

Effects of Blended Learning on Students' Achievement in English Essay Writing among Senior Secondary Schools in Asaba, Delta State

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Abstract

The study examines effects of blended learning on students' achievement in English essay writing among senior secondary schools in Asaba, Delta State. A pretest-posttest control group quasi-experimental research design was used. The population consisted of 1,162 male and 1,226 female SS2 English Language students. Simple random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 145 students. The experimental group received Face-to-face blending (FTFB) instruction in English essay writing, while the control group received traditional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instruction. Data was collected through Essay writing tests to evaluate students' writing skills; pre-test and post-test were used to assess students' achievement in English essay writing before and after the intervention. Data was analyzed using mean, standard deviation and ANCOVA. The results show, among others, that FTFB learning significantly enhanced the achievement of students in English Essay writing more than the PPP learning irrespective of the gender. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that English essay writing teachers should be encouraged by the government to adopt FTFB learning in teaching English essays at senior secondary school level. The students should be adequately trained on how to effectively utilize FTFB in learning.

Keywords: face-to-face blending, achievement, essay writing, PPP, blended learning.

Introduction

Communication is the foundation of human interactions and is necessary for human survival. An individual must comprehend and appropriately apply the laws governing communication in order to participate in any form of it correctly. Language is the primary tool used by humans for communication. This suggests that in order for meaning to be properly communicated, a person must be fluent in the language of communication. Proficiency in all the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - is necessary to be considered fully proficient. Despite the growing importance of English language proficiency, senior secondary school students continue to struggle with essay writing, leading to poor achievement. This is a pointer to the fact that the traditional teaching methods used for teaching and learning essay writing may not be sufficient to engage students and foster meaningful learning experiences.

Speaking and listening are called oracy skills, while writing and reading are called literacy skills. However, of the four language skills, writing is probably the most difficult because it requires the application of knowledge of the other three skills. Writing is the process of expressing ideas and thoughts in a comprehensible format using symbols, such as letters (Durga & Rao, 2018). Writing can also be defined as any conformist system of marks or signs that represents the utterance of language and renders language visible. It entails using symbols to represent language, which enables users to externalize their thought processes and create lasting records of information. Writing can take various forms, from simple notes to complex literary works. It is also a complex skill that is not naturally acquired; it is usually learned in formal education settings. Daffern et al. (2017) revealed that proficiency in writing is key and foundational to successes in global economy. Fitria (2024) opined that good writing skill gives pleasure and joy to any one that acquires it.

Writing is a vital instrument for human development on both a personal and professional level. Perhaps, of greater importance, is the fundamental role essay writing plays in academic settings. Essay writing is a style of writing, often written from the author's point of view (Podolkova & Medvid, 2019). It is also referred to as a concise piece of non-fiction writing that aims to either inform the reader about a topic or argue a particular perspective (Caulfield, 2023). It is an analytic, interpretative, or critical literary composition usually much shorter and less systematic and formal than a dissertation. According to Faiqoh (2015), essay writing is a written piece that is designed to present an idea, propose an argument, express emotion or initiate debate. However, essay writing can also be seen as a piece of writing that is written to convince someone of something or to simply inform the reader about a particular topic. It is a focused piece of writing that develops an idea or argument using evidence, analysis, and interpretation. Essay writing consists of a number of elements which include:

imagination, criticism, and observations of daily life experience, recollection and reflections of the author.

Essays can be classified into four main categories: argumentative, expository, descriptive, and narrative. A narrative essay uses vivid details and stories to create a story, usually based on personal experience. A descriptive essay uses words to vividly describe a person, location, or item. In order to enlighten or educate the reader, an expository essay provides facts and information about a subject. Contrarily, an argumentative essay makes a claim or takes a stance and backs it up with logic and proof in order to influence the reader to agree with the author or act. However, different abilities and strategies are needed for each kind of essay in order to successfully interest the reader and deliver the desired message.

