachers started to put more attention on the writing process than the result. Writing is a process of continuous exploration, which is complex and creative, instead of an original reflection of ideas already in mind (Brace & Johns-Putra, 2010). Wei (2020) pointed out that the writing skills of L2 learners, who would like to express their

thoughts via writing, are similar to their L1 writing skills. Therefore, teachers should strengthen the training of the EFL writing process. Based on this understanding, the process approach divides EFL writing into three stages: pre-writing, writing, and revision (Resmini et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Mahlow et al. (2022) pointed out that these three stages are not linear, but a circulating arrangement, and the pre-writing stage is vital to any successful writing that happens later.

The process approach of L2 writing teaching is generally reasonable and widely used in EFL writing instruction. However, it has not been without its critics. Türkben (2021) indicated that certain aspects of the process approach are invalid in specific academic contexts. For instance, the process approach advocates for considering learners' self-selected topic as the best writing, but many university writing courses do not allow students to choose the writing topics. Therefore, this idea is considered meaningless. In other words, the process approach emphasizes the significance of learners' psychology but overlooks the sociocultural environment, such as the academic environment (Türkben, 2021).

Then, another writing teaching approach appeared, known as English for academic purposes. In this view, writing is a process of producing articles deemed acceptable by academic institutions. Learning to write is a form of socialization that leads to integrating into academic society, enabling individuals to understand expectations and strive for access gradually. During this process, writers push themselves to meet established standards, aiming for academic success. However, no theory or practice method is immune to criticism. According to Silva (2012), English

for academic purposes has been criticized for advocating interdisciplinary instruction of academic writing by EFL teachers, especially for natural science and engineering disciplines, which is beyond the professional level of English teachers.

Dos Santos (Spack, 1988)(2022) argued that writing instruction, especially in university, should be academic-oriented, while writing instruction in a specific professional field should be conducted by experienced teachers, as specialized knowledge is beyond the reach of an English teacher. On the other hand, EFL writing teachers should teach English writing based on the humanities. It should combine the basic principles of scientific research with a rhetorical approach.

Recently, the process approach is not only supported by researchers and instructors of L1 writing (Bychkovska & Lee, 2017; Schoonen, 2019) but also advocated by EFL professionals (Maharani & Santosa, 2021; Özkul & Ortaçtepe, 2017; Seow, 2011; Zhao, 2017). The process approach contains numerous iterative procedures that compel writers to examine their chosen writing theme, language use, purpose, and the social realities of their readers. Even though there are different opinions on implementing the process approach in EFL writing courses, most scholars agree that the basic principles of the process approach include planning, drafting, revising, and editing. (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).

As the most commonly tested writing genre in language tests (Huang & Zhang, 2020), argumentative writing is much more challenging than other writing genres (Weijer et al., 2019). It encourages learners to make arguments through observation and investigation on a theme and to develop and explain their stand with a series of

reliable evidence (Setyowati et al., 2017). In addition, Weijer et al. (2019) indicated that argumentative writing is considered an advanced literacy genre and must be well structured. Argumentative essays require learners to possess clear ideas to convince the reader to accept these ideas or employ the same thinking perspective (Alwaely & Lahiani, 2020). Fundamentally, argumentative writing has six steps: raise a claim, challenge it, support it with reasons, query the reasons, disprove them, and arrive at a conclusion (Kuhn, 1991). It usually takes a long time to acquire the cognitive model related to argumentative writing (Piolat et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, the challenges experienced by learners in EFL writing have captured scholars' attention, leading to a focus on learning approaches that can enhance learner's argumentative writing skills. Ezza (2010) stated that employing inadequate traditional teaching approaches is crucial to student's low achievement in EFL writing. Learners have few chances to practice EFL writing skills outside of class, leading to weakness in argumentative writing. Moreover, an appropriate teaching approach must align with the teaching environment to facilitate improved student-teacher and student-peer interactions. This alignment can enhance students' initiative in EFL wiring. The technology-assisted blended learning model is ideal for an EFL argumentative writing course.

2.2.3   The process-based approach to writing

Janet Emig initially introduced the writing process by comparing the writing behaviour of students to that of proficient writers. Emig (1971) claimed that simply correcting students' wording and phrasing did not enhance their writing performance.

During the writing process, a writer should focus on the idea of writing rather than the grammar, while the writing should focus on the process instead of the final product. Through experimental research, Emig (ibid) concluded that the writing process is not a linear sequence consisting of a preparation phase, formal writing phase, and revision phase, as in traditional product writing, but a cyclic process.

Since the 1980s, the process approach has been applied to writing courses. Wallace Douglas, a professor at North-western University, first proposed the process approach and suggested that the writing courses should instruct students in every step that constitutes the writing process (Rosen et al., 1983). The process approach focuses on the process instead of the product. Unlike product-based writing, the process-based writing approach considers students the centre of learning activity. Students have enough time and opportunity to plan, draft and revise writings to give full play to their abilities with the help of instructors and peers. Therefore, writing becomes a process of exploring what we know and how we feel via language (Murray, 1980).

Keh (1990) improved the definition of process writing by studying different writing processes and extended the writing processes into seven stages, including input, first draft, peer-evaluation, second draft, writing workshops, teacher-student sessions, and final draft. However, Hyland (2003) concluded five stages of the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Reviewing the division of the writing process by different researchers, the process-based approach to writing generally covers five stages: planning, drafting, feedback, revising and editing. Moreover, these five stages do not exist independently but interact.