EFL Teachers' Perceptions on Blended Learning of Written Expression During Pandemic-19.

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Abstract:

   Writing is a challenging and nuanced endeavor; it is the most difficult of all the linguistic skills to master. This complexity frequently makes the teachers' mission difficult and affects the students' language learning comprehension and performance. However, with the rapid advancement of internet technology and the pandemic-19, blended-learning (abbreviated as BL) approach has been widely adopted and teachers become obliged to adapt to the new circumstances and try new teaching methods. The current paper aims at probing EFL teachers' perceptions of blended learning of written expression during pandemic-19. A survey was conducted with a sample of nine teachers of written expression module from the department of English at M'sila University. The findings demonstrate that teachers are dissatisfied with blended learning of written expression for a variety of reasons, and they offer a set of suggestions and recommendations based on their experiences.

   Key words: *Written expression, perceptions, face-to-face instruction, on-line*

   instruction, EFL, students.

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1. Introduction

In a world where the rapid expansion of networking technologies is dramatically changing the nature of life, work, knowledge, and communities, and with the newly dramatic events that the world witnessed due to the pandemic-19, it has become necessary to re-examine the fundamental axioms that dictate daily expectations and behaviours in general, and in education in particular. To keep up with local higher education reforms, they wanted university teachers to blend traditional teaching methods and learning approaches with the usage of new technologies to provide students with new skills needed in the 21st century labour market.

One of the most significant skills in the English language is writing, which is a critical skill for interpreting feelings, thoughts, and opinions in order to increase communication. Furthermore, it is thought to be more difficult, complex, and difficult for ESL students to master than speaking since it requires them to master handwriting, spelling, flow, and punctuation, as well as the ability to produce and organize ideas into comprehensible writings (Myles, 2002). The rapid development of internet technology and the pandemic-19 have altered writing skills education, forcing teachers to employ blended-learning, which is a combination of traditional face-to-face learning and certain aspects of internet learning. Thus, issues about the ongoing relationship between technology and the teaching and learning process seem deserving of continued discussion.

In regard to the process of learning English, all Algerian EFL undergraduate students in almost all English departments take written expression course during their three years of study for a bachelor's degree. This course has always been taught in a traditional manner, however, with the pandemic-19, the online learning becomes a necessity for both teachers and students as well. The current paper aims to shed light on current teaching experiences of written expression teaching in the English department at M'sila university, as well as depicting teachers' perceptions of combining face to face and on-line learning in written expression classes, to see how much teachers are aware of the issue and how much they employ online learning in their sessions, and to come up with some suggestions and recommendations that might be useful for policymakers, practitioners, and academics.

2. Literature review

A number of previous studies have concentrated on the effectiveness, effects, and benefits of blended learning using varying designs, scopes, and participants (Jin, Su, & Lei, 2020; Spanou & Zafiri, 2019). These studies proved that blended learning is significantly effective in developing positive learning outcomes among ESL students. For instance, Dowling (2003) revealed that developing a blended course increases students' scores and that students have a positive attitude toward its implementation. According to Lloyd-Smith (2010), blended learning allows institutions to make the most of their classroom space and resources, and provides flexibility for adult students who have a variety of activities outside of the classroom. According to Yamin and Ishak (2017), students at higher institutions have positive perceptions of blended learning, which improves their performance by allowing them to share documents, and complete assignments more quickly.

Reagrding blended learning tools, Kakosimos (2015) found that multimedia and web-platforms useful in improving the teaching and learning experience, and tools such as podcast and videocast, helped improve students' grammatical competence and communication (Brown, 2016). Anggrawan (2020) scrutinized the impact of blended learning on students' learning results and he found that blended learning has a substantial impact on students' learning results. In a study by Reasons (2005), he designed a business course in three ways: face to face, blended, and fully online. He found that the students enrolled in the online course performed better than the students enrolling in other sections even though the pedagogical teaching approach was the same. Cameron (2003) adds that students' motivation to study increases when the material is diversified, like when

employing interactive learning tools like simulations and static graphics in an online environment. In the same vein, Emelyanova and Voronina (2017) believed that the blended approach is effective in fostering self-directed learning and students' intrinsic motivation. Additionally, Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2015) argue that students who have positive perceptions of blended learning are more likely to engage and participate in the blended learning environment.