Agreeably, students' progress in school is dependent on their ability to develop a satisfactory degree of writing proficiency and fluency (Cummings & Petscher, 2015). Teachers primarily assess students' achievement through writing (Mellati & Khademi, 2018). A student cannot graduate from school without taking written examinations, continuous assessment tests, writing assignments, and engaging in note taking activities in class. Writing is also an adaptable means of evaluating students' knowledge and academic capability on high-stakes educational assessments (Chan et al., 2018). One of such high stakes examinations is the Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) for students exiting the secondary level of education in Nigeria. It is conducted by examination bodies such as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO).

English Language is one of the courses in the Senior School Certificate Examinations where good writing abilities are evaluated. The subject is compulsory and candidates are obligated to obtain at least a credit pass in it in order to gain admission into any institution of higher learning in Nigeria. In order to do this, candidates must possess good writing abilities. This is because the part (Paper 1) of the WAEC examination, requiring a direct application of writing skills, carries the highest marks – 120 marks (60%) out of a total of 200 marks for the whole paper which includes Papers 2 and 3. Paper 1 is further divided into three sections – A (Essay Writing = 50 marks), B (Comprehension = 20 marks), and C (Summary = 30 marks). In all, the essay writing section carries the most marks in Paper 1 (50%). According to WAEC Chief Examiners report (WAEC, 2014), essay writing section demands the following kinds of writing – letter, speech, narration, description, debate/argumentation, report, article, exposition and creative writing. By mastering these forms of writing, students develop essential skills in communication, critical thinking, and self-expression, ultimately achieving success in essay writing.

Students' achievement could however be described from different perspectives. Werdhiastutie et al. (2020) noted that achievement means doing something successfully, typically by effort, courage and skills. Carter (2016) referred to students' achievement as a measure of the amount of academic content a student learns in a determined amount of time. Students' achievement is a systematic and purposeful quantification of their learning outcomes (Nasser & Mohd, 2022). Apparently, students' achievement is commonly measured through external or internal examination as well as continuous assessment in form of tests, assignments, and debates; practical and term papers (Nja et al., 2020). Hence, achievement in essay writing refers to the demonstration of skills, knowledge, and competence in writing essays that effectively communicate ideas, arguments, and perspectives. It involves: clear and concise writing, strong argumentation, effective organization, critical thinking, and creativity and originality.

However, as important as the ability to write well is to students' academic life generally, and success in the English Language examination specifically, research has shown that students are generally poor in written English (Gultom & Oktaviani, 2022). Ezeokoli and Igubor (2016) observe that the level of educational achievement in terms of competence in written English in Nigerian schools has been quite low. This situation is evident in the May/June and November/December West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), and other external Examinations (Chief examiners' report, 2014-2019). In spite of the fact that deliberate attempts are made to give candidates tests within their experience and capabilities, it has been noted that many of them fail to show an understanding of the requirements of the questions they attempt and their essays are dominated by errors of grammar/poor expression, spelling and punctuation and wrong amalgamation (WAEC, 2019).

Many factors have also been noted to be responsible for the poor achievement of students in this important examination. These factors include, teachers' academic qualification (Ibezim, 2018), teacher's workload (Ibezim, 2018), and insufficient language laboratory equipment and a deficiency of hands-on instruction. These significantly contribute to students' unsatisfactory achievement in essay writing (Pareek, 2019). Muhammad et al. (2016) note that success in teaching in the classroom lie in teachers' hands because they are responsible for stimulating students' interest and in directing the mood and flow of the class. Thus, a major cause of students' underachievement in essay writing is that of poor methodology. Teachers of essay writing usually adopt ineffective methods and approach in class. This situation supports the survey by Francescucci and Foster (2014) which found lecture method to be the dominant method of teaching in Oyo State. Similarly, studies by Nwankwere (2019)

show that the conventional lecture style is still a major part of English language instruction for teachers in public secondary schools.

In an effort to find a teaching approach that takes this desire into account, there is need to try out such learning approaches like blended learning, against the usual conventional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach of teaching essay writing. One of the reasons for choosing blended learning approach is that existing literature showed that this approach has been used in other areas and disciplines and that the approach showed a significant impact on students' achievement. On the other hand, in the current area of study, this approach remains under-explored mostly in the part of determining students' achievement in essay writing, which is one of the concerns the current study saw the need to address.

