



 Research Article

## IMPROVING STUDENTS' PARAGRAPH WRITING SKILLS THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AT HIGHER PEDAGOGICAL EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

Composing a paragraph in English is almost the same as writing an essay, namely by consisting of three main parts (introduction (topic sentence), body (supporting sentences), conclusion (concluding sentence)) to deliver a message to the readers. Because of this feature of teaching students how to create paragraphs under the proper instruction in practice, blended learning technologies enable both teachers and students to adapt the educational environment for the system of improving their (learners') paragraph writing skills in the digital era of educational development. This study investigates the potential of blended learning technologies on students' writing skills, especially paragraph writing in English as a foreign language (EFL). It examines students' most improved EFL writing areas and perceptions while utilizing blended learning technologies to foster their paragraph writing skills in a systematic way. In this experiment, two groups of EFL writing course students participated during the first-semester 2021-2022. A mixed-method design was implemented into the experiment: course evaluation questionnaires, achievement tests, and students' portfolios on writing tasks. Findings of the investigations illustrated that most of the participants' mistakes were in composing topic sentences, creating ideas, and providing concluding sentences coherently and cohesively. The study showed that blending learning technologies in the environment of higher pedagogical education assisted both teachers and students to conduct lessons on the writing skills in a more effective and convenient way.

### KEYWORDS

Paragraph writing, blended learning, writing pedagogy, higher education, writing competence, educational environment, written speech.

## INTRODUCTION

For the most part, to be literate has always been one of the most important characteristics of humanity in social contexts for centuries – for one thing, a set of discrete, value-free technical skills related to writing has been given the principal focus while employing people to do a particular job. Nonetheless, this view has changed radically currently, in essence, literacy is seen as significantly more complex, located as it is in social contexts and, increasingly, in the online world, where digital literacy is vitally important (Harmer, 2022). In addition, as globalization brings people together from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and technology allows for instantaneous long-distance communication, the written word has taken on increased significance (Sara, 2020). Indeed, writing is a complex type of the productive skills in a language as it involves both a teacher and a language learner to work cooperatively to improve it in a systematic way. Following this approach results in creating an educational environment to conduct lessons on this skill taking all the issues and aspects into consideration. Besides, often writing turns out to be the most difficult activity even for the native speakers of a language since it not only involves a graphic representation of speech but also requires development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way (Arora, 2012). Albeit this condition, the ability to compose different genres of the written speech in a first (native) or second language impacts on the process of acquiring the writing skills in a foreign language in practice. Incidentally, there are a number of aspects to be considered so as to produce fluent, accurate and appropriate written English:

Mechanical problems with the script of English;

Problems of accuracy of English grammar and lexis;

Problems of relating the style of writing to the demands of a particular situation;

Problems of developing ease and comfort in expressing what needs to be said (Broughton et al., 2002).

Dealing with the afore-mentioned problems in English writing, the writing course should be structured and organized by following gradual stages so that language learners (students) can improve their writing competence in a blended language learning environment (BLLE) under the teacher's control. We can do many of the things we have always done inside the classroom, but we also have the option of going beyond the classroom without necessarily moving from our seats. To put it another way, we can mix the inside and outside learning worlds in what is usually referred to as blended learning (Harmer, 2022). Therefore, it is advisory to focus on creating educational environments not only for teaching and learning foreign languages (TLFL), but also for the first and second ones to reach practical goals in the practices of TLFL. Besides, teaching paradigm has radically been changed by technology which makes teaching simpler without time or space restriction (Alonso et al, 2005). Technology is also trusted to provide language learners with a great number of possibilities to enhance language learning (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007). In fact, implementing learning technologies into the practice of improving the writing skills is not a new phenomenon in language education, thereby upgrading the whole system and atmosphere of TLFL. In this information century, for instance,

writing is not paper-based only, but it also uses richer media such as multimedia platforms (Westwood, 2008). Based on the above-mentioned factors, in this study, the practice of improving students' paragraph writing skills in EFL through blended learning technologies at higher pedagogical education is examined in detail.

