ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

Vol.8. No.3.2025

IMPACT OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION ON EFL STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of online method of instruction on the development of the writing skills of EFL learners. Various methodologies have evolved over time for teaching language. Teachers in Pakistan have traditionally used the Grammar Translation Method for EFL teaching. However, information technology has revolutionized educational settings, especially in the post-COVID-19 environment. The entire teaching practice was carried out online during COVID-19 and both the teachers & students compulsorily switched to this medium of teaching acquainting all to this new method. Therefore, there was a need to study the impact of online teaching on the development of writing skills of EFL learners. This experimental study (quasi-experimental design) investigated the impact of various online techniques on developing the writing skills of intermediate-level EFL students in the Capital district of Islamabad. The subjects of the research were 30 male students of Islamabad Model College for Boys, Pakistan Town, Phase-I, Islamabad. They were divided into two groups of 15 students in the science group and 15 in the humanities group. The study continued for fourteen weeks. A pretest was conducted to establish the equivalence among participants. The pre-test essays were rated with the help of Paulus' (1999) Essay Scoring Rubric. The study also compared the performance of students in the Science and the Arts groups. The data was analysed using SPSS to establish the impact of the frequency of participation in online activities on the writing development of students. The aspects of writing skills that were analysed included organization, development, vocabulary, coherence, structure and mechanics. The overall findings indicated that the learners who had better frequency of participation in online activities wrote better essays than those who participated with a lower rate of participation.

Key Words*: Online Instruction, Writing Skills, Digital Learning, Feedback, Blended Teaching, Educational Inequity, Traditional Teaching, The Process Approach.*

Introduction

Various definitions of online learning have surfaced since the emergence of the online method of teaching in educational settings. Before introducing online learning, let us have a look at what Gruba & Hinkelman (2012) and Smith & Kurthen (2007), say about what constitutes online learning. In the above-referred work, they presented a taxonomy of different types of technology-assisted learning as follows:-

Taxonomy of Different Types on Learning Using the Online Medium

Ser	Term	Definition
1.	Web-enhance	Subjects in which no amount of time is spent replacing F2F classes. The Internet is used only for sending syllabi and making course announcements.
2.	Online	Subjects in which more than 80 percent of instruction is carried out online.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
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3.	Hybrid	Subjects in which 50 to 80 percent of instruction is carried out online to replace F2F classes.
4.	Blended	Subjects in which less than 50 percent content is taught through an online format to replace F2F classes. It should be a dominant percentage.

Over the past two decades, online learning has evolved from a pedagogical experiment to a mainstream educational approach, reshaping the landscape of formal and informal education (Akram et al., 2022, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Driven by advances in digital technologies and accelerated by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become a vital means for the dissemination of knowledge for millions of learners around the globe (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023; Chen & Ramzan, 2024). As educational institutions and learners continue to navigate the shift toward digital means, it has become increasingly important to examine the impact of online methods of instruction on developing the writing skills of EFL learners.

Online learning is facilitated by technology and takes place partially or in its entirety over the internet (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). This type of learning has advantages from asynchronous self-paced courses to synchronous virtual classrooms that work like traditional face-to-face instruction. The widespread use of learning management systems (LMSs), video conferencing tools, and cloud-based collaboration platforms have greatly improved the accessibility and spectrum of online education (Martin, Sunley, & Turner, 2020).

The flexibility and accessibility offered by online teaching are among its most frequently cited advantages. For learners with geographic, physical, or scheduling constraints, online education provides an invaluable opportunity to pursue academic and professional goals without the limitations imposed by time and location. Additionally, online platforms often support personalized learning experiences through adaptive technologies and data analytics, allowing for content to be tailored according to individual learner needs (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Siemens, 2013). These facilities have made online learning particularly attractive to traditional learners as well as to adult learners, working professionals, and marginalized populations.