Blended learning approach can also be seen as hybrid learning approach. It is a teaching approach that integrates technology and digital media with traditional instructor-led classroom method, giving learners more flexibility to customize their learning experience. The learning approach is one of the most modern approaches of teaching and learning which helps in solving the classroom challenges; that is, the growing demand for teaching and learning of English language in the modern classroom. Blended learning approach increases learning effectiveness to a large extent, decreases the time required for training and allows learners to study at their preferred time and place (Kintu et al., 2017). It provides learners with adequate information needed to practically engage in teaching and learning exercises.

The blended teaching mode expands and enriches the content of English teaching, makes English teaching colourful, and may improve students' motivation and achievement. It eliminates time and space restrictions, and broadens the scope of education. Students are no longer confined to a fixed time and place to learn English in class. They can use electronic devices such as computers and mobile phones to learn English in their homes, dormitories, libraries and public places (Obla & Ukabi, 2021). They can also receive instruction from other teachers in any place, to expand the teaching space. Students can learn independently through courses stored in the cloud to optimize their personal time allocation (Obla & Ukabi, 2021). Besides, the blended teaching mode could strengthen the depth of education and improve the quality of teaching. It is not only the use of online platform, or the simple construction of digital teaching resources, but also it enhances the depth of learning, and enriches the teaching content.

Students carry out English learning in a variety of ways, and use the Internet and other platforms for English communication, listening, speaking and writing. At the same time,

teachers can evaluate students' interests and characteristics according to their learning records on the Internet, adjust teaching plans and methods, and improve learning efficiency (Zykrina et al., 2022). Applying the blended teaching approach to the teaching and learning of English essay writing may have positive effect on students' interest and achievement. There are different types of Blended Learning Approaches, they include, Face-to-Face Blending, Online-Facilitated Blending, Rotation Blending, Flex Blending, Supplemental Blending, and Enriched Virtual Blending. However, this study adopted the Face-to-Face Blending.

A Face-to-face blending (FTFB) classroom combines traditional in-person instruction with online learning activities, allowing for a flexible and interactive approach to teaching essay writing. In this setting, teachers can use online resources and tools to provide students with foundational knowledge and skills, such as grammar, structure, and style, while reserving face-to-face time for more nuanced and personalized instruction, such as peer review, discussion, and one-on-one feedback (Obla & Ukabi, 2021). This blended approach enables teachers to maximize classroom time for high-impact activities, such as writing workshops, peer editing, and discussion-based feedback, ultimately helping students develop their writing skills in a more engaging and effective way using communication and network technologies.

With the innovation in communication and network technologies, the teaching approach/technique has changed as new trend has emerged to equip learners with meaningful learning experiences in the modern classroom. A blended learning classroom which is both virtual and traditional is used to deliver meaningful learning experiences as contained in the programme of learning. Blended learning approach, as innovative teaching technique, is growing rapidly because of the role it plays in enhancing learning outcomes and increasing students' satisfaction and participation in the teaching and learning process (Kumar et al., 2021). It is based on the above background that the present study investigated the effect of blended learning approach on the achievement of senior secondary school students in essay writing in Asaba, Delta State.

On the other hand, Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach is predominantly used in teaching English essay writing in Asaba, Delta State in which the bulk of the writing tasks lie heavily on the teacher (Oryza et al., 2022). This approach is straight forward; the teacher presents the target language and students are asked to practice it; first in well-controlled activities and free activities. It is only later that students are allowed to produce. The PPP approach starts with input and ends with output.