### Paragraph writing in EFL

The definitions of 'paragraph' illustrate basic features and aspects of composing paragraphs in writing, such as the following ones: (1) a short part of a text, consisting of at least one sentence and beginning on a new line. It usually deals with a single event, description, idea, etc.; (2) a short part of a text that begins on a new line and consists of one or more sentences dealing with a single idea; (3) one of the parts that a piece of writing is divided into, consisting of one or more sentences and beginning on a new line (dictionary.cambridge.org). According to the above-mentioned definitions, it can be highlighted that a paragraph can be understood as a small version of a text by size, in other words, it also consists of an introduction (a topic sentence), a body (supporting sentences), and a conclusion (a concluding sentence). In general, a paragraph with blanks to be filled may be a legitimate early part of a writing programme, and can be considered a controlled composition (Broughton et al., 2002) which aims to instruct students to convey information, namely a message accurately and directly to the point and purpose of the context. The paragraph is the basic unit of prose forms of writing whose basic elements are as follows:

② All the sentences should be arranged in chronological and logical order.

② Organization of sentences should be according to the purpose.

② All the sentences should have meaningful relationship with each other (Arora, 2012).

Analyzing the basic elements of the paragraph according to its structure, it is necessary to highlight that the goal of teaching students how to compose paragraphs in EFL writing is instructing language learners to convey information, that is to say deliver a message to the reader accurately and effectively to achieve the purposes of writing genres from the initial stages of acquiring the target foreign language in fact. As a result, having mastered skills in constructing words, sentences, and other small parts of the written speech, fostering paragraph writing skills is not only the next stage in writing, but also the practice of consolidating all the knowledge and competence simultaneously. Following that, teaching paragraph writing skills is one of the most crucial parts of the system of improving students' writing competence at higher pedagogical education.

### Blended language learning technologies (BLLT)

Over the centuries, there have been a number of important changes and improvements in the scope of educational technologies, especially those which are implemented into the environment of teaching and learning foreign languages. Additionally, student access to our digital world has led some to talk about the 'connected classroom' (Stannard, 2012). Furthermore, the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has transferred completely the educational process into a new phase (Zhu & Liu, 2020). Consequently, conducting foreign language (FL) lessons through only traditional ways and technologies could not meet the requirements of the phases during and after the pandemic. For this reason, blending language learning technologies has become one of the most effective and convenient ways of sustaining the quality and content factors of education, for example, higher

pedagogical education in this pandemic phase around the world. For the most part, blended learning is an instructional design where face-to-face and online (mediated) learning are thoughtfully fused in educationally meaningful ways (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). To be clear, blended learning designs purposefully and creatively integrate synchronous free flowing, often spontaneous verbal communication with asynchronous reflective and precise written communication in face-to-face and virtual environments (Richey, 2013). It is a common consensus that students are not interested in writing a lot as the process of improving this type of the productive skills requires a vast amount of time; however, it depends on the teacher's technical and pedagogical competences to engage students to acquire their writing skills productively with the help of suitable methods, techniques, and approaches in a BLLE. As a result, it is now conceptualized as "a combination of real world plus in-world" (Claypole, 2010).

Following the above-mentioned factors, blended learning technologies in the practice of improving students' writing skills in EFL are advisory to be adapted for the process of composing genres of the written speech – for one thing, paragraph writing. Especially, as there are certain types of paragraphs in English writing, such as descriptive, narrative, example, process and opinion ones, a blended language learning environment can be created to foster paragraph writing skills based on the stages of composing this piece of the writing speech. This present study addressed the following questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the beneficial features of the BLLE in the improvement of students' paragraph writing skills?

RQ2: Is there any significant correlation between blended learning technologies and writing

competence, especially paragraph writing competence?

#### METHODS

The explanatory mixed methods research design is adopted in this study because of the need to examine the effects of BLLT on the improvement of students' paragraph writing skills in EFL writing. The design was implemented to collect data through course-evaluation questionnaires, achievement tests, and students' portfolios on writing tasks, namely paragraphs.

#### Participants

The participants involved were two groups of first-year students whose major was Foreign language and literature (English) in Uzbekistan State World Languages University (UzSWLU). During the study, the course on writing skills was taken into observation and chosen for the implementation of BLLT to improve the students' paragraph writing skills. The study sample had two types of groups (N=36): Experimental (N=18) and control (N=18); and the participants were selected purposefully to serve the objectives of the study. To some great extent, the two groups were almost the same in terms of nationality (Uzbek), age (average 18), educational background (high school), L1 (Uzbek), English level in the placement test (B1+). Following that, while the experimental group studied writing skills using the BLLT after having received the important instructions, the control group studied writing skills through the traditional ways of conducting the lessons at university. Before starting the whole process in practice, the participants were informed about the study objectives and their roles in the study. Then the participants in the experimental group who were invited to take part in the study were instructed to utilize BLLT to improve their paragraph

writing skills in general for the beginning of the study as this had to impact on the efficiency of the whole process.

