Teaching Writing within the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): A Supplement Asynchronous Blended Learning Approach in an EFL Undergraduate Course in Egypt

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Abstract

Based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and following a blended learning approach (a supplement model), this article reports on a quasi-experiment where writing was taught evenly with other language skills in everyday language contexts and where asynchronous online activities were required from students to extend learning beyond classroom hours. The experiment was carried out with freshmen in one of the Egyptian private universities. Twenty one pre-intermediate level students represented the experimental group that was taught the new CEFR course, and twenty six other students of the same level represented the control group that was taught the traditional face to face academically contextualized course. A pre and post writing tests were used to reveal students' writing proficiency before and after the experiment, and a *t* test was also used to measure the development of each group to find out whether their writing has developed after tutoring or not. Results indicated that the experimental group transcended the control group in 70% of the rubrics used to grade students' writing, and when measuring the results of the experimental group in the pretest and the posttest, there was a significant development in their writing proficiency level. This experiment is considered a step towards developing students' learning techniques in the institution; henceforth in the country. The experiment is one of the leading initiatives to teach English as a Foreign Language according to CEFR following a blended learning approach to undergraduate students in Egypt.

Keywords: Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), blended learning, asynchronous learning, writing

1. Introduction

In 2001, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) provided "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe." (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1) then it has spread all over the world. However, no actual application of it apart from assessment has been dated in Egypt.

Blended learning was also associated with CEFR in the present study. In the late 1990s, blended learning evolved in the business field as a requirement of a mix between media tools and different delivery methods (Bryne, 2004), then it has spread to include an array of disciplines all over the world. In the education field, blended learning has three definitions. It is defined as the combination of traditional face to face interaction with computer mediated activities; or it is the complete elimination of face to face interaction and the combination of different media and different tools of technology; or it is the combination of different teaching approaches (Sharma, 2010). The first of these definitions was the one applied to the present study. Blended learning, as used in this study, is the combination of the traditional face to face classroom interaction with computer activities. Closely related to the above three definitions of blended learning, Graham (2009) discussed three major categories of blended learning: "enabling blends", "enhancing blends" and "transforming blends" (p. 376), and Twig (2003) discussed five models of blended learning: "supplemental", "replacement", "buffet", "emporium" and "fully online". Blended learning was used in this experiment as a "supplemental model" or an "enhancing blend" category that retains face to face course meeting hours. It only incorporated technology in the course by supplementing it with extra asynchronous online activities.

Research dealing with the effective application of blended learning in different disciplines is ample. It has, for example, been used as an effective approach in nursing (Guttu, 2007; Hsu, 2011); emotional management skills (Orvis, Ruark, Engel, & Ratwany, 2010) and autism (Roll-Pettersson & Ala'l Rosales, 2009).

Other fields that incorporated blended learning approaches include literary studies (Colbert, Miles, Wilson, & Weeks, 2007) and education (Mogus, Djurdjevic, & Suvak, 2012; Poole, 2006; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006). Colbert et al. (2010) used a blended learning model of integrating face-to-face interaction with online discussion to examine how far a virtual learning environment (VLE) would enhance the teaching of English literature in high education. Colbert et al. (2010) argued that online activities should be incorporated into English courses and should also be assessed throughout the course time. Mogus et al (2012), on the other hand, were interested in investigating the relationship between the rates of students' log in to VLEs and students' final grades. Results of their studies showed that there was a positive correlation between the two variables examined. Interested in examining students' learning styles and their reaction towards online teaching/learning environments, Poole (2006) assessed students' learning styles at the beginning and end of a blended-learning course aiming to examine how this would affect future designs of online courses. However, Ziegler et al. (2006) analyzed students' online narratives and discussions in a graduate online course to examine how they expressed meaning through online discussions by focusing on four main aspects: noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing, and questioning assumptions.

Blended learning has also been associated with writing in literature. Leedham (2009) discussed the reasons for why students should produce different types of written assignments like blogs and e-posters other than the traditional prose essay. Poniatowski (2012) discussed and supported the effectiveness of an online writing course on students' engagement, learning and satisfaction. Nevertheless, blended learning has not been used as a proper, authorized approach in Egypt.

In order to assure the researchers' knowledge that no literature in the fields of CEFR and blended learning in Egypt has been detected, and in order to emphasize the importance of the experiment discussed in this article, a series of telephone interviews and emails have been made. These interviews and emails signify the place of CEFR and blended learning in Egypt.

1.1 CEFR and Blended Learning in Egypt

According to Cambridge ESOL Assistant Director for Research and Validation, the British Council in Egypt and the School of Continuing Education for Adults (SCE) in the American University in Cairo (AUC) are both authorized to run a group of Cambridge ESOL exams; one private university in Egypt uses PET as an entrance exam, and the Faculty of Law at Alexandria University is using ILEC and preparing students for ILEC exam. (H. Khalifa, personal communication, October 13, 2012).