Despite these advantages, online learning also presents significant challenges. One of the most persistent issues is the disparity in student engagement and retention compared to traditional in-person learning (Akram & Li, 2024; Aslam et al., 2021; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). The digital divide also remains a critical concern; unequal access to reliable internet and digital devices worsens educational inequities, particularly among low-income and rural populations (Van Dijk, 2020).

However, many educators enter the online teaching space without adequate training or institutional support, which negatively impacts student outcomes (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). The challenge is even more significant in the Pakistani educational setting, where lack of training, insufficient institutional backing, and government indifference toward this teaching method are unlikely to be addressed soon. As online education becomes more common, there is a growing need for faculty development programs that prepare instructors with the skills necessary for effective online teaching. This is an even greater challenge in Pakistan, where teachers' traditional teaching practices and orthodox methods are difficult to change. Questions remain about the validity, reliability, and academic integrity of online assessments (Bennett, Dawson, Bearman, Molloy, & Boud, 2017). Given these concerns, the present study is essential to investigate the effectiveness of this method for EFL learners in Pakistan.

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ISSN P:2709-8265
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With this background in mind, the current study aims to investigate the effectiveness of online method of instruction on the development of the writing skills of EFL learners in the capital district of Islamabad.

Literature Review

The development of writing skills is an important milestone in learning any language. Unlike speaking, which often develops through informal interaction, writing demands deliberate instruction and practice. It involves complex cognitive processes such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Hyland, 2003). Over the years, researchers and educators have investigated numerous pedagogical strategies and theoretical frameworks to enhance writing proficiency among EFL learners (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021), considering both linguistic competence and the socio-cultural aspects of writing (Li, S., & Akram, 2023; 2024; Ramzan et al., 2023a, 2023b; 2023c; Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024).

A model for understanding writing development is the process-oriented approach, which contrasts with earlier product-based models that emphasized grammatical correctness and static formats (Ramzan & Khan, 2024; Ramzan et al., 2020). The process approach highlights recursive stages—prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. It encourages learners to focus on idea development and organization rather than just surface-level accuracy (Zamel, 1983). Research indicates that process writing helps learners become more reflective and independent writers (Tribble, 1996). Furthermore, when embedded within a supportive instructional framework, process writing enables learners to internalize feedback and progressively improve both fluency and accuracy.

The use of technology and digital tools in EFL writing instruction has also gained increasing attention. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tools, such as automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems, discussion forums, and collaborative writing platforms (e.g., Google Docs), provide opportunities for greater interactivity and feedback (Li, Link, & Hegelheimer, 2015). These tools can deliver immediate, personalized feedback and promote process-oriented learning by supporting drafting and revision. However, scholars warn that such tools must be integrated carefully into teaching practice to prevent overreliance on technology at the expense of teacher guidance (Choi, 2013).

Scholars have observed that EFL learners often find it difficult to independently apply process writing strategies because of limited linguistic resources. Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) contend that explicit instruction in genre conventions, vocabulary, and grammar remains crucial for EFL students, particularly those at lower proficiency levels. Incorporating instruction that emphasizes different forms of writing tasks can help close the gap between communicative goals and linguistic accuracy. This combined approach, commonly known as the process-genre approach, allows students to develop linguistic awareness while also enhancing the language use (Badger & White, 2000).

An important area of inquiry is the impact of feedback on the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing. Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) has been extensively studied for its potential to enhance learners' accuracy over time. Early research by Truscott (1996) raised concerns about the long-term efficacy of grammar correction; however, subsequent studies have largely refuted this perspective. For instance, Bitchener and Knoch (2008) demonstrated that focused feedback, which targets specific types of errors, effectively aids learners in reducing grammatical mistakes in subsequent writing tasks. Moreover, when appropriately scaffolded, the

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
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integration of peer feedback has been shown to promote metacognitive awareness and facilitate collaborative learning (Min, 2005).

Cultural and contextual factors significantly influence the development of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing skills. Research has demonstrated that learners' native language (L1) rhetorical traditions and educational backgrounds shape their approach to writing in English (Kaplan, 1966). For instance, students from cultures that prioritize indirect argumentation or circular reasoning may initially find it challenging to adapt to the linear, thesis-driven structure typical of English academic writing. To effectively support the learners, instructors must be culturally responsive and aware of such differences, helping students adapt to new rhetorical norms while respecting their prior knowledge and experiences (Hyland, 2016).