The first stage of PPP is presentation of an aspect of language in a context that students are familiar with. The second stage is practice, where students will be given an activity that gives them enough opportunity to practice the new aspect of language and be familiar with it. At this stage, the teacher monitors this process and gives support (teachers centred). The final stage is production. Here, the students will be asked to use the language in context, in an activity set up by the teacher who will be giving minimal assistance (Anderson, 2016). To emphasize further, Risman (2018) states that PPP focuses on form that might benefit learners in relation to grammar teaching, especially in the early stages of learning. Yet this approach has been criticized as merely providing focus on form of second language learning (SL). It does not seem to promote adequacy in learning essay writing. Anderson (2016) listed the shortcomings of PPP to include teacher centred activities; when a teacher talks at length, students in most cases get bored and unwilling to participate in the learning process and students are not given the chance to be creative in the classroom activities. Ability to have an equal impact on male and female students is one related factor posing a challenge to the utilization of this educational approach.

Gender is seen as socially constructed roles and socially learned behaviour and expectations associated with males and females (Malpique et al., 2024). The authors stress further that males and females are biologically different even with different cultural interpretation. It is also worthy of note that gender has to do with the inherent differences in social expectations about what behaviour and activities are appropriate and expected of each gender and what rights, resources and even power they should possess. Gender can simply be referred to those societal created behavioural patterns and characteristics judged appropriate by a specific culture for male and female. In their study Cordeiro et al. (2018) notes that females are more fluent in writing skills, as measured by the total number of written words within a time limit, and produced better text in comparison to their male counterparts. Female learners in the primary grades performed consistently better than their male counterpart in the areas of reading comprehension and writing skills (Reilly et al., 2019). In science, males' and females' performance is on the same level at age nine; but beginning in the middle school, the performance of females will begin to decline (McQuillan et al., 2023). It is also discovered that white boys perform better than white girls in English Language essay writing, but by age 17, both White and Hispanic males perform better than their female counterparts (McGlown, 2015).

The arguments above show that in Nigerian education system, blended learning is a major innovation approach. However, there is a pressing need to establish an empirical backdrop on the effect of blended learning on students' achievement in English essay writing. This, as pointed out, is necessary because as approach to teaching students writing skills, its

effectiveness on students' achievement in English essay writing is yet to be determined within the area of the study, hence the need for this study.

Research questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What are the effects of FTFB and PPP learning on the mean achievement scores of students in essay writing?
2. What is the influence of gender on the mean achievement scores of students in essay writing?
3. What is the interaction effect of approach and gender on the mean achievement scores of students in essay writing?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses guided the study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught essay writing with FTFB and those taught with PPP approach.

Ho2: Gender has no significant influence on the mean achievement scores of students in essay writing.

Ho3: There is no significant interaction effect of approach and gender on the mean achievement scores of students in English essay writing.

Methodology

The study employed a quasi-experimental research design; specifically a pretest-posttest control group design. The population of the study consists of all the 2,388 English Language students in public Senior Secondary School Students II (SSS2) from the 63 schools in Asaba, Delta State in 2022/2023 academic session. This population consisted of 1,162 male and 1,226 female SS2 English Language students (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, Oshimili Local Government Area, Asaba Field Office, 2023).

The sample for this study consisted of 145 (93 males and 52 females) students from the two intact classes that were used for the study. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of two secondary schools out of the 63 public co-educational secondary schools for the study. Purposive sampling was used on the grounds that the sampled schools are having the same characteristics such as: co-educational secondary schools with stream of SS2 English classes, willingness of the schools to participate in the experiment, number of students offering English were up to 20 and above in a class and the availability of facilities for blended learning. Simple random sampling technique was used to assign schools into the two-

treatment conditions (Face-to-face blended instruction and Presentation-Practice-Production) through balloting.

Before the commencement of the experiment, the researchers visited the schools to seek permission from the school authorities and check the facilities available in the school that were selected for the study. The English language teachers were trained as research assistants on how to use the blended learning and conventional PPP learning approach. This is to prepare them with necessary strategies in implementing the treatment. The training was done in each of the schools selected for the study for one week according to the type of treatment that was given to such schools before the commencement of the experiment.