#### Instruments and materials

The data were collected using the following instruments: a course-evaluation questionnaire, achievement tests, and students' portfolios on writing tasks, namely paragraphs.

#### Course evaluation questionnaire

Course evaluation questionnaire was designed to examine the participants' approach and evaluation towards the whole process and study. It aimed to reveal strong and weak points of the BLLT in the system of improvement of students' paragraph writing skills. The course evaluation questionnaire consisted of three sections: personal information, topics chosen to improve paragraph writing skills in English, and BLLT implemented into the process during the study. The participants rated their responses to the course evaluation questionnaire on a three-Likert scale. Items for the topics chosen during the study were rated using the following responses: More than I would like; About right; Less than I would like. Items for the applied BLLT into practice were rated responses as follows: Very satisfied; Neutral; Slightly satisfied.

#### Test

The final test of the writing skills course prepared by the department based on the study objectives was utilized to examine the students' paragraph writing skills after having received education in the BLLE. The test was administered online via Google Forms. This test included multiple-choice, true/false, matching, jumbled sentence, and fill in the blank questions. The achievement test of the writing course had a total of

40 items on the topics covered in the syllabus and an allotted time of one hour.

#### Portfolios

As portfolios served to save the students' writing assignments online and conveniently, this technology assisted the participants to foster not only their writing skills, but also IT literacy simultaneously. For this process, Telegram messenger was implemented to announce home assignments and receive them from the students in the BLLE. Due to the fact that digital learning environment tools enable both teachers and students to work with their documents conveniently at any place and time, the students' portfolios served both the teacher and students to work on the assignments in the digital environment of higher pedagogical education. Following that, this approach was adopted only in the experimental group as this was one of the most important features of BLLE. All the assignments on composing paragraphs in EFL were downloaded and kept in files by the teacher during the practical process of the study. In the end, the collected data from portfolios were utilized to compare and examine the areas of improvement of students' writing skills and efficiency of the created learning atmosphere (BLLE) in practice.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What are the beneficial features of the BLLE in the improvement of students' paragraph writing skills?

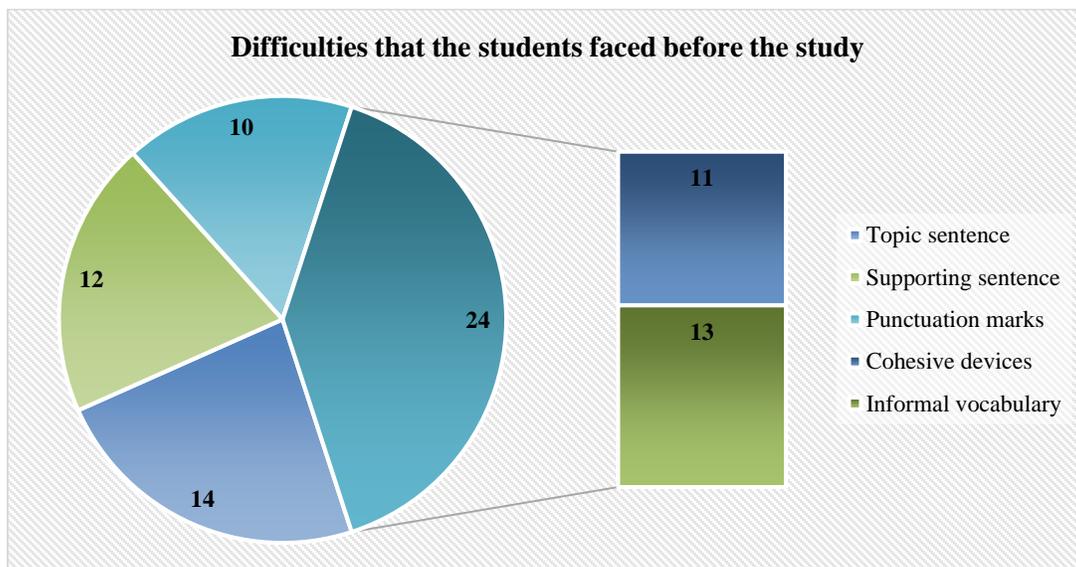
The improved areas of the first-year students' writing skills, especially paragraph writing ones were examined with the help of the portfolios on the digital platform, namely Telegram messenger and course-evaluation questionnaire that was administrated offline (at university) at the end of the study.

