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A Probe into Blended Teaching of EFL Writing from the Perspective of Deep Learning

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Abstract: For the teaching of EFL writing, the blended approach which is practiced by combing offline and online teaching activities, is gaining attention in recent years. Guided by the deep learning theory, this paper explores the blended teaching path of "integrated preview—focused discussion—efficient interactive evaluation", and explores the feasibility of this mode through teaching practice. The author holds that this mode can effectively enhance students' awareness of English writing skills.

Keywords: Deep Learning; EFL English Writing; Blended Teaching; Online and Offline Activities

1. Introduction

The improvement of English writing is a challenging task for many EFL students, and the improvement of writing ability involves the cultivation of students' ability of critical thinking. In the information era, the teaching and learning of English writing are characterized by a blended approach, which combines online and offline resources. Besides, the emergence and prevalence of artificial intelligence technology has offered both merits and challenges to the teaching of English writing. The theory of deep learning highlights active construction, critical understanding and knowledge transfer, and its core goal is highly consistent with the teaching and training of English writing skills. Based on this, this paper digs into the teaching of English writing skills, and tries to testify the impact of the blended mode on the improvement of students' writing awareness and writing ability. By analyzing the teaching practice of English writing course on Business English majors in a university, the author aims to explore the implementation strategies of blended teaching of EFL English writing from the perspective of deep learning, and offers some suggestions concerning improving English writing teaching.

2. Theoretical Background and Feasibility Analysis

Proposed by Marton & Säljö(1976), the concept of deep learning is a learning paradigm which is different from mechanical memory and passive acceptance. In recent years, many Chinese scholars have also dug into the theory of deep learning by referring to Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives. Duan Jinju and Yu Shengquan (2013) believed that deep learning corresponds to higher-order thinking such as analysis, evaluation, and innovation, while shallow learning corresponds to lower-order thinking such as memorization, comprehension, and application. Some scholars have also explored the practical application of the deep foreign language learning approach in course teaching (Liu Huiying, 2016), and explored its role in ideological and political education in integrated English courses (Liu Jianjun, 2022).

With the progress of information and artificial intelligence technology, various online learning platforms have greatly facilitated and contributed to language learning and language teaching; hence, the blended approach in language teaching and learning is gaining popularity. Blended teaching offers an efficient and effective carrier for the implementation of deep learning. The online platforms offer students sufficient resources for their self-study, preview and review work, enabling students to revise essay writing by analyzing the feedback from peer review and online platform, so as to cater to the different tastes of students with different English levels, thus meet the needs of deep learning. The theory of deep learning can be applied in the learning and teaching of EFL English writing, for writing is relatively speaking the most difficult part for EFL students, and it is the embodiment of learners' comprehensive English proficiency.

3. Main Problems with Current Blended Teaching of EFL English Writing

On the one hand, APPS like Pigai and Itest have

greatly improved the efficiency of the instruction of writing course. For instance, essay grading and feedback to students' essays are prompt and efficient. Therefore, online platforms have facilitated the teaching of writing course. On the other hand, AI technology may pose some challenges for language learning. One of the problems is that it, more often than not, lends itself to over-dependence by learners who rely heavily on it for answers, which will lead to academic misconduct. Besides, compared with manual grading, there is still room for online platforms to improve their functions. Take Pigai as an example, as an App for grading essays for English writing, its automated grading mechanism has greatly improved the efficiency of English writing study, providing an overall comment as well as suggestions for sentence revising in the essay. However, learners need the teacher's guidance in offline classrooms, while many teachers fail to carry out in-depth guidance based on students' online learning situation, resulting in a disconnection between the two. Besides, some learners have a very weak awareness of the importance of a holistic approach to English writing, and they have got used to relying on certain sentence patterns at a microscopic level for essay writing of test papers, making it difficult to improve writing skills.

3.1 Insufficient Interaction between Online and Offline Learning

In the current blended teaching mode, a substantial proportion of learners lack the initiative to finish the online tasks teachers have assigned, and often ignore the sample essay browsing or reading, which is not conducive to the cultivation of writing skills. One of the reasons for the above phenomenon is the disconnection online learning and offline teaching. More often than not, offline classrooms fail to design teaching activities based on online learning data, nor answer students' doubts in online learning, forming a situation of "separate operation" and making it difficult to form teaching synergy.

3.2 Insufficient Training of Writing Strategies

Most blended writing teaching still focuses on the correction of language forms. Online resources are mainly about template explanation and grammar rules, while offline classrooms focus on model essay analysis and composition revision, lacking speculative activities oriented to in-depth thinking. Affected by this, students do not have high efficiency and accuracy in the brainstorming stage, and they are used to applying fixed frameworks in writing without pondering over the overall method of developing paragraph and essay writing, thus leading to problems like weak arguments, inadequate supporting evidence and loose logic, making it difficult to improve their critical thinking ability.

3.3 Insufficient Focus on Formative Feedback

The current online learning relies heavily on the automatic scoring function of the platform, giving too much attention to language accuracy instead of cultivation of awareness of English writing strategies. Offline teaching emphasizes the standardization of article structure, ignoring the consideration of viewpoint innovation and argumentation depth. The lack of formative feedback makes it hard for students to obtain targeted and individualized suggestions for writing improvement in a timely manner, and their learning initiative and reflective awareness are difficult to stimulate.