The experiment lasted for 5 weeks. In the first week, the researchers trained the research assistants and administered pretest. Pretest was administered in order to ascertain the students' academic achievement in Essay writing before the commencement of the experiment. Treatment for the experimental groups was done using the school time table and at their normal lesson periods with the trained regular English language teachers.

The lesson plans on blended learning were given to the research assistants in the experimental group while the lesson plans on conventional PPP learning were given to the research assistants in the control group. The treatment kicked off at the end of the training. It lasted for four weeks for both groups. Each group was subjected to one lesson per week. Each lesson lasted for 40 minutes for the two groups. The experimental group received FTFB instruction in English essay writing, while the control group received the PPP instruction. At the end of the treatment, post-test was administered on the students with the same lesson contents and instructional objectives. The only difference was on the instructional technique. The test was conducted in the two schools selected for the study at the same time.

Data was collected through Essay writing achievement tests to evaluate students' writing skills and Pre-test and post-test to assess students' achievement in English essay writing before and after the intervention. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize students' achievement scores and inferential statistics (ANCOVA) to compare the achievement of students in the experimental and control groups.

Presentation of results

Research question one: What are the effects of FTFB and PPP learning on the mean achievement scores of students in essay writing?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of achievement score of students taught English Essay writing with FTFB and PPP learning

Group	Pre-test		Post-test		Adjusted Score
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
FTFB learning	65	25.15	4.83	35.94	4.95
PPP learning	80	11.44	2.36	29.82	2.13

Table 1 shows that students who were taught English Essay writing using FTFB had mean achievement score of 35.94 with a standard deviation of 4.95 at post-test against their pre-test mean achievement score of 25.15 and standard deviation of 4.83; while those who were taught using PPP learning had mean achievement score of 29.82 with a standard deviation of 2.13 at post-test against their pre-test mean achievement score of 11.44 and standard deviation of 2.36. Mean adjusted scores of 34.41 and 31.31 for the two groups show that the students who were exposed to FTFB had higher adjusted score than those taught using PPP learning, which means that FTFB is more effective.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught English Essay writing with FTFB and those taught with PPP learning.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of the mean achievement scores of students in English Essay writing by approach and gender

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1531.302a	4	382.825	28.599	.000
Intercept	4851.294	1	4851.294	362.421	.000
Pre-test	116.574	1	116.574	8.709	.004
Group	79.910	1	79.910	5.970	.016
Gender	.044	1	.044	.003	.954
Group* Gender	16.115	1	16.115	1.204	.274
Error	1940.938	140	13.386		
Total	164062.000	145			
Corrected Total	3472.240	144			

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

Table 2 showed that $F(1,140)$ is 5.970 and P is less than 0.05. The result implied that students that were taught English Essay writing using FTFB achieved higher than those taught with PPP learning. The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught English Essay writing with FTFB and PPP learning is rejected. This implies that there is significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught English Essay writing using FTFB and PPP learning.

Research question two: What is the influence of gender on the mean achievement scores of students in English Essay writing?

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation of achievement score of male and female students taught English Essay writing with FTFB and PPP learning

Group	Pre-test			Post-test		Adjusted Score
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Male	93	18.88	8.14	33.15	4.72	32.84
Female	52	16.10	6.85	31.88	4.97	32.88

Table 3 shows that the male students had mean achievement score of 33.15 with a standard deviation of 4.72 at post-test against their pre-test mean achievement score of 18.88 and standard deviation of 8.14 while the female students had mean achievement score of 31.88 with a standard deviation of 4.97 at post-test against their pre-test mean achievement score of 16.10 and standard deviation of 6.85. This shows that the mean post-test score of male students was higher than that of the female students. However, mean adjusted scores of 32.84 and 32.88 for male and female students respectively indicate that the female students had higher adjusted score than the male students not minding that the male students had higher post-test mean achievement score.

Ho2: Gender has no significant influence on the mean achievement score of students in English Essay writing.

Table 2 shows that the probability associated with the calculated value of $F(0.003)$ for the influence of gender on the mean achievement scores of students in English Essay writing is 0.954. Since the probability value of 0.954 is greater than the 0.05 level of significance ($p > 0.05$), the null hypothesis was not rejected meaning that there is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of male and female students in English Essay writing taught with FTFB and PPP learning.

