

# Blended Learning for English Writing Skills: A Thematic Analysis of Students' Perspectives in Chinese University

Ruan Qi, Nurhasmiza Sazalli, Miskam Nuraqilah Nadjwa  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Corresponding Author Email: ruanqi@graduate.utm.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i9/22606>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i9/22606

**Published Date:** 17 September 2024

## Abstract

Blended learning has received widespread attention as an English language teaching method that has a positive impact on improving students' writing skills (Quvanch & Na, 2020). Although the application of blended learning in English language teaching has become increasingly widespread, existing research lacks an in-depth exploration of Chinese university students' specific perspectives and needs in English writing courses. In particular, the current literature seldom addresses the specific issues students face in English writing and their preferences for blended learning models. To address this gap, this paper aims to explore Chinese university students' perspectives on blended learning in English writing courses, employing a qualitative research method and thematic analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of students' viewpoints from semi-structured interviews. The research objectives include investigating students' issues in English writing, studying student preferences for blended learning models, and identifying the benefits of integrating mobile apps in blended learning from students' perspectives. The findings of the study revealed that students' issues in English writing can be categorized into four main aspects. By thoroughly understanding students' issues, educators can effectively design targeted curriculum content and teaching strategies. Students generally expressed a preference for applying blended learning models in writing courses. Students also believed that integrating mobile apps in a blended learning environment brings significant convenience and increased course interactivity through interactive activities. These findings provide important insights for optimizing the instructional design of English writing courses and offer direction for further exploration of mobile applications in writing instruction. There is still room for improvement in this study and different retrieval techniques need to be explored and practised in future research.

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, English Writing Skills, Perspectives, Thematic Analysis, University Students.

## **Introduction**

The internationalized business environment and the continuous expansion of multinational corporations have made proficient English writing a core competency for job search and career advancement (Abbas, 2021). Writing is the most concentrated and accurate representation of overall English language ability and is a skill that university students must master. In recent years, the integration of technology in education has significantly transformed traditional learning environments, particularly for language learning. Blended learning, a pedagogical technique that allows flexibility and personalized learning experiences, has gained popularity. It blends in-person education with online components.

Despite the growing popularity of blended learning in English language education, current research fails to thoroughly examine the distinctive perspectives and requirements of Chinese university students in English writing courses. Specifically, the existing literature rarely discusses the particular issues that students encounter in English writing and their preferences for blended learning approaches. This study focuses on English writing skills among Chinese university students. Despite the widespread use of English in academic and professional settings, students often struggle with various issues of writing, including grammar, structure, and coherence in previous researches. To address this, this study explores students' issues in English writing and examines their preferences for blended learning approaches. Additionally, the study aims to identify the benefits of integrating mobile applications in blended learning environments, specifically from the students' perspectives. The significance of this study lies in addressing the existing research gap in the context of English writing in blended learning for Chinese university students, not only from theoretical aspect but also substantial practical significance.

## **Objectives**

This study attempts to analyse:

- a. To investigate the students' issues of English writing.
- b. To study the students' preference for blended learning in English writing lessons.
- c. To identify the benefits of integrating mobile apps in blended learning for writing lessons from students' perspectives.

## **Methodology**

This section discusses the methods used to collect and analyse data related to the three of research objectives. The qualitative research methodology has been adopted by the researcher combined with semi-structured interviews as the data collection instruments. For data analysis, the researcher utilizes thematic analysis approach that aims to identify and distill codes and core themes from the collected interview data. Thematic analysis helped to reveal the deeper perspectives and experiences of the research participants, thus providing rich qualitative insights.

### **Population and Sampling**

The number of students participating in the study was 15 EFL students of similar age and with similar overall English proficiency. The students in this study were from a university in Sichuan Province, China. All of them were enrolled in the fourth semester in the university. They were selected to participate to take the interview because all of them had participated in English Writing I in the third semester and had a certain learning foundation. All of them were all enrolled in English Writing II during the semester in which this interview was conducted.

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

Semi-structured interviews are preferred when a researcher wants to learn more about the participants' particular points of view rather than the phenomenon as a whole, semi-structured interviews are the best approach for gathering data, which are appropriate for other data collection methods in qualitative research, is that it enables targeted interviewing while maintaining the investigator's autonomy to investigate pertinent concepts that could surface during the interview. The interviews are audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees in advance and take the form of one-on-one interviews. The data from the interviews is textually exported through a transcription tool and then organized by the researcher prior to data analysis.