Recent research has examined the effectiveness of collaborative writing, especially in pairs or group settings. Collaborative writing tasks enhance grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use through peer support, while also encouraging negotiation of meaning and a sense of shared responsibility (Storch, 2005). However, the success of these tasks relies on careful planning, group dynamics, and the establishment of clear roles and expectations.

The literature on EFL writing development highlights the complexity of teaching and learning to write in a second language. Effective instruction requires a multifaceted approach that balances attention to linguistic accuracy with opportunities for meaningful communication. Emerging trends in technology are catching roots in Pakistani educational settings but the conservative instructional practices persist and hinder open introduction of technology in classrooms. Therefore, there was a need to investigate the impact of online instruction in Pakistani environment with a special emphasis on development of EFL writing skills at intermediate level.

Research Methodology

This study used a quantitative, quazi-experimental research design to examine the impact of online teaching on the writing development of EFL students. Specifically, a pre-test and post-test control group design was used. This design was suitable for measuring changes in learners' writing abilities as a result of intervention, in this case online instruction. The experimental group received writing instruction via Zoom platform, while the control group received traditional face-to-face instruction. The experimental group also participated in a WhatsApp Group there they were assigned different assignments. Students also participated, under supervision of the researcher, in discussions among themselves on how to improve drafts and correct mistakes.

The participants were 60 intermediate-level EFL students enrolled in Islamabad Model College for Boys Pakistan Town Phase-I Islamabad. They were selected using non-random sampling**,** ensuring a homogenous level of English proficiency. The students were assigned into two groups with 30 participants in the experimental group (online instruction) and 30 in the control group (traditional grammar translation method). Participants were assigned to each group on odd and even no technique to ensure homogeneity and equivalence among them. All participants were between the ages of 16.5 and 18.5 years and had similar academic backgrounds and prior exposure to English instruction. The study compared the overall writing performance of both the groups. However, this paper only covers the online portion of research wherein, the impact of frequency of participation, by the experimental group in the online activities, was measured on their level of writing enhancement. Pre-test results were compared with the posttest results to measure the writing development level. This level of writing development was compared with the frequency of the participation to analyse whether those who had a higher rate of participation in online

ISSN E: 2709-8273
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activities showed higher level of development in the writing skills. The pre-test was also used to establish the equivalence among the participants.

To measure writing development, the study used an essay writing test that assessed organization, development, vocabulary, coherence, structure and mechanics. Additionally, a Paulus' Essay Scoring Rubric was used to grade and evaluate the essays. The evaluator's rating reliability was ensured by using Cronbach's alpha which indicated (Cronbach's alpha of 0.72 considered as a suitable and trustworthy. Essays were graded out of 60 marks with 10 marks for each aspect being evaluated. 1 was minimum grade awarded and 10 was the maximum. Grading was carried out strictly in according with the said Rubric.

The study lasted for fourteen weeks. In the first week, both groups took the pre-test and in the past week, posttest was conducted. Following this, the experimental group received instruction through an online platform (Zoom Platform and WhatsApp Group), including video lessons, interactive writing tasks, peer review activities, and instructor and peer feedback via the said Group. The data collected from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)**.** Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize the means and standard deviations of both groups' scores. Then, an independent samples t-test was used to compare the posttest scores with the frequency of participation in online activities by the participants.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. They were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their involvement. The study received approval from the Principal of the College. This study is limited by its relatively short duration and small sample size. Furthermore, the findings may not be generalizable to students of different proficiency levels or to other educational contexts.