According to O'Toole & Absalom (2003), publishing content online has a significant impact on students' success levels. They discovered that students who read the online material in addition to the in-class lecture performed better on a quiz than those who relied solely on the usual in-class lecture.

As far as integrating blended learning in writing instruction is concerned, researchers like McCall (2017) explored how blended learning might help students improve their academic reading and writing skills using classroom observation, surveying, and interviewing. The integrated learning strategy was perceived by the participants as a creative and collaborative way to foster both reading and writing skills. Blended learning strategy was proven to be beneficial since it increases students' communication with their teachers, reduces communication anxiety, and promotes self-directed learners to improve their academic writing talents (Liu, 2013). In another study by Spanou & Zafiri (2019) and Yusuf et al. (2018), ESL learners' writing skills, essay composition, critical arguments, linguistic abilities, grammar, spelling, topic sentence, punctuation marks, capitalization, organization, and planning were found to increase with blended learning, as well as minimize language anxiety and ideas outlining.

When it comes to resolving writing difficulties, research studies have found that regular exposure to material is the only solution, especially in teaching a second language. According to Cervero & Pichardo Castro (2000, p 99), "80 percent of the content learned is forgotten in 24 hours." As a result, blended learning could be a significant learning model for students, as it provides them with additional assignments to reinforce what they've learned. In the same vein, O'Donnell (2004) argues that the accessibility of online material nearly 24 hours in addition to the face to face interaction give students more practice, and this can be a good solution to problems of writing.

It is worth mentioning that while many research studies have proven that blended learning can assist FL/ESL students improve their writing skills in many areas of the world, just a few have looked at the Algerian educational system, particularly in the context of EFL higher education. The current study aims to shed light on teachers' views on incorporating blended learning into writing teaching, which is one of the fundamental skills that students need to improve their foreign language proficiency. It aims also at providing a set of recommendations and pedagogical implications out of the teachers teaching practices, their access to technological mediums, the difficulties they face, their methods of assessment and their own suggestions.

Research Question: The following research question needs to be addressed:

1)   How do EFL written expression teachers perceive blended leaning as a newly imposed
     way of instruction?

3. Method
3.1. The Exploratory Study Design

Since the study is based on investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of the blended teaching and learning of written expression, an online semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect the needed data. The purpose is to provide an insight not only into teachers' perceptions, but also into their practices regarding written expression including their teaching methods and techniques, ICTs integration, the students' motivation, and the assessment methods as well as the difficulties they face in their mission.

3.2. Research Setting and Participants

This research took place during the second semester of the academic year 2020/2021. The study's participants are nine written expression instructors from the department of English at M'sila University. The sample consists of three males and six females. Most of the participants (6) taught written expression for more than five years, while three participants taught it for less than five years. All the details are displayed in table (1) and figure (1) below.

Table 1. **The number of the females and males**

Teachers' gender	Number	Percentage
Male	**3**	**%33.33**
Female	**6**	**%66.66**
Total	**9**	**100%**

Figure1: The number of the females and males

3.3. Data collection tools:

To achieve the intended objectives and answer the research question, an online semi-structured questionnaire was used. Before arriving at the final version of the questionnaire, several drafts were developed. For revision and validation, the questionnaire's validity was verified utilizing face and content validity procedures by consulting written expression experienced teachers. The questions were chosen, modified, and arranged mostly based on the assumptions derived from the review of the literature. The questionnaire's final version included 13 items. To collect both quantitative and qualitative data, various types of questions, including closed-ended and open-ended questions, were employed to provide adequate coverage of the researched topic. The questionnaire incorporates four sections. The first one provides information about the participants. The second section sheds light on the teachers experience with on-line teaching. The third one covers the teachers' teaching practices using face-to-face and on-line ways of teaching. Finally, the teachers' difficulties and suggestions are dealt with in the last section.

4. Results

The obtained results are summarized and presented in tables and graphs to be then analyzed and discussed.

Section II: Teachers' perceptions on on-line teaching of written expression as a newly adopted method of teaching

Q2) - Have you been using Moodle for teaching writing?

Table 2. **Written expression teachers' use**

	Number	percentage