### **Thematic Analysis**

In this research, thematic analysis (TA) serves as a robust and adaptable method for analyzing qualitative data, allowing researchers to identify, examine, and report on recurrent themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). This analytical technique is particularly effective in qualitative research, where it helps to explore participants' experiences, thoughts, and actions.

Braun and Clarke (2006), outline a six-step process for conducting thematic analysis (see Figure 1), which includes: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data through transcription and repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes to characterize key features of the data; (3) grouping these codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset; (5) defining and naming the themes, refining each theme's specifics and analyzing the overall narrative; and (6) producing a final report that conveys the themes and the overarching story, ensuring its validity.

Thematic analysis (TA) is particularly well-suited for this research since it allows for a detailed examination of the diverse perspectives and experiences of Chinese university students regarding blended learning that integrates mobile apps for English writing. Given the exploratory nature of this study, TA provides the flexibility to uncover and analyse recurring themes from semi-structured interviews, enabling a nuanced understanding of how these students perceive and engage with blended learning in the context of English writing skills. This method aligns with the research's objectives of capturing the depth and complexity of students' perspectives in a systematic manner. The themes of this study are presented in 4.0 Results according to each research objective.

**Coding Process**

According to (Saldaña, 2015) code is defined as “a word or phrase that symbolically assigns summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative properties to a part of linguistic or visual data-based” (pp. 3 - 4). By categorizing and color-coding certain words and paragraphs of the record, the coding process reduces a vast amount of qualitative data and serves as the foundation for the coding of pertinent aspects (Saldaa, 2015).

Researchers are encouraged to undertake at least 2-3 rounds of coding because coding is a cyclical process and the first round of coding might not be able to detect all the codes. The researcher must distinguish between the original data and the cognitive interpretation of the data during the first round of coding (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). Only the most crucial information should be provided as a code in the first round of coding so that the corpus’s semantics and understanding can be deduced as much as feasible (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2015). Codes under the same subject will be combined in the second phase of coding, and codes that are deemed meaningless or non-repetitive will be eliminated (Saldaña, 2015). This is a heuristic technique that will help the researcher better comprehend the trends and connections in the data (Saldaa, 2015). The coding procedure consists of three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Due to this approach, the researcher can gain a more detailed understanding of the participants’ perspectives and answers to the research issue. Coding can be used to collect and analyse information and data about what participants are doing, in what ways they are doing it, and why they are interacting in the research setting. As coding proceeds, potential themes may be identified, coded, and interpreted, thanks to the dynamic function and nonlinear orientation of coding, which can provide favourable support for research priorities and complement relevant literature and research.

NVivo is chosen as a data assistance software for qualitative surveys, handling coding, classification and retrieval. Based on three research aims, NVivo helps systematically organize and analyze data from student feedback. Common themes and patterns are identified through multi-level coding of students’ descriptions of writing problems, preferences, and perspectives. NVivo’s text search and word frequency analysis features help the researcher to discover students’ most frequently cited writing difficulties and preferences, as well as perspectives of the benefits. NVivo provides a comprehensive set of tools that effectively support the research objectives of this study and help the researcher to deeply understand and present complex qualitative data to derive insights about Chinese university students’ problems in English writing, blended learning preferences, and perspectives on the benefits of mobile app integration in blended learning.

**Results**

The findings of the study were categorized into eight broad themes based on three research objectives, the first four themes were used to explain students’ issues of English writing, which were categorized as Language-based Issues, Writing Skill Issues, Content Issues, and External Support Issues. Two themes were generalized according to the second research objective about students’ preference for blended learning in English writing lessons, which are They Like Blended Learning or Not and Distribution of Online and Face-to-face Learning. Based on the last research objective, two more themes were summarized as Convenience and More Interactive Activities, which were used to present the benefits of integrating mobile apps in

blended learning for writing lessons from students' perspectives. Next section starts with presenting the four themes under the first research objective.

### **Issues in English Writing**

Understanding writing problems is crucial in the context of guidelines (Sharp, 2020; Anggara, 2021). Many studies have reported and demonstrated EFL students' current English writing practices and problems in Chinese universities (Wang, 2019; Huang et al., 2022; Khan & Ganapathy, 2023; Li, 2023; Sun et al., 2024). On the other hand, understanding students' previous learning experience is an important way to reinforce the researcher's understanding of the issues in their current English writing. Therefore, in the interview of this research, the students' previous learning experiences in English writing were explored at first. This section indicates the issues in English writing of students from four main aspects, which were categorized into four themes, Language-based Issues, Writing Skill Issues, Content Issues, and External Support Issues.