Concerning books that are designed according to CEFR, the Education Services Manager at Cambridge University Press, Egypt representative, maintained that only two private universities, other than the University where the research took place, order these books for undergraduate students and are totally aware of CEFR importance (H. Mufeid, personal communication, October 21, 2012). A third university aligns the CEFR levels to an American system. Only two governmental universities use CEFR books because they are interesting and motivating to students without using Cambridge ESOL certified tests or aligning it to CEFR levels or to any American system.

Blended learning, which is also a new approach in Egypt, is nowadays attached to CEFR. According to the Education Services Manager at Cambridge University Press, Egypt representative, blended learning has been thought of by some private universities, but it has actually been used in only one university as a replacement model (H. Mufeid, personal communication, October 21, 2012).

Additionally, in an attempt to provide Egyptian under and fresh graduates with a bench-marked internationally recognized certificate, a pilot study is being carried out. Cambridge ESOL Assistant Director for Research and Validation maintained that Cambridge ESOL is working with the Pathways to Higher Education Initiative whose headquarters is in Cairo University, and a report on the use of BULATS will be coming out mid-2013 (H. Khalifa, personal communication, October 13, 2012). The Coordinator of the English Program at Pathways to Higher Education, Egypt (PHE) asserted that the mission of PHE is

> to enhance the skills of socially disadvantaged under and fresh graduates of Egyptian Universities. PHE collaborated with Cambridge ESOL and the British Council to offer a ToT/TKT course to 100 staff members and a BULATS blended learning course to 1000 participants. The 100-hour BULATS training course provided by Cambridge ESOL is divided into two stages: 50 face-to-face hours followed by 50

hours of online self-study monitored by trainers. The steps that involve CEFR are two: placement tests for all applicants and BULATS tests for accepted candidates. [Accordingly,] the aim of the project is not the implementation of CEFR, but the acquiring of 1000 BULAT certificates that are based on CEFR (S. Salaam, personal communication, October 13, 2012).

1.2 Importance of the Study

Based on tracing the history of CEFR and blended learning in Egypt, and according to the researchers' knowledge, it has been noted that no implementation of teaching any undergraduate course using books designed according to CEFR and following a blended learning approach has actually taken place in the country. Moreover, the Education Services Manager at Cambridge University Press, Egypt representative, maintained that the University where the research was carried out was the first to order not just any books that are designed according to CEFR, but specific CEFR levels (H. Mufeid, personal communication, October 21, 2012).

No one in the University where the research was implemented knew anything about CEFR until Cambridge ESOL Assistant Director for Research and Validation visited the University in November 2010 to offer Cambridge ESOL exams together with Cambridge online Placement Test (CPT). Unfortunately, the University Administration refused CPT; nevertheless, people involved in the experiment, with the University Administration approval, evaluated the existing general English courses in the University for the purpose of developing the foundation year in order to prepare students to sit for the KET and/or PET exams.

1.3 Context of the Study

The University where the research took place offers students five English courses: English 80 (ENG 80), English 90 (ENG 90), English 101 (ENG 101), English 102 (ENG 102) and English 201 (ENG 201). ENG 80 and 90 represent the foundation year where students are taught general English tackling the four language skills; ENG 101 focuses on academic writing; ENG 102 deals with study skills and business English; and ENG 201 prepares students for research writing. Students are placed in these levels according to their scores in the University Placement Test which measures students' proficiency in Listening, Reading and Writing as well as Vocabulary and Grammar. If students score from 0-39 out of 100, they are enrolled in the ENG 80 classes; if they score from 40-49, they are enrolled in the ENG 90 classes; and if they score from 50-100, they are registered in the ENG 101 classes.

It was claimed by ENG 90 instructors in the University that in order to develop students' writing to prepare them for the ENG 101 course, the ENG 90 course should focus mainly on academic contexts, and writing should focus on paragraph writing to the extent of having a separate writing book which was Hogue's (2007) *First Steps in Academic Writing*. Students were also taught listening from Sarosy and Sherak's (2005) *Lecture Ready 2*, and there were some reading supplements. Students were given only two quizzes throughout the semester: one before the mid-term and one before the final exam. Listening was not examined. It was only practiced in class from exercises in the book, and speaking was tested once before the final exam and prompts had to do with abstract ideas like happiness, charity, behavior, corruption and discrimination.