4.5.2 Online Teaching / Learning Kit

The experimental group underwent online teaching intervention. Therefore, this study examined if the online teaching had any significant impact on the writing skills development of the participants. The variable of frequency of participation was taken up as a basis of comparing the frequency with the level of improvement in the writing skills. Results of this investigation are being appended in the succeeding paragraphs. The study was based on the hypothesis: *There will be no significant difference between Pre-Test and Post-Test essays by the students in Experimental Group after their participation in online teaching and discussions.*

Following their involvement in online discussion forum, students in the Experimental Group's Pre-Test and Post-Test writings differ significantly. The null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis (H_1) because the results indicate a considerable improvement.

Table 1: Pre-test and posttest essay scores of the Experimental Group (Arts & Science)

Experimental Group	No	Pre-test Mean Scores	Post-test Mean Scores	Mean differences	Improvement (%)
Arts Group	15	49.2	60.4	11.2	29%
Science group	15	51.5	64.5	13.0	32%

After the participants' involvement in intervention the null hypothesis (H_0) their writing performance significantly improved, rejecting the null hypothesis. Following their use of online media education, the students in the Arts group showed marked improvement in their essays. Arts Group had a mean difference of 11.2 points between the pre-test mean score of 49.2 and post-test mean score of 60.4. This group indicated a 29% improvement in percentage, suggesting that online

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
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learning improved the writing skills.

The Science group showed greater development in the essays. The Group had a mean difference of 13.0 points between the pre-test mean score of 51.5 and post-test mean score of 64.5. The group showed a 32% improvement in percentage, indicating a stronger effect of online learning on science students. Because of their aptitude for analysis and concept-based studies, science students benefitted more from digital teaching. The improvement was marginally higher in the Science group (32%) than in the Arts group (29%). These results demonstrate how well online learning resources can support students improve the writing abilities.

Table 2: Essay improvement in terms of online engagement in learning

Group	No	Indicator	Criteria	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean differences	Improvement (%)
Arts Group	15	Student Engagement	Avg. Logins per week	3.2	4.3	1.1	35%
Science group	15	Student Engagement	Avg. Logins per week	3.5	4.8	1.3	37%

Following the participation in online training, the Arts group students showed a discernible increase in student engagement. In the post-test phase, the average weekly login count rose from 3.2 in the pre-test phase to 4.3. This shows a 35% improvement with a mean difference of 1.1. The increase in logins indicates that students were using the online learning platform more frequently and their perception about the use of technology was positively impacted. The online media possibly catered better to the individual learning needs and styles.

Similarly, there was an even greater rise in student engagement in the Science group. An average of 3.5 logins per week was recorded in the pre-test phase, and this number rose to 4.8 in the post-test phase. This indicates as a 37% improvement with a mean difference of 1.3. The reason for the greater engagement rate in the Science group could possibly the nature of science disciplines, which normally include interactive digital resources, simulations, and problem-solving exercises. The findings indicate that both groups' participation was positively impacted by online learning, with the Science group demonstrating a higher degree of engagement.

Table 3: Pre-test and posttest essay improvement in terms of time spent online

BTG	No	Indicator	Criteria	Pre-test Mean	Posttest Mean	Mean difference	Improvement
Arts Group	15	Time spent on platform	Avg. hours per Student	2.5	6.4	3.9	23%
Science group	15	Time spent on platform	Avg. hours per Student	2.8	6.9	4.1	27%

Science and Arts groups demonstrated significant rise in the use of online learning materials. The average amount of time spent on the online platform improved significantly for the Arts group. According to the pre-test statistics, students spent on average 2.5 hours per week per student; in the post-test phase, this average increased dramatically to 6.4 hours. This 3.9-hour

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increase indicates a 23% increase in the time spent online. Contrary to the null hypothesis, the longer length indicates that students gradually engaged with digital teaching materials, which probably helped them develop the essay-writing abilities.

The average time spent on the platform by the Science group also improved. With a mean difference of 4.1 hours, the average time improved by 27% from 2.8 hours in the pre-test phase to 6.9 hours in the post-test phase. The interactive nature of science disciplines, which calls for a better use of digital resources may be the reason for the better rate of engagement.