#### **Theme 1: Language-based Issues**

The students' language-based issues are first and foremost in the area of vocabulary deficit. Although many students reported that they often use mobile apps designed for vocabulary training to memorize words, the vocabulary they represented in their writing is still insufficient. On the one hand, it is difficult for them to apply their vocabulary reserves in practice when writing, resulting in limited expression. According to S2, students tend to forget their accumulation of advanced vocabulary due to nervousness while writing, "I may have forgotten it completely due to nervousness, especially during the writing test, so I can't apply them to my essay". On the other hand, they preferred to use familiar and simple vocabularies in order to avoid mark deduction for spelling errors on complex vocabularies. S6 pointed, "I have difficulty in using new words, I am afraid I will spell them in wrong way, so I will use familiar vocabularies to be on the safe side". Students suggested that the use of larger amount of advanced vocabularies may be marked with high scores, but in case of misuse, it's better to use basic and familiar vocabularies instead of advanced vocabularies to avoid marks deducting when writing essays.

Another manifestation of students in language-based issues mainly focus on the area of grammatical errors. Firstly, there existed frequent grammatical errors such as tense, subject-verb agreement, etc. For example, student S11 said, "I have done poorly on the sentence modification before, it was difficult for me to find out the existing errors. When I organize my own sentences, I always tend to make grammatical mistakes". Students tend to write in simple syntactic structure when organizing sentences and students are struggling with their inability to write or organize more complex sentences. S18 said, "I seem to write only simple sentences rather than complex sentences, and I even prefer to write simple sentences like subject-verb-object sentences with a single structure, and I don't use subjunctive or inverted, passive, and other grammar, in order to avoid grammatical errors". S3 had a similar view, she said, "I admit that the sentences I write do look very one-dimensional." Students with many ideas to express while with their inability to writing long and complex sentence, they can only chooses to write simple sentences in order to make sure that they make less mistakes.

**Theme 2: Writing Skill Issues**

The second theme was writing skill issues, and the interview data showed that the students repeatedly mentioned the problem of poor mastery of writing skills. In terms of organizational structure, the students' first problem was the lack of a clear overall structure in the essay. There were often missing parts in the essay such as a clear introduction, body and conclusion. S1 suggested, "In the feedback that my teacher used to give me on my essays, she often pointed out that I lacked a clear introduction, or sometimes I forgot that I needed to write a summary after I finished writing about the subject matter, but I didn't know how to separate the introduction and the summary from the main part." Another problem was the layout of paragraphs. Most students were unable to find out how to separate their contents into clear paragraphs with different functions, so they chose to write everything in a whole paragraph. S13 said, "I always follow the three-paragraph writing style taught by my secondary school teachers, and the main body is never divided into paragraphs because I don't know how to do it!"

Providing insufficient argumentation is also one of the problems for students in writing argumentative essays, which is regarded as the most difficult by students from the results of interviews. First of all, it is difficult for students to form a clear thesis statement when they facing the process of proposing ideas, and some students even have a vague concept of the thesis statement, and cannot distinguish it from an opinion or an argument. S3 said, "Before this interview, I never thought about what exactly is a thesis statement, I feel that every time I write an argumentative essay, I can only express by using my own words. So it often looks like a colloquial expression, very pale and not academic". Secondly, students thought that they lack of strong arguments to support the thesis because they had no idea on what kind of arguments are sufficient and favourable. S4 pointed, "I don't know how to give me a thesis statement before writing an essay, also don't how to define the structure and outline for my arguments, so I can only write the sentence one by one separately with poor structure".

**Theme 3: Content Issues**

The third theme was content issues. Empty content was also a problem that students reflected in their interviews that they needed to address urgently. Students took argumentative writing as the most difficult type of composition, which was mentioned by the students from the interviews. S9 said, "Whenever I opened the topic and saw that it was argumentative writing, I had no idea what to write, which was a sign of my failure from the very beginning". It was difficult for students to form a clear thesis statement when facing the proposition. More than five students mentioned that they had not been trained systematically in writing argumentative essays in their past studies, especially in developing depth of ideas. They always relied on memorizing templates to help them pass the writing exams. S3 said, "I usually used to memorize templates and felt that I couldn't write without them, and in the writing competitions I had participated in, memorizing templates did give me a better score which was suitable for the exams but not conducive to the improvement of my writing level".

This leads to a lack of training in the depth of thinking, when the recitation of the template is not adapted to the writing of the topic, they can not carry out in-depth thinking, and ultimately the completion of the composition quality is not high. In addition, argumentative

essay writing has high writing requirements, in addition to the need to express a clear argument, but also need to provide a sufficient wealth of arguments to analyse, and even give examples of arguments. Students felt that they were unable to conduct deep analysis and could only express superficial views. S7 said, "When faced with an essay on a given topic, there is no way for me to think deeply about it, and there is no unique opinion on the content". S4 agreed with this viewpoint, and believed that "it is difficult to think of an argument when writing an essay. It is difficult to think of points to analyse, I always listed the same point over and over again and keep saying similar things".