4. Blended Teaching Practice of English Writing from the Perspective of Deep Learning

The author of this paper has tried three types of platforms to aid the instruction of the writing course in one semester, namely the QQ Class Group, MOSO Teach, and the Pigai, and the three Apps and platforms have greatly facilitated the teaching of English writing course. Generally speaking, the Apps have played a positive role in aiding English writing teaching and learning.

4.1 Before Class: Integrated Preview to Lay a Solid Foundation for Deep Learning

In the first writing class of the semester, six classes of students majoring in Business English downloaded and installed three Apps of QQ, MOSO Teach and the Pigai on their mobile phones. And the author, as the teacher of the six classes, made students get familiar with the major functions of each App and their roles in aiding English writing learning and teaching.

Table 1. Roles of Apps in EFL Class

App	Role
QQ Class Group	class notice & interaction
MOSO Teach	online and offline Class activities
Pigai	essay grading & revising

Among the three Apps, the QQ Class Group was established to ensure smooth communication

between students and the teacher, as well as communication among students. Students can contact the teacher about their learning when necessary. It is also used for posting some notices and announcement about the course study. Though a popular social media, QQ has some functions like shared folders which bring convenience to learners with their English study. And in this point it is better than WeChat. MOSO Teach, known as "Yunbanke" in Chinese, is a free, intelligent teaching assistant application designed to enhance classroom interaction and streamline teaching management through the integration of artificial intelligence technology. It serves as a comprehensive cloud-based teaching platform that facilitates resource management, in-class interaction, after-class tutoring, self-study, and teaching evaluation. MOSO Teach has the core advantages of ubiquitous accessibility, enhanced interactivity and personalized learning support, and formative assessment facilitation.

Under the teacher's guidance, students from each class log in on the MOSO Teach to submit their learning tasks for their preview work, which includes sample essay reading, paragraph and essay writing, recitation work, etc. The reminder function of MOSO Teach helps learners catch up with the whole class and make learning efficient. For this part, the QQ Class Group also plays an important role by being a good complement to MOSO Teach with its notice function as well as social functions. Besides, students use Pigai App to submit their essay writing tasks and revise their essays with the help of revising suggestions.

4.2 In Class: Focused Offline and Online Discussion to Enhance Deep Learning

Classroom teaching aims to cultivate learners' writing strategies and "critical thinking" ability. Following the lead-in or warm-up activity, the sample writing appreciation activity should not occupy too much time, which usually lasts for a small proportion of the teaching periods. The focus of in-class teaching lies in rolling out effective writing and rewriting practice, which is driven by discussion. The discussion is embodied in the peer-review work about students' writing tasks.

Much priority is also given to sentence writing practice, and this is in light of the different English levels of the students who are college students with different academic backgrounds.

The sentence writing practice helps learners improve their sentence skills and gradually reduce language errors in their writing.

Also, students come to realize the importance of by analyzing and appreciating the method of developing English paragraphs, the teacher helps students have a better understanding of unity and coherence in paragraph writing, which are the two important perspectives to evaluate English writing. Quizzes like choosing the best topic sentence, thesis statement, supporting sentence are also carried out on MOSO Teach to help learners consolidate their acquisition of the writing skills they've learned. A lot of peer-review work has been done to help students have a better understanding of the developing method of paragraph and essay writing such as time order, space order, exemplification or listing, process description, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition, and classification, etc.

In doing so, learners do a better job at the brainstorming stage of the writing task by determining the major development method. By peer-review work, students also realize the importance of resorting to writing techniques like the use of statistics, quotation etc, which all contribute to the acquisition of their writing strategies. Thus, they can organize the details for writing more effectively and efficiently.

4.3 After Class: Efficient Interactive Evaluation to Consolidate Knowledge Transfer

After-class activities aim to enhance students' ability of appreciating English writing. The teacher designed a checklist to help students better examine English writing. A "three-level evaluation" mechanism is set up to improve the pertinence and timeliness of evaluation. First of all, students conduct self-evaluation of their own writing, paying special attention to problems in the content, organization and language their writing. Generally speaking, students are more likely to discover the problems with their writing from the perspective of content and coherence, and have difficulty identifying their own language errors. Secondly, with peer-review work, students can recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing by appreciating other students' writing. Finally, teachers make brief comments, focusing on common problems and giving guidance instead of revising word by word.

As a matter of fact, the peer-review work is conducted in class and after class regularly, and the combination of in-class and after-class activities has greatly enriched learners' learning experience and enhanced their writing strategies.

Table 2. Checklist for English Writing

Item	Description
language	handwriting; spelling; grammar; sentence variety; punctuation; diction; rhetorical devices;
content	essay length; unity; effective thesis statement and convincing supporting points; plenty of supporting details/evidence;
organization	cohesive devices; clear method of paragraph development;

5. Conclusion

The blended teaching of EFL English writing, featured by flipped classroom, has proved its value through the author's teaching practice. From the perspective of deep learning, it effectively bridges the disconnection between online and offline teaching and learning. The blended teaching path of "integrated preview—focused discussion—efficient interactive evaluation" is very feasible in EFL writing class. This initial practice verifies the feasibility of the teaching mode, which can not only improve students' writing strategies, but also cultivate their critical thinking ability. However, this study still has limitations such as small sample size and short research period which lasts for only one semester. In the future, it is necessary to further optimize teaching strategies and carry out more in-depth teaching practice to provide a more valuable reference scheme for the reform of teaching EFL writing.

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