#### Portfolios

Focusing on the students' paragraph writing skills who were in the experimental group with the help of portfolios on the digital educational platform enabled both the teacher and students to work on the areas to be improved in a more systematic way. Accordingly, the results of this approach revealed that students had difficulties in composing topic sentences effectively, utilizing punctuation marks, cohesive devices and

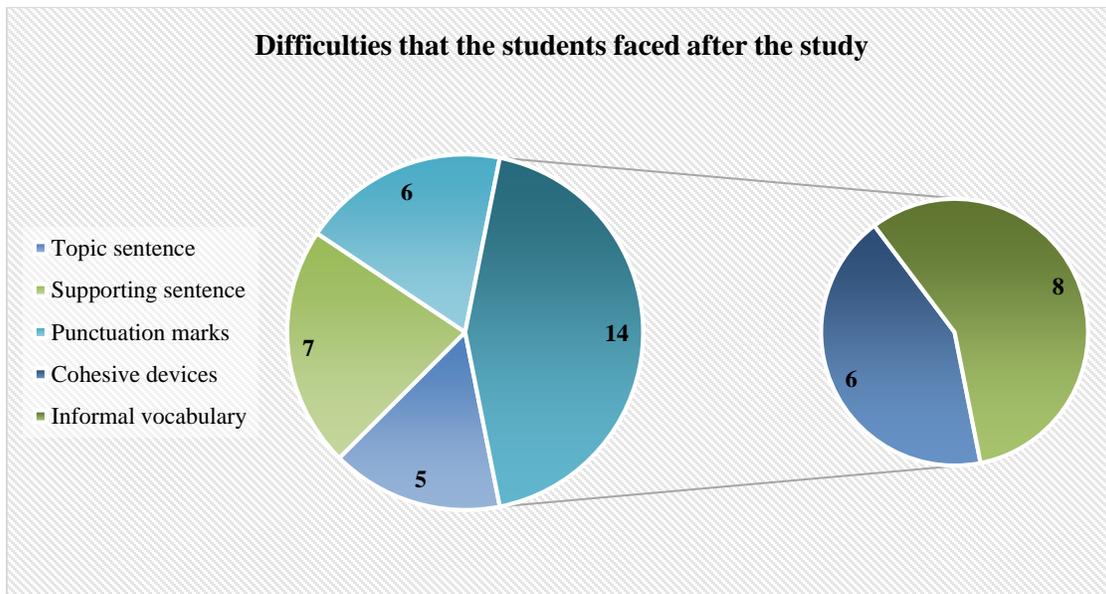
informal vocabulary along with supporting sentences. Following that, the following graphs illustrate the pre (before) and post (after) results of the study on implementing portfolios into practice based on the number of students with the above-mentioned types of difficulties in EFL paragraph writing (Figure 1):

Figure 1.



Thus, the initial condition of the students' paragraph writing skills instructed us how to implement BLLT into practice, and the primary focus of the study was given to create the BLLE to improve the areas which are presented in Graph 1 step by step. For instance, the assignments on fostering the students' paragraph writing skills were made in different forms, such as tests, exercises, and tasks on both platforms of higher pedagogical education. Consequently, working on the necessary areas via portfolios resulted in making progress remarkably which is shown in Figure 2 along with the decreased number of the students at the end of the study:

Figure 2.



As for the results of the control group, lessons for the students were conducted in a traditional way without BLLT, especially portfolios, so there did not occur any significant changes in the areas of improvement which is highlighted in the following results (Table 1). Besides that, students could not observe their progress and improvement areas as they were not provided with digital learning technologies and means continuously and connectedly in practice. The teacher also focused on improving their writing competence only during the face-to-face lessons at university.

Table 1.