It was also claimed that writing should be taught through a direct instruction technique that is based on structured overview, explicit teaching, mastery lecture, drill and practice, didactic questions, demonstrations and guides for viewing ("Instructional Models," 1991). In other words, students were taught that a paragraph has to have a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence, and they kept practicing this over and over. Accordingly, when grading their writing, the focus was usually on the structure of the paragraph rather than the meaning and use of language. Grammar rules were taught in isolation with the assumption that teaching students grammatical rules would help them in embellishing their writing with respect to language. Vocabulary was used out of context, and students were asked to memorize lists of words. The meaning of these lists was totally based on the meaning found in the textbook; hence diminishing any chance of getting students guessing meaning from contextual clues. However, this claim was proven to be false. By tracing students' writing in ENG 101, ENG102 and ENG 201 that prepares students to their graduation project, it was found that students' proficiency level in writing was so weak that the study board (Note 1) of the university rejected students' graduation projects. Students in these advanced levels still had errors in subject verb agreement as well as problems in the correct use of tenses, correct word order and correct spelling.

In an attempt to solve this problem, an experiment was carried out with ENG 90 students since they represent the immediate level that precedes the ENG 101 academic writing course, and there would be no other chances for a remedial course in writing.

1.4 Framework of the Study

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) pre-intermediate level (B1) was used as the framework of the experiment. It enhances the four language skills through everyday language contexts, and it assists students to go beyond the paragraph level to write three/four connected paragraphs on a given topic.

Blended learning was also used as a supplement framework in the experiment. Blending learning, as a supplemental model, combines face to face classroom interaction with computer activities without eliminating any of the traditional contact hours (The Pennsylvania State University, 2009). No other models of blended learning could be used since meeting students according to a regular schedule is a very important target to the institution that cannot be altered. Blended learning was illustrated in the experiment through the DVD activities accompanying the course book used in the experiment and through the weekly assignments students submitted on MOODLE software. Thus, blended learning represented only two steps further than traditional face to face interaction since it only required the accomplishment of online components (that are asynchronous) extending learning beyond classroom hours (Watson, n.d.).

*English Unlimited B1*series (Baigent, Cavey, & Robinson, 2010; Doff, Smith, Thake, Brabben, & Lloyd, 2010; Tilbury, Clementson, Hendra, & Rea, 2010) (Note 2) was chosen for the course. This level was chosen for the experiment since ENG 90 students were placed in the pre-intermediate level according to the University Placement Test. *English Unlimited B1* (Baigent et al. 2010; Doff et al. 2010; Tilbury et al., 2010) was preferred to other books (Driscol, 2008; Logan & Thaine, 2008; Palmer, 2008) because it covers the four skills in one book, and it is based on a blended learning approach where there is a Self-Study Pack that includes a DVD with hundreds of exercises that allow learners to assess their development outside the classroom and extend the study time. The book also follows interactive instruction strategies. These strategies embrace activities like role playing, brainstorming, peer practice, reflective discussion and reading for meaning ("Instructional Models," 1991). *English Unlimited B1* (Baigent et al. 2010; Doff et al. 2010; Tilbury et al., 2010) was also suitable for the experiment since it did not lessen the face to face contact hours.

1.5 Hypotheses

The current experiment was based on the following two hypotheses:

1.5.1 Hypothesis 1

Teaching writing evenly with all other language skills in an everyday language context would develop students' writing proficiency, and it would have an impact higher than teaching writing in academic contexts at a much longer span of time in the course.

1.5.2 Hypothesis 2

Teaching writing through a blended learning approach, even if it were a supplement model, would develop students' writing proficiency level more than teaching writing directly through an entire traditional face to face approach.

2. Method

This experiment followed a quasi-experimental design where there was one experimental group and one control group. The procedures involved a pre-test, an experiment and a post- test. The experiment was carried out during Fall 2011semester over a period of twelve instruction weeks.

2.1 Participants

Twenty one Mass Communication students represented the experimental group that was taught the new book, and twenty six other students from the Faculties of Pharmacy and Dentistry represented the control group (Note 3) that was taught the traditional books. All participants were placed in the pre-intermediate level according to the University Placement Test. Participants were males and females and their age ranged from 18 to 20 years old.

2.2 Procedures

The procedures went through three steps: a pre-test, the experiment where the new books were taught and a post-test.

2.2.1 Pre-Test

In spite of the fact that all participants were placed in the pre-intermediate level (B1 according to CEFR) according to the University Placement Test, a pre-test was conducted to both the experimental and control groups to find out their actual writing proficiency level because the University Placement Test is not an accredited one. Students were given an A2 pre-test taken from the Teacher's Pack of *English Unlimited A2* (Doff, Lloyd, Thake,

& Brabben, 2010). It was the Writing section of Achievement Test One in the book (see Appendix A).