#### **Theme 4: External Support Issues**

Theme 4 was external support issues. The issue of lack of external support also deserves attention and has direct relevance to this research. In writing course, after submitting their essays, students had to wait a long time for the teacher to correct their essays and give them feedback. According to S1, "In good cases, I can see the teacher's feedback in a week, but sometimes it takes longer. I've forgotten what I've written". S6 said that she appreciated the teachers' heavy workload, but agreed that the feedback given was slow and lagging, which was not conducive to correcting student's writing in a timely manner. Moreover, students felt that there were limited resources available at university to help them improve their writing skills, with S2 stating that "it takes a lot of determination for me to go to the library, even if I need to look up books on writing I don't want to go to the library, and in fact I'm not sure if there are any resources in the library to improve my writing". When asked why she didn't use the internet to seek resources to improve her writing, S2 said again, "There truly existed a lot of resources online, but I don't know what resources to choose instead, I often get attracted by a lot of headlines, only to click on them and find out that I need to pay for them or it's just an advert to sign up for a course". S2 emphasized that she needed learning resources that she can access straight away and are quality assured.

Students also complained about the lack of class time. On the one hand, considering the time constraints and completion of teaching tasks, the teacher could not offer enough practice with the students on the knowledge points, and usually assigned the practice tasks after class. S2 said, "The practice in class is more disciplined for me, and I'm more willing to cooperate with the teacher, but I'm not willing to complete the practice after class because I feel that there is no supervision from the teacher, and sometimes I'll go to search for some answers online then hand them in". On the other hand, students thought that the teacher did not explain in-depth the points of writing such as grammar that were difficult to understand because of time constraints. S8 said, "Sometimes I could not understand what the teacher conveyed to me in the course, it was too theoretical, difficult to digest and understand, and very complicated. But the teacher didn't stop to explain in depth. When I didn't understand I lost my confidence in learning".

#### **Students' Preference for Blended Learning**

Understanding student preferences for blended learning is critical to creating an effective educational experience. Blended learning combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning, allowing flexibility to cater to different learning styles and schedules. By understanding students' attitudes towards this approach, researchers can adapt teaching guidelines and instructors can adjust course design to better meet their needs and

preferences, thereby increasing student engagement and motivation. In addition, it helps to determine the most effective balance between online and face-to-face components, which not only delivers content efficiently, but also creates a more personalized and responsive learning environment, which in turn improves learning.

**Theme 5: They Like Blended Learning or Not**

To the researcher's surprise, all the respondents said they preferred the blended learning approach to the traditional learning approach. S10 said, "In the traditional classroom, many teachers are rigid and boring, and we just sit down and listen, and the questions are hard and rigid, so the students don't pay attention to the lectures and revision, and they don't master the knowledge at all. But I think a blended classroom would be more attractive to me because it would be more interesting to listen to." According to S7, by taking the traditional teaching and learning model, the teacher act as the centre of the class, the students are easily distracted and get bored in the test-based education environment. Also due to the lack of timely feedback, teachers tend to ignore students who didn't acquire the target knowledge. On the other hand, students in blended learning are less likely to be distracted, for example, their attention can be attracted and with a increasing interests by watching videos for online rather than they were just listening to the teacher's speaking. "Even if they are distracted, they will be attracted again by the blended approach". S4 said, "I think there are many more opportunities to set up enrichment activities in the blended classroom, and it sounds very interesting and I am looking forward to it". The results of this study are very positive for the development of this study.

**Theme 6: Distribution of Online and Face-to-face Learning**

The results of the study showed that students' choices regarding the weight of online and face-to-face learning were twofold. The first group of students preferred the flexibility and convenience of online learning as it allowed them to work through the content at their own pace and to utilize online resources for additional help. However, they also recognized the effectiveness of the direct interaction offered by face-to-face learning. They felt that face-to-face communication with teachers and students was different from online communication because it deepened understanding and increased engagement in the classroom. S4 said, "I prefer to receive feedback from the teacher during the English course or practice rather than from some apps. Because I want to get face-to-face encouragement and guidance from the teacher himself, which will impress me. Feedback from online is likely to be ignored. I am also more active in class discussions with my classmates and I am less inclined to speak up when using online apps because I feel that I won't be noticed or valued". This group of students therefore advocates for more offline learning methods in order to benefit from structured instruction and collaborative learning environments. The other group of students were neutral and believed that an even distribution would be best. S11 said "I believe that teachers should be able to distribute the time evenly, I think that having both learning styles working evenly would be a better outcome".