Group	Areas	Topic sentence	Supporting sentence	Punctuation marks	Cohesive devices	Informal vocabulary
Control group	Pre	15	16	14	15	13
	Post	12	14	12	13	10

### Tests

Testing the students' knowledge and writing skills, especially paragraph writing ones in the BLLE impacted on the quality and content of the whole process at higher pedagogical education. The final test was distributed to both experimental and control groups at the end of the study to obtain all the results on fostering the students' paragraph writing skills in EFL. The topics which were included into the test materials consisted of all the necessary ones that assisted to compose paragraphs effectively and successfully, such as subject-verb agreement, capitalization, sentence and its types, collocations, and paragraph structures. As a result, the data which were obtained via Google Forms revealed the following differences between the groups (Table 2):

Table 2.

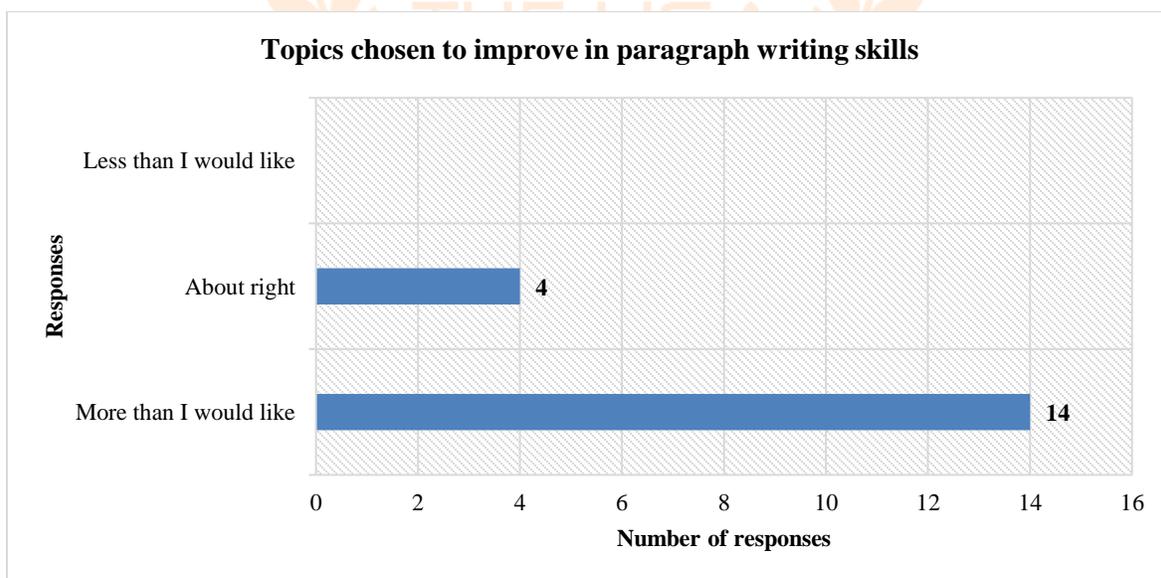
Group	SVA	Capitalization	Sentence	Collocations	Par. structure
Experimental group	8/10	7/10	9/10	4/5	5/5
Control group	6/10	5/10	6/10	3/5	3/5

A glance at the above-provided graph illustrates the medium number of the correct answers among the students to the questions of the final test on composing paragraphs in EFL. Hence, the difference between the groups can be noticed easily that creating a convenient and effective environment through digital learning technologies for students in the example of higher pedagogical education impacts on the content and quality factors of education directly. Furthermore, instructing the students how to compose paragraphs in EFL aimed to involve them to work on their writing skills through various means of blended learning in the experimental group.

### Course evaluation questionnaire

The whole process on implementing BLLT and examining their efficiency in fostering the students' paragraph writing skills was taken into consideration while preparing the course evaluation questionnaire for the ending of the study. As it was mentioned above, the questionnaire consisted of three main sections, and it was distributed among the students of the experimental group. Firstly, Figure 3 depicts the results of question on the topics which were covered during the study in the BLLE on both of the educational platforms with the help of a three-Likert scale.

Figure 3.