Paragraph writing rubrics ("New York State Elementary Test Prep Center," 2001-03; "Paragraph writing rubric," n.d.; "Rubrics for writing elementary/intermediate," 2000) (see Appendix B) were used to grade students' writings. The rubrics comprised all elements necessary for a successful writing. They tackled content, organization and different language items. The item legibility was also added to these rubrics since it is an essential component in all Egyptian exams. Most assignments, quizzes and exams are handwritten in Egypt. There are rarely computerized exams; hence it was important to work on improving students' handwriting; otherwise, raters might not be able to grade exams if the handwriting was not legible.

In order to avoid bias, two external raters apart from the experimental and the control groups instructors were given the paragraph writing rubrics to use for grading students' pre-test. To measure the reliability of the raters, Cronbach's alpha α formula (Fulcher, 2010) was used. α = 0.68 between rater 1 and rater 2. This result showed the unreliability of the two raters and that the error measurement was pretty high. Therefore, a third rater was asked to grade the pre-test, and her results were compared to those of raters 1 and 2 using Cronback's alpha formula (Fulcher, 2010). α = 0.68 between raters 1 and 3, and α = 0.69 between raters 2 and 3, which also showed unreliability. Consequently, a fourth rater was asked to correct the same test, and finally the results showed reliability between raters 3 and 4 and α = 0.81. Accordingly, the results of one of the reliable raters (rater 3) were manipulated to calculate the mean of each item found in the rubrics for the experimental and the control groups (Note 4).

2.2.2 Experiment

In the course of the experiment, nine units from *English Unlimited B1* (Baigent et al., 2010; Doff et al., 2010; Tilbury et al., 2010) were taught to students of the experimental group over a period of twelve instruction weeks. Beside all exercises found in *English Unlimited B1: Self Study Pack* and DVD (Baigent et al., 2010), students were given ten extra writing assignments to be submitted on the MOODLE software, and sixteen writing assignments based on the nine units were also assigned to students to be done in a double-lined copybook in an attempt to improve students' handwriting (for a list of MOODLE assignments and the copybook assignments, see Appendix C).

Assignments started with paragraph writing and ended up with writing three/four paragraphs. Students were taught that writing, like any other thing in life, should have a beginning, middle and an end i.e. an introduction, a body and a conclusion or a head, a body and legs.

All writing rhetorical modes (descriptive, argumentative, narrative, compare and contrast) were taught to students indirectly without telling them the terminology. They got to know the rhetorical mode under discussion from the topic they were writing about or from the prompts given. They were never directly asked to write a "narrative" paragraph or an "argumentative" paragraph. They were, instead, asked to look at some pictures and tell the story of the characters in the pictures (narrative mode), or they were asked to say whether they prefer one thing to another and say why (compare and contrast or argumentative mode).

Students were asked to peer correct their assignments, and then the instructor gave individual feedback for each single assignment. In this individual feedback, organization, sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and handwriting were discussed with each single student. Students were also asked to rewrite their assignments to see their own development. All the copybook writing assignments were submitted in the double-lined copybook that was used as a portfolio and the MOODLE assignments were submitted on MOODLE software.

Moreover, a weekly quiz was given to students from the Progress Tests found in *English Unlimited B1: Teacher's Pack* (Doff et al., 2010). At first, students' grades in these Progress Tests were below 40%, and they found them very difficult. After three tests, they got used to the idea of having a weekly quiz and their grades started to be much higher, and most of them scored above 85%.

The Achievements Tests found in *English Unlimited B1: Teacher's Pack* (Doff et al., 2010) were also used in the experiment. Two Achievement Tests were given to students. Reading and Writing from Achievement Test One were given to students before the mid-term exam (mid-term exam lasts for ninety minutes only and it is out of 20 marks, so Reading and Writing were only examined in the mid-term exam), and Speaking and Listening from Achievement Test One together with the four skills in Achievement Test Two were given to students as quizzes before the final exam (the final exam lasts for three hours and it is out of 50 marks, so it was supposed to test all four language skills, but for administrative purposes only Reading, Writing, Grammar and Vocabulary were only tested in the final exam).

It is worth mentioning that according to Cambridge ESOL Examination, the CEFR B1 level corresponds to Cambridge ESOL PET exam. Therefore, students were exposed to PET as an accredited exam. At the end of the experiment, students were given two PET samples: one was used as a classroom exercise with no time limit to acquaint them with this kind of tests, and the other was used as a quiz with the test official time limit to see their development in the four language skills in general and to see their development in writing in particular. Students were able to pass the PET exam sample, and the mean of nineteen students out of the twenty one (two students did not attend the PET quiz) of their PET writing was 15.26/25. Moreover, students found the PET experience so interesting that they asked the instructor to have another sample, but the remaining time in the semester did not allow that.

2.2.3 Post-Test

After the experiment, the same writing pretest was given to both the experimental and the control groups to find out whether there was a development in the writing of both groups or not. One of the reliable raters of the pretest (rater 3 who was available) was asked to correct the posttest of the experimental and the control groups, and the results were compared to those of the pretest.