**The Benefits of Integrating Mobile Apps in Blended Learning in Writing Lessons**

Students prefer user-friendly apps, the convenience and flexibility offered by mobile apps is valued by many students, enabling them to access educational content and resources from any location. The ease of use and comprehensibility of the app interface is also critical; in

addition, the ability of apps to facilitate an interactive and engaging learning experience through, for example, multimedia content or interactive communication, increases acceptance.

**Theme 7: Convenience**

Students felt that the use of mobile apps brought a great deal of convenience, most notably in enabling students to study at any time and from any place, increasing the flexibility of their learning. S14 said “We take our mobile phones with us every day and use them whenever we want, I use my mobile phone for about eight hours or more a day, which is much more convenient than taking books and computers with me”. On the other hand, many mobile apps nowadays integrate a variety of learning functions, such as online tests, discussion forums, which students will find more convenient to use. Even the functions of mobile apps are no longer single, for example, WeChat, which is a mobile app for communication, can also provide a variety of learning platforms. S11 said, “If there were no mobile apps, I might need to bring along writing guides, dictionaries, sample essays, and other tools to learn writing at the same time, but now I can carry all the tools I need on my mobile phone”.

**Theme 8: More Interactive Activities**

The use of mobile apps also provides more opportunities for students to interact and communicate. Not only did they interact with their classmates, but they also interacted more with the teacher than in a traditional classroom. S13 said, ‘I don’t want to stand out in the classroom in front of all my classmates and I’m not very brave to ask the teacher questions face to face. But I don’t have that concern when using mobile apps to communication in online classroom or learning group, and I don’t have to be limited by location and time”. In addition, students can share learning resources, collaborating to solve learning challenges, and keeping each other updated about the course, these benefits were reported by the majority of students. “I occasionally forget homework and tasks set by the teacher, but if the task is posted in mobile apps, it gives me a permanent reminder, and the teacher can also share some information with us, through WeChat”, said S13.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study aimed to explore students’ students’ issues of English writing, their preference for blended learning in English writing lessons, and to identify the benefits of integrating mobile apps in blended learning for writing lessons from students’ perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and the results from interviews were rigorously coded to identify, organize and systematize students’ perspectives. A total of eight themes emerged from the data, four of which reflected the issues students encountered as learners in writing English. There were two more sub-themes that reflected students’ preferences for blended learning in English writing lessons. The other two themes reflected students’ belief in the benefits of integrating mobile apps in blended learning for writing.

Previous studies have emphasised that students’ perspectives of English writing in blended learning are crucial in language learning. There have been a number of researchers whose studies have focused on learners’ perspectives of blended learning (Huang, 2016; Wright, 2017; Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018; Çırak Kurt & Yıldırım, 2018; Annamalai, 2019). Understanding students’ perspectives on blended learning of English writing is crucial to

enhance writing skills for students, since it helps in addressing benefits, challenges, improving motivation, teaching methods and guiding improvements to meet students' needs effectively within the educational environment (Indriani et al., 2021; Mursela & Ratmanida, 2022; Ngo, 2023). Therefore, by understanding students' perspectives of English writing in blended learning, it paves the way for the subsequent research objectives of this study, and also contributes to the eventual enhance of student' English writing skills.

The perspectives of blended learning by learners have been the subject of studies conducted by several researchers in recent years (Huang, 2016; Wright, 2017; Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018; Çırak Kurt & Yıldırım, 2018; Annamalai, 2019). Multiple studies have demonstrated that university students hold positive views on blended learning. For instance, Huang's (2016) study conducted at universities in southern China analysed the perspectives of 296 non-English majors and revealed that more than 50% of the students preferred mixed learning over online or offline learning. Wright (2017), on the other hand, examined the learning preferences of university students in Malaysia across all types of learning. The study's findings revealed that among the 112 students, less than 5% showed a preference for blended learning, while 50% favoured in-person classroom instruction, and the remaining 37.5% opted for online courses. According to the study, half of the students who expressed a preference for in-person training indicated that utilising conventional teaching methods enabled them to obtain individualised instruction and acquire a more profound comprehension of the material.