For the efficiency of the study, the topics to improve the students' paragraph writing skills had been chosen based on the study programme of the university for

the first year so as not to distract them in practice. What is more, the teacher presented the topics in different forms, for instance, text, video, audio, and

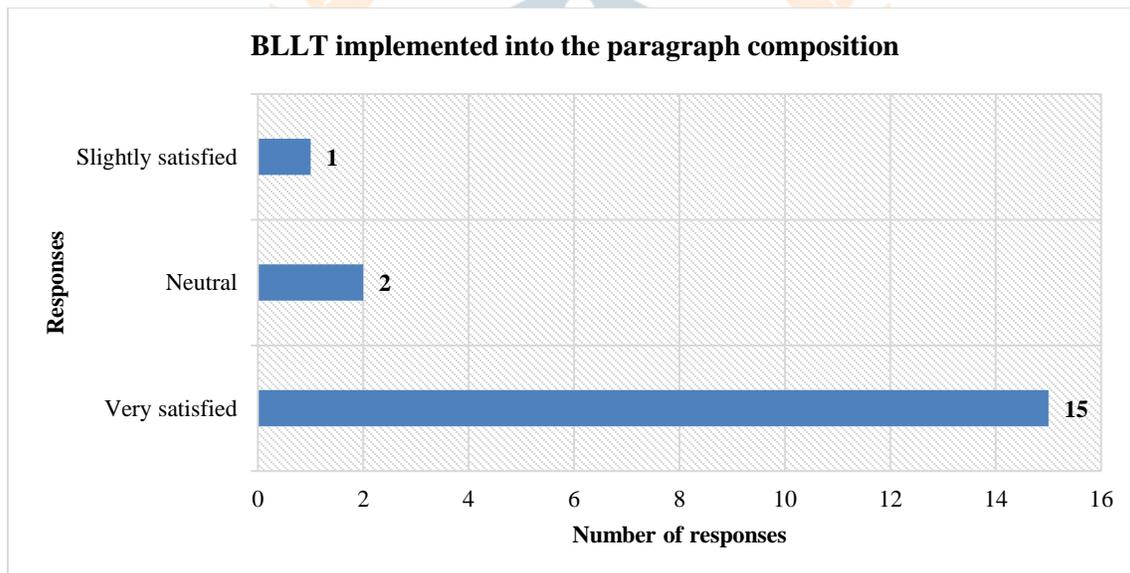
infographic ones with the help of BLLT to increase the students' interest in paragraph composition. As a result of this, the responses to the second section of the course evaluation questionnaire were in a high position.

RQ2: Is there any significant correlation between blended learning technologies and writing competence, especially paragraph writing competence?

Figure 4 reveals that BLLT in improving the students' paragraph writing skills are effective and significant in

higher pedagogical education as training future personnel in teaching EFL as an example involves teachers of this sphere to be proficient not only at teaching practical linguistic skills, but also integrating modern informative and innovative learning technologies with the system of teaching and learning EFL productively. Because of this factor, RQ2 played an integral role in the third section of the questionnaire. BLLT consisted of the platforms to provide the students with the materials, to communicate and discuss them, to receive home assignments, and to test the students' paragraph writing skills with electronic feedback in practice.

Figure 4



Accordingly, the above-provided graph illustrates that the students have utilized the BLLT effectively and successfully during the study. This also means that the correlation between BLLT and paragraph writing skills is that both teachers and students of EFL should work co-operatively to improve writing skills, thereby following a certain programme in a connected and continuous way. In addition, teachers should instruct students to compose genres of a written speech by

examining their strong and weak points through BLLT in practice to achieve their goals in a systematic way. Analyzing the correlation between the BLLT and writing skills highlights that content and quality factors of the lessons on this competence can be consolidated only when the whole process is updated with the help of an integrated educational model continuously.

### CONCLUSION



The current study has emphasized the use of BLLT in the improvement of students' paragraph writing skills in higher pedagogical education following the research results and data on this matter. The influence of BLLT on creating a convenient environment for both teachers and students of EFL in the example of teaching writing skills was examined. The difficulties that the participants of the research faced were reported in the use of informal language, punctuation marks, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, sentence and its types along with paragraph composition, such as topic and supporting sentences during the study. While focusing on the students' difficulties in a systematic way, it was also taken into account that not only their perspectives, but also the teachers' approach towards this linguistic competence and learning technologies were to be investigated to make progress in the scope of the research remarkably. Furthermore, the study implicates that it is advisory to give the primary focus not only learners, but also teachers and their competence on applying modern learning technologies in higher education. In general, the results of this study on implementing BLLT into the system of teaching and improving writing skills can be taken as a ground for further investigations in EFL writing compositions as genres of the written speech.

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