3. Results and Discussion

When comparing the writing proficiency level of the experimental and control groups in the pretest with respect to the ten items of the rubrics using a t test, it was noticed that their levels were very close to each other and the p value = 0.0955 which shows that there is low statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p>0.05$). This is normal since the University Placement Test put them in the same proficiency level although it is not an accredited test. However, the mean of the control group in eight items of the rubrics (supporting detail, elaborating detail, organization, sentences, vocabulary, punctuation and case, spelling and legibility) was slightly higher than that of the mean of the experimental group in the same items (Figure 1), which shows that the control group level was at a higher level than that of the experimental group.
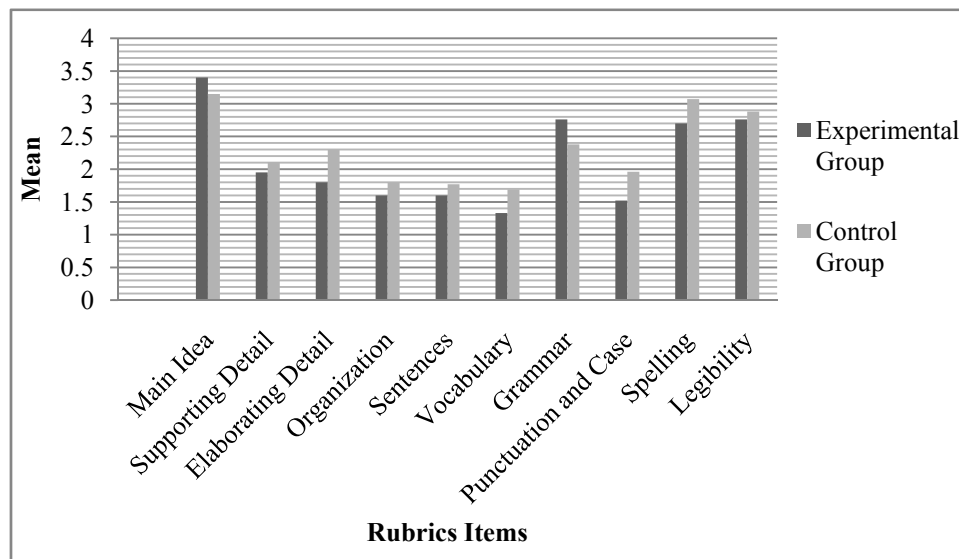

Figure 1. Mean of the pretest in the experimental and the control groups

When comparing the writing proficiency level of the experimental and control groups in the posttest regarding the ten items of the rubrics using a t test, it was noticed that there is no statistically significant difference in the development of the writing proficiency level of the two groups. The p value = 0.2014 ($p> 0.05$). This would imply that the experiment has not affected students' writing proficiency level, and that teaching a CEFR course through a blended learning approach has had the same effect as teaching an academic course through a traditional face to face interaction, which in turn does not support any of the hypotheses upon which the experiment was based.

However, when comparing the results of the pre and posttests of the experimental and the control groups concerning the mean of each single item of the ten items of the rubrics, it was found that both groups have

developed in most of the ten items of the rubrics (Figures 1-2). Nevertheless, the development of the experimental group was higher in seven items (main idea, elaborating detail, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and case, spelling and legibility) than the control group, and the results of the control group were higher in only two items (supporting detail and organization), and their results in the item "sentences" were equal (Figure 2). The writing of the experimental group surpassed the writing of the control group in 70% of the writing rubrics, which validates the two research hypotheses. Teaching the four skills evenly resulted in developing the writing skill more than focusing on writing only, which confirms with CEFR standards. Moreover, the use of a virtual learning environment exemplified in MOODLE and the activities on DVD improved students' writing proficiency level, which coincides with the positive impact of using a virtual learning environment in literature (Colbert, et al., 2007; Mogus, et al., 2012; Poniatowski, 2012).

It was also noticed that both groups scored lower in the posttest in the "main idea" item than in the pretest in the same item (Figures 1-2).This might be normal concerning the experimental group since the course did not focus on the academic format of a paragraph, but it might not be acceptable for the control group since they were directly taught the format of a paragraph and there was an ongoing practice on it. So, direct teaching did not guarantee the development of the learning issue under discussion, and this supports the research hypotheses.

Both groups also scored less in the posttest in the "legibility" item than in the pretest (Figures 1-2).This indicates that the attempt to improve the experimental group handwriting has not given great results. Yet, it is believed that if students were not asked to write in a double-lined copybook, their handwriting would have been much worse since the overall pretest results indicated that the experimental group level was lower than that of the control group level, and if legibility was not stressed upon in the experiment, their handwriting would have got worse.