As mentioned earlier, there were four themes that reflected students' perspectives as learners of the issues they encountered in English writing. The first theme that emerged from the data was language-based issues. Students' vocabulary acquired is limited, and they were restricted in their expressions due to their inability to grasp the choice and precision of words. Students relied on simple words rather than advanced ones. Students perceived that they were prone to errors in the use of grammar in their writing, such as problems with tense and subject-verb agreement, They tended to use single sentence structure that lacks variety, due to their inappropriate or insufficient use of compound sentences. This finding is in line with the findings of previous studies by Kitila and Bekele (2023), and Isma (2016), that highlighted the problems of EFL students in learning English writing in terms of vocabulary and grammar, emphasizing the need to address the linguistic fundamentals to improve writing skills in writing.

Secondly, students also encountered great problems in writing skills, mainly in organization structure and insufficient argumentation. The overall structure of the essay was unclear because students didn't not know how to arrange the distribution of paragraphs in the essay. The essays written by students were less complete overall due to the fact that they usually lack a clear introduction, body or conclusion. When confronted with essay writing or the need to provide an argument, the thesis statement is unclear. Due to a lack of systematic knowledge about the thesis statement, not only were they unable to provide a strong argument in support of the thesis, but they were also unsure of what kind of argument would be sufficient and favourable. These findings further support the views of Hasnawati and Tanjung (2023), Giang et al (2023), and Hameed and Jawad (2023), who argued that students' English writing issues, particularly in organizational skills, structuring essays and presenting arguments, incoherence are evident, followed by a lack of knowledge about how to present arguments, poor topic

sentences, disunity, and lack of conclusions, which indicate a significant focus on these aspects of English writing skills.

In addition to this, students also had content issues in English writing. Argumentative writing was regarded as the most difficult composition by students because of its high demanding and difficulty in writing. Students thought that their argumentative essays did not have enough depth of thought and were not creative enough because they were used to memorizing writing templates, relying on the content of previous writing templates and lacking their own ideas. Some students emphasized that their analysis of the topic was not in-depth enough and that they could only express superficial views and lack of insight. Ulfa and Purwati (2023), pointed out that students always struggled with English argumentative essays due to problems such as poor reasoning, inability to refute counterarguments, and reliance on false facts. Nenotek et al (2022), also confirmed this view when they emphasized that students face difficulties in writing academic papers in English, especially in the areas of thesis statements, relevant ideas and effective introductions. They highlighted that students face difficulties in writing academic papers in English, especially in the areas of thesis statements, relevant ideas and effective introductions.

Finally, students also faced with external support issues. Firstly, there is inadequate feedback. Due to the slowness of teachers who have many students to correct their compositions, students had to wait for a long time before they can get feedback. Secondly, students lack of instructional resources on writing, students have relatively low willingness to buy reference books, however, there are many resources on the internet, but they were not sure about the choice. In addition, due to the limited classroom time, students were only able to obtain an insufficient number of exercises in the classroom, and were less motivated to study actively after class due to the lack of supervision by the teacher. Teachers may also be unable to provide students with insufficiently detailed explanations due to the limited classroom time. Ven and Verelst (2009), echoed similar sentiments, arguing that the use of external support, such as professional help or community. This also shows that emphasizing the significance of external support in English writing is necessary.

The study also did a survey on students' preference for blended learning and the first theme that came out of the data was they like blended learning or not. The results of the study showed that students preferred the blended learning approach over the traditional learning approach. Blended classrooms were more appealing to students because they were more interesting and less distracting than traditional classrooms, which are boring. There were also more opportunities to experience learning activities in a blended classroom. Studies of Sharma et al (2022), and Jeti et al (2023), showed that students' positive perspectives of blended learning indicated that knowing that students prefer blended learning means that they perceived the combination of online tools and face-to-face teaching as beneficial, improving the quality and effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Students' preference for blended learning implies that they have positive perspectives, understandings, actions and expectations about implementing blended learning. They found online activities rewarding, which can develop independence and self-confidence, and they value feedback from lecturers. Understanding that students enjoyed blended learning means recognizing their positive

attitudes towards blended learning as an effective strategy for improving skills and competencies, as indicated in the study.