Table 4: Pre-test and post-test essay improvement in terms of tasks completion rate

Group	N0	Indicator	Criteria	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Mean differences	Improvement
Arts Group	15	Completion Rate	% of Students completing task	60%	72%	12%	31%
Science group	15	Completion Rate	% of Students completing task	64%	79%	14%	35%

The percentage of students who completed assigned tasks significantly increased in the Arts group. Just 60% of students completed the activities during the pre-test phase, whereas 72% did so during the post-test phase. This indicates a 31% improvement and a mean difference of 12%. The higher task completion rate suggests that students improved the time management and self-regulation abilities. The systematic practice with online tasks reinforced the learning. The increase in task completion rate contributed to improved writing skills.

The science group also demonstrated a greater task completion rate. 64% students completed the pre-test phase exercises, while 79% of them did so in the post-test phase. A 35% improvement is reflected with 14% mean difference. This improvement is slightly higher than that of the Arts group. The interactive and problem-solving nature of the coursework helped science in the learning process, as suggested by the rise in task completion rate.

Table 5: Summary of Pre-test & Posttest essay improvement in terms of online learning

Indicator	Criteria	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean difference	Improvement (%)
Student Engagement	Avg. login per week	3.2 3.5	4.3 4.8	1.1 1.3	35% 37%
Time spent on platform	Avg. Hrs./Per week	2.5 2.8	6.4 6.9	3.9 4.1	23% 27%
Completion rate	% of completing tasks by students	60% 64%	72% 79%	12% 14%	31% 35%

The hypothesis suggested that after the involvement in online media training, students will not significantly improve the essay writings skills. The results negated the proposition and indicated significant increase across all measured aspects.

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ISSN P:2709-8265
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Significant improvements were observed in student involvement as shown by the average weekly number of logins. The Arts group had a 35% improvement in weekly logins, rising from 3.2 in the pre-test phase to 4.3 logins per week in the post-test phase. Similarly, the Science group improved by 37%, rising from 3.5 to 4.8 logins each week. These findings imply that students got more engaged in the learning, most likely as a result of the growing comfort level with online learning environments and the desire to take part in discussions, exercises, and homework. Students' readiness to include online learning into the study habits is strongly indicated by the increase in engagement.

The amount of time spent online grew substantially. Time spent online by each student per week rose from 2.5 to 6.4 hours in the arts group and from 3.5 to 4.8 hours in science group with 23% and 27% improvement respectively for each group. Improved use of online by students indicates that they were more involved with the material, which facilitated them become better writers. Students were probably inspired to devote more time to polishing the academic work by the regulated aspect of online learning, which provides flexibility in accessing materials with respect to time and place.

The improvement in the completion rates of assigned tasks and assignments also improved. While the task completion rate rose from 60% to 72% in the arts group, it from 64% to 79% in the science group with 31% and 35% improvement for each group respectively. This increasing inclination implies that students benefited from the controlled nature of online learning settings and became more accustomed to finishing the assignments owing to the liberty offered. A crucial component of skill development is task completion, and this rise displays that students not only engaged in active participation but also adhered to the learning goals.

Summary

The data displays prominent improvements across all assessed parameters, and defies the null hypothesis. The results demonstrate how well online media training works to improve writing skills. Science Group generally revealed marginally greater progress rates, though Arts Group also improved the writing skills. The inherent learning styles of the two groups could be the cause of this difference in the rate of improvement in writing skills. Students studying science might be more used to organized and iterative approach to problem-solving. This makes them more open to online forums and feedback systems. On the other hand, because the subject matter is abstract, the arts students may take a little more time to adjust to the online medium compared to the Science Group students. However, the digital means are effective for improving writing skills for both Science and Humanities group, as indicated by the results. In conclusion, the study indicated by offering persuasive evidence that online media training effectively improves EFL students' writing abilities. These results indicated that integrating digital learning techniques into conventional instruction might greatly enhance academic achievement. Furthermore, other factors including students' interest levels, availability of dependable internet, and teachers' training at use of technology in class may affect the outcomes.

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ISSN P:2709-8265
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