The control group also scored less in the "spelling" item in the posttest than in the pretest, which proves the fact that focusing on academic contexts, academic vocabulary only and not everyday language vocabulary would decrease the level of students' spelling, which also validates the first hypothesis.
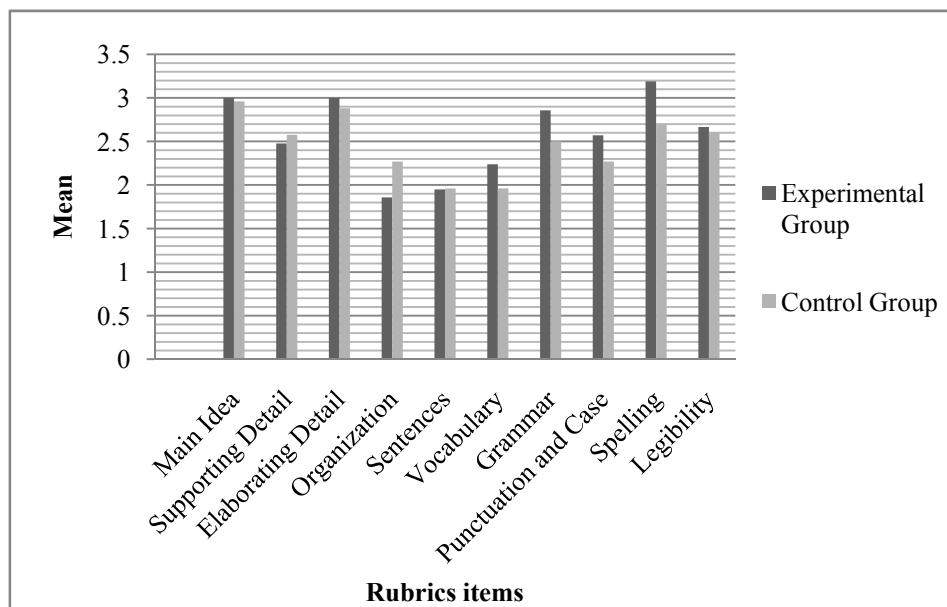

Figure 2. Mean of the posttest in the experimental and the control groups

In order to find out whether the experimental group has developed after the experiment or not, a t test was conducted between the mean of the pretest and the mean of the posttest of the experimental group in the ten writing rubrics, and another t test was conducted between the mean of the pretest and that of the posttest of the control group in all the writing rubrics. The p value between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group = 0.0081 ($p < 0.05$) which is considered to be very statistically significant. This proves that the writing proficiency level of the experimental group has developed after the experiment. On the other hand, the p value between the pretest and the posttest of the control group = 0.1762 ($p > 0.05$) which is considered to be not statistically significant. This proves that the experiment validated the hypotheses upon which it was based. When students learn the four

language skills evenly in an everyday language context and through a blended learning approach (even if it is a supplement model), their writing proficiency level will be much higher than focusing on academic contexts, grammatical rules and fully face to face traditional teaching.

In addition, students who were subject to the experiment were able to listen to any topic apart from the topics discussed in the book, read any topic and discuss it, write about any topic and speak about any everyday language topic, which corresponds to the benefits of Picciano's (2009) "multimodal model" (p. 7) that challenges students to learn in ways different from those presented in the classroom. Furthermore, when tracing the development of the students in their following courses, it was noted that their writing proficiency has improved. Personal communication with their instructors showed that noticeable improvement in their writing was remarked. When compared to their peers, writing samples of students who were involved in the experiment contained less grammatical mistakes and were more unified, fluent and coherent. In addition to this, instructors said that these students showed critical thinking skills in the development of their essays or research papers.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary

The purpose of this article was to report on a quasi-experiment where an experimental convenient sample was taught writing evenly with other language skills in everyday language contexts. Materials used were books designed according to the B1 level of CEFR. A supplement model of a blended learning approach using asynchronous online activities was also used to extend students' learning time beyond classroom hours. The experiment was carried out in one of the Egyptian private universities.

It was hypothesized that teaching writing evenly with the other language skills in everyday language contexts would improve students' writing proficiency level more than teaching writing solely in academic contexts. It was also hypothesized that using a blended learning approach, even if it were a supplement model, would improve students' writing proficiency level more than using a traditional face to face interaction. Results of the pre and posttests of the experimental group were compared to those of a control group that was taught writing in a traditional face to face academically contextualized course, and these results validated the hypotheses upon which the experiment was based.