The sixth theme that emerged from the data was the distribution of online and face-to-face learning. The results of the study showed that students had two choices for weighting online and face-to-face learning divided into wanting more of the blended portion and wanting an even distribution. The study of Jetti (2023), suggested that understanding students' perspectives of the proportion of online and offline learning in a blended programme was critical to improving satisfaction and overall quality, self-directed learning and the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

The last two themes that emerged from the data emphasized the benefits of using mobile apps from students' perspectives. Firstly, convenience, the use of mobile apps can help students to study anytime, anywhere and increase the flexibility of learning. And thanks to the fact that some mobile apps have multi-functional integration, such as online tests, forums, etc., it will be more convenient for students to use them. In addition, using mobile apps makes more interactive activities in learning possible. Students can interact more with teachers and classmates, share learning resources, collaborate to solve learning problems, and inform each other of the latest course updates. As a result, communication and interaction in the learning process is increased. A study conducted of Westerlaken et al (2019), also focused on this point. Thus, the use of mobile apps can benefit students' English writing learning in many ways.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The samples in this study were mainly drawn from undergraduates majoring in English at specific universities in specific regions of China, and the samples are limited in their representatives, which may not fully reflect the situation of the national or international student population. In addition, the sample size may not be sufficient to support certain statistical analyses, which limits the generalizability and replication of the findings. Moreover, there may be subjective bias in this qualitative study because some of the data came from students' semi-structured interviews. Students may have overestimated or underestimated their learning effects in the interviews, which affects the objectivity and accuracy of the findings.

Future studies should expand the sample to include students from more districts and backgrounds to improve the representativity and generalizability of the findings. At the same time, the sample size should be increased to support more complex and refined statistical analyses to further validate the reliability of the study findings. It is also worth drawing attention to conduct a cross-cultural comparative study to explore the differences in students' perspectives blended learning using Chinese mobile apps in different cultural contexts. This will help to understand the impact of cultural factors on blended learning and mobile learning, and provide a reference for educational practices on a global scale.

### **Conclusion**

This thematic analysis of the study provides information about the Chinese university students' perspectives on blended learning in English writing, providing important insights into blended learning in English writing courses for Chinese university students. Firstly, the study explored

that the main issues faced by students in English writing providing teachers with targeted suggestions for improving teaching methods. Secondly, the results of the study showed that students generally preferred blended learning in English writing courses. Students believed that online resources provided them with more opportunities for practice and personalized feedback, while offline classrooms facilitated instructor guidance and peer interaction. Students highly valued this blended learning approach, which combines the advantages of online and offline. Finally, students generally agreed that the integration of mobile apps in blended learning could bring many benefits, such as increasing learning flexibility and convenience, and facilitating teacher-student interactions through more activities.

This study provides an important contribution to current educational theory and practice by exploring Chinese university students' perceptions of blended learning in English writing. Contextually, while blended learning and mobile technologies are increasingly used in education, few studies have focused specifically on Chinese university students' perceptions of these approaches in English writing courses. By deeply investigating students' writing problems, preferences for blended learning, and the potential benefits of mobile applications, this study provides valuable insights for English education policymakers and educators in China. The significance of this study for the existing knowledge lies in three main areas. First, it provides the latest insights into English writing issues among Chinese college students, which can help update and improve current writing teaching strategies. Second, by exploring students' preferences for blended learning, the findings can guide educational institutions on how to better design and implement blended learning programmes, especially in teaching English writing. Finally, the analysis of the potential benefits of mobile apps in writing instruction provides an empirical basis for the development and application of educational technology, which is particularly important in the current rapidly developing field of educational technology. In addition, this study employs qualitative methods and thematic analyses to provide insights into understanding students' subjective experiences and perspectives. Overall, this study provides an important reference for the development of English writing blended learning programs in Chinese universities. By fully understanding students' needs and preferences, teachers can design a blended learning model and effectively integrate mobile learning applications to enhance students' English writing skills. Future research can further explore how to optimize the blended learning program and the specific application strategies of mobile applications in writing teaching.

## References

- Abbas, F., Rana, A. M. K., Bashir, I., & Bhatti, A. M. (2021). The English language proficiency as a global employment skill: the viewpoint of Pakistani academia. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 9(3), 1071-1077.
- Anggara, M. R., Purnama, W., & Kuswardhana, D. (2021, February). Development of Scientific Writing Guidelines for Project Based Learning in Vocational School. In *6th UPI International Conference on TVET 2020 (TVET 2020)* (pp. 176-180). Atlantis Press.
- Annamalai, N. (2019). Using WhatsApp to extend learning. *Teaching English with Technology*, 19(1), 3–20. <https://www.tewtjournal.org/issues/volume-2019/volume-19-issue-1/>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological. *American Psychological Association*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-000>
- Çırak Kurt, S., & Yıldırım, İ. (2018). The students' perceptions on blended learning: A Q method analysis. *Kuram ve Uygulamada Eğitim Bilimleri*, 18(2), 427–446. <https://doi.org/10.12738/estp.2018.2.0002>
- Giang, H. T. L., Dan, T. C., & Han, T. P. B. (2023). An investigation into organization errors in EFL learner's paragraph writing: a case in a foreign language center in CAN THO City, Vietnam. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics Studies*, 6(1).
- Gyamfi, G., & Sukseemuang, P. (2018). EFL learners' satisfaction with the online learning program, tell me more. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 183–202.
- Hameed, S. I. A., & Jawad, I. T. (2023). Investigating The Organizational Competence in EFL University Students' Writing at Tikrit University. *Journal of Al-Farahidi's Arts*, 15(53-1).
- Hasnawati, H., Mujahidin, E., & Tanjung, H. (2023). Analyzing Students' Difficulties in Writing English Essay. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 6.
- Huang, Q. (2016). Learners' perceptions of blended learning and the roles and interaction of F2F and online learning. *ORTESOL Journal*, 33(2013), 14–33. Retrieved from <https://ortesol.wildapricot.org/Journal2016>
- Huang, J., Li, J., Shu, T., & Zhang, Y. (2022). A mixed-methods national study investigating key challenges in learning English as a foreign language: A Chinese college student perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1035819.
- Indriani, L., Kusumaningrum, W. R., & Yosintha, R. (2021). Challenges in English Writing within Blended Learning Environment. *ELT Echo: The Journal of English Language Teaching in Foreign Language Context*, 6(1), 1-12.
- Jetti, E. R., AL-Fraji, G. A., AL-Habsi, O. K., & AL-Rusheidi, Z. S. (2023). A study on blended learning environment–students perspective. *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, 10(3), 79-87.
- Khan, A., & Ganapathy, M. (2023) Educational Challenges in Underdeveloped Regions of China: A Microscopic Analysis of Current EFL Writing Pedagogies in a Chinese Normal College.
- Kitila, F., Ali, S., & Bekele, E. (2023). The Impact of Writing Through Integrated Skills Intervention on English Students' Writing Skills: Focus on Vocabulary and Grammar. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 14(2), 297-303.
- Li, J. (2023). Problems and Difficulties Faced by Chinese Students in Online English Classes. *Reading and Writing*, 8(8), 4.

- Mursela, F., & Ratmanida, R. (2022). Students' perception in using e-learning for english writing activity. In *67th TEFLIN International Virtual Conference & the 9th ICOELT 2021 (TEFLIN ICOELT 2021)* (pp. 101-105). Atlantis Press.
- Nenotek, S. A., Tlonaen, Z. A., & Manubulu, H. A. (2022). Exploring university students' difficulties in writing english academic essay. *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 14(1), 909-920.
- Ngo, V. G. (2023). Building Blended-learning Materials for Improvement of Academic English Writing Skills for Vietnamese Higher Education Students. *Управленческое консультирование*, (6 (174)), 118-129.
- Quvanch, Z., & Na, K. S. (2020). A review on impact of blended learning on the English writing skills. *Innovative Teaching and Learning Journal (ITLJ)*, 4(1), 41-50.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE, 3-4.
- Seidel, J., & Kelle, U. (1995). Different functions of coding in the analysis of textual data. In U. Kelle (Ed.), *Computer-aided qualitative data analysis: Theory, methods and practice* (pp. 52-61). SAGE
- Sharma, M., Devi, M., Raj, T., & Kumar, S. (2022). Study on students' perceptions on application of blended learning (BLA) an approach towards NEP. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(1), 1580-1589.
- Sharp, M. (2020). *The use of reporting guidelines as an educational intervention for teaching research methods and writing* (Doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris; University of Split (Croatie)).
- Sun, J., Motevalli, S., & Chan, N. N. (2024). Exploring Writing Anxiety during Writing Process: An Analysis of Perceptions in Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 1-16.
- Ulfa, S. M., & Purwati, O. (2023). Argumentative Essay Patterns Produced by University Students. *Journal of English Education and Teaching*, 7(3), 595-612.
- Ven, K., & Verelst, J. (2009). The importance of external support in the adoption of open source server software. In *Open Source Ecosystems: Diverse Communities Interacting: 5th IFIP WG 2.13 International Conference on Open Source Systems, OSS 2009, Skövde, Sweden, June 3-6, 2009. Proceedings 5* (pp. 116-128). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Wang, M. (2019). Research on the teaching mode of college English writing under the concept of hybrid teaching. *Journal of Educational Institute of Jilin Province*, 2019(9):4.
- Westerlaken, M., Christiaans-Dingelhoff, I., Filius, R. M., De Vries, B., De Bruijne, M., & Van Dam, M. (2019). Blended learning for postgraduates; an interactive experience. *BMC medical education*, 19, 1-7.
- Wright, B. M. (2017). Blended learning: Student perception of face-to-face and online EFL lessons. *Indonesian journal of applied linguistics*, 7(1).