Research question three: What is the interaction effect of approach and gender on the mean achievement scores of students in English Essay writing?

Table 4: Mean and standard deviation of students' achievement mean scores in English Essay writing by approach and gender

Group	Gender	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Adjusted score
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
FTFB learning	Male	40	25.32	5.21	35.79	4.90	34.04
	Female	25	24.67	3.56	36.39	5.21	34.79
PPP learning	Male	53	11.46	2.79	30.11	1.74	31.65
	Female	27	11.42	1.64	29.42	2.55	30.97

Table 4 shows that male students who were taught English Essay writing using FTFB had a post-test mean achievement score of 35.79 with a standard deviation of 4.90 and an adjusted score of 34.04 while the female students who were also taught with the same approach had a post-test mean achievement score of 36.39 with a standard deviation of 5.21 and an adjusted score of 34.79. Male students who were taught English Essay writing using PPP learning had a post-test mean achievement score of 30.11 with a standard deviation of 1.74 and an adjusted score of 31.65, while the female students who were also taught with PPP learning had a post-test mean achievement score of 29.42 with a standard deviation of 2.55 and an adjusted score of 30.97. These show that both male and female students who were taught using FTFB had higher post-test mean achievement scores and adjusted scores than the male and female students who were taught using PPP learning.

H₀₃: There is no significant interaction effect of approach and gender on the mean achievement scores of students in English essay writing.

Table 2 shows that calculated value of F(1.204) for the interaction effect of approach and gender on mean achievement scores of students in English Essay writing had an associated probability value of 0.274. Since the probability value of 0.274 is greater than 0.05 level of significance ($p > 0.05$), the null hypothesis was not rejected meaning that there is no significant interaction effect of approach and gender on students' mean achievement scores in English Essay writing.

Discussion/educational implications of the findings

The findings of this study have several implications for teachers, students, policymakers and curriculum planners. The finding has provided empirical evidence on the effectiveness of FTFB over the PPP learning approach in enhancing achievement of students in English Essay writing. This implies that the use of PPP learning by teachers may not yield the desired change in the achievement of students in the subject. Such strategy may be substandard to FTFB in facilitating achievements of students in English Essay writing.

An implication of the findings to the students is that the use of FTFB will make the students to be active participants in the teaching and learning process thereby leading to higher improvement in their learning of the subject, if such approach is not employed in teaching and learning process, students remain dormant and will not be active participants in learning. This will lead to no improvement in their learning of English Essay writing. The finding also shows that FTFB is more effective than the PPP learning irrespective of gender of the student in facilitating students' achievement in studying English Essay writing. This implies that the adoption of FTFB by English Essay writing teachers could greatly enhance the achievement of both male and female students in English Essay writing. The implication of this finding to curriculum planners is that the inclusion of FTFB in the teaching and learning of English curriculum and that of the teacher training institution is required for the training of teachers to use appropriate strategy in the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study and the discussion, the following conclusions were drawn: FTFB significantly enhanced the achievement of students in English Essay writing more than the PPP learning irrespective of gender; there were no significant gender differences in the achievement of the students in English Essay writing; and instructional approach did not interact with gender in affecting the achievement of the students in English Essay writing. This shows that the achievement of the students in both FTFB and PPP learning were totally independent of their being either male or female.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. English Essay writing teachers should be encouraged by the government to adopt FTFB in teaching of English Essay writing at senior secondary school level.
2. Government should through the Ministry of Education install computers and mobile phones in schools and students should be encouraged to use them.

3. The Ministry of Education through the Secondary School Management Board should organize regular sensitization workshops for English Essay writing teachers on the use of FTFB in teaching.
4. The students should be adequately trained on how to effectively utilize FTFB in learning.
5. Curriculum planners should make concerted effort to incorporate FTFB into the various teacher education programmes and the curriculum of senior secondary school students in English Essay writing.

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