4.2 Limitations

This study was limited to exploring the effect of a supplement model of the blended learning approach and teaching the four language skills according to CEFR on students' writing proficiency in freshmen EFL classes in Egypt. Other contexts like high school language classes were not the focus of the study. The number of participants and the way they were selected is another limitation. Only twenty one students participated in the experiment and they were a convenient sample. In addition to this, students who participated in the experiment were students of Mass Communication while those of the control group were students of the medical school. It should then be noted that students' educational background/major in both groups could be another factor that limited the results of this study. This experiment could be replicated on a larger sample size that is randomly chosen. Time constraints were other limitations of the study. Only one semester was devoted to the study. It is possible to devote more time to the experiment in order to be able to actually measure the effect of both the blended learning approach and teaching the four language skills according to CEFR on students' writing proficiency. Other variables that might have affected the experiment, like students' age and gender, were not considered when evaluating students' writing.

4.3 Teaching Implications

Results of the experiment confirm the importance of considering international conventions like CEFR when teaching EFL students in order to be able to measure their performance more efficiently. These international conventions should be the benchmark for curricula and test design in Egypt. Besides, both students and teachers should be acquainted with these international conventions in an attempt to improve the learning/teaching environment in Egypt. This could be achieved through training sessions for teachers who will, in turn, acquaint their students with the new criteria during their first week of classes. Blended learning could also be encouraged in EFL classrooms in Egypt since it enhances independent learning which will, in turn, contribute in solving the everlasting problem of large classes.

It is worth mentioning that in the University where the experiment was carried out, a training session was given to new instructors on CEFR and blended learning. Consequently, *English Unlimited* Series (2010) has been generalized to all ENG 80 and ENG 90 classes in Fall 2012, and all students are assessed according to KET exam for ENG 80 and PET exam for ENG 90 at the end of the semester. These exams, according to

administrative issues, are not online or current exams. They are the exams past versions, but still what has been achieved so far is a step towards qualifying students to sit for internationally certified exams if they want to.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

Note 1. The university offers a British certificate that has to be validated by the study board of one of two British universities signing a contract with the university.

Note 2. According to the Cambridge Publishing House in the country, we are the first to use the *English Unlimited* (2010) Series.

Note 3. Mass Communication students were chosen to be the experimental group and Pharmacy and Dentistry students were chosen to represent the control group for mere administrative issues.

Note 4. The ideal situation was to train raters on the rubrics first then to give them the pretest to correct, but there was no time to do that. However, this was done later when the University approves the use of the series in the following semester.
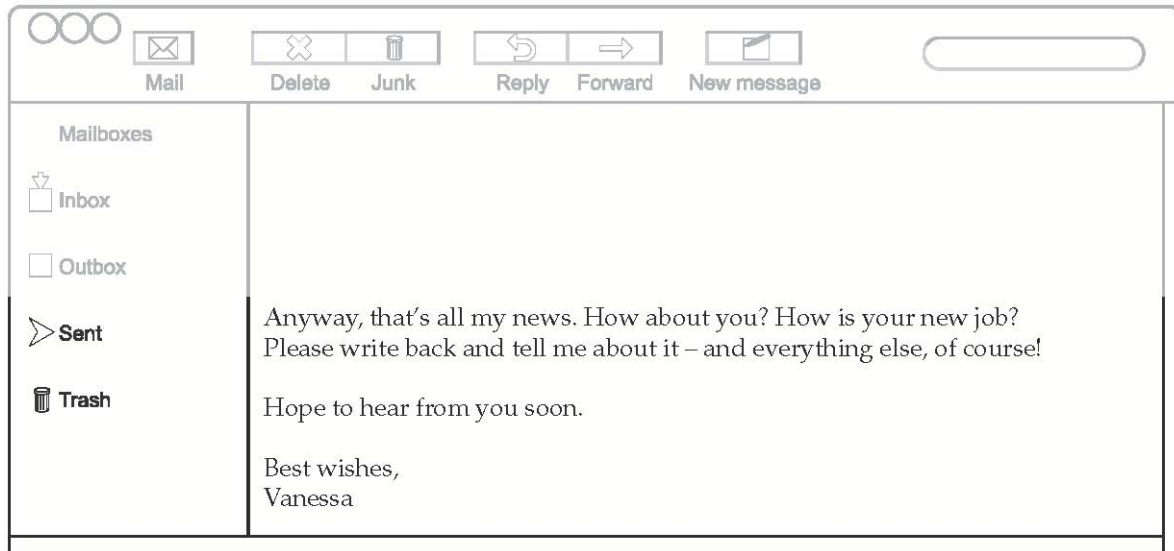
Appendix A

Achievement test 1 – Writing

Intro – 4 Writing

Choose ONE of the following questions to answer. (25 marks)

1. Read the last part of an email you received from a friend. Write a reply to Vanessa, answering her questions and telling her your news. Please write 50–100 words.

2. Imagine you are interested in visiting India. Read the profile which you printed from the Sofasurfing website. Write an email to Daya, giving information about yourself and asking the questions you noted on the profile. Please write 50–100 words.

English Unlimited Elementary Teacher's Pack Photocopiable © Cambridge University Press 2010

Appendix B

	Criteria				Points
	4	**3**	**2**	**1**	
Main/Topic Idea Sentence	Main/Topic idea sentence is clear, correctly placed, and is restated in the closing sentence.	Main/Topic idea sentence is either unclear or incorrectly placed, and is restated in the closing sentence.	Main/Topic idea sentence is unclear and incorrectly placed, and is restated in the closing sentence.	Main/Topic idea sentence is unclear and incorrectly placed, and is not restated in the closing sentence.	____
Supporting Detail Sentence(s)	Paragraph(s) have three or more supporting detail sentences that relate back to the main idea.	Paragraph(s) have two supporting detail sentences that relate back to the main idea.	Paragraph(s) have one supporting detail sentence that relate back to the main idea.	Paragraph(s) have no supporting detail sentences that relate back to the main idea.	____
Elaborating Detail Sentence(s)	Each supporting detail sentence has three or more elaborating detail sentences.	Each supporting detail sentence has at least two elaborating detail sentences.	Each supporting detail sentence has one elaborating detail sentence.	Each supporting detail sentence has no elaborating detail sentence.	____
Organization	Good flow of ideas from topic sentence + details or sequence	Main idea + details or sequence as appropriate	Some order of main ideas + details or sequence	Ideas not ordered	____
Sentences	No sentence errors; variety in length and type; sentence type relate to writing style	Complete sentences; no run-ons or fragments; some variety in length and type	Complete sentences; few run-on sentences	Mostly complete sentences; some fragments or run-on	____
Vocabulary	Uses new/key related words/ideas easily; colorful interesting words suitable for topic and audience	Uses new/key related words/ideas correctly; varies language	Attempts to use new key words in description; goes beyond basic vocabulary	Related words or ideas mentioned; limited basic vocabulary	____
Grammar	No errors in agreement, number, tense	Few errors in agreement, number, tense	Some errors in agreement, number, tense	Many errors in agreement, number, tense	____
Punctuation and case	Correct punctuation and case throughout; variety used	Minor errors in punctuation and case; variety used	Few punctuation and case errors	Several punctuation and case errors	____
Spelling	No spelling errors	Few spelling errors	Some spelling errors	Many spelling errors	____
Legibility	Legible handwriting, typing, or printing.	Marginally legible handwriting, typing, or printing.	Writing is not legible in places.	Writing is not legible.	____
Total					

Appendix C

MOODLE Assignments:

1. Write a diary about your first week in the university.
2. Do exercise 10 p. 12 in the Self Study Pack book.
3. Write a paragraph describing your first quiz in the course.
4. Write a 70 words paragraph to compare between your first and second quizzes in ENG 90.
5. Write a mini-manual of 70-100 words on how to send an SMS from your mobile phone.
6. Work out the writing process steps of brainstorming and grouping to write a paragraph of80-120 words to evaluate your ENG 90 course.
    Note: "evaluate" means saying the good and the bad points not only the bad ones.
7. Write a paragraph (80 - 120 words) about your experience in the mid-term exam.
8. Write three/four paragraphs about an item that is so dear to you stating why you like it and another item that you wish to get rid of stating why you hate it.
9. Write three/four paragraphs expressing your opinion about the following statement:"Having a servant at home is a good thing".
10. Write three/four paragraphs evaluating your teachers and your courses in your first term in university.

Copybook Assignments:

The copybook assignments were based on the nine units of the book, and sometimes they were assignments given in the writing section of the unit.

1. Write an email to invite a friend to meet you somewhere and another one to cancel an appointment with a client and suggesting a new time.
2. Use the same pattern in the book p. 14 no. 4 to write about your interest.
3. Use the same expressions in no. 5 p. 21 to write about jobs of people you know.
4. Write a paragraph presenting yourself.
5. Think about places where people buy food. What are their good and bad points?
6. Write about a meal you had recently. Use questions on p. 29 as prompts.
7. Write the ingredients and the instructions for a recipe of a dish you like.
8. Look at the pictures on p. 123 to write the rest of the story.
9. Think of a time in your life when you met someone interesting. Use questions on p. 38 no. 4a as prompts.
10. Write about an important day in your life. Use questions on p. 47 no. 4b as prompts.
11. Work out the writing process steps of brainstorming and grouping to write three/four paragraphs email to a friend who's going to visit you. Use questions on p. 48 no. 5a as prompts.
12. Write a paragraph about your country using the comparative and the superlative forms.
13. Look at the script on p. 149. Write a more polite version of the conversation.
14. Write a paragraph giving directions from class to the university president office.
15. Write three/four paragraphs about a place you would like to visit.
16. Write an email of apology. Use situations on p. 80 no. 5 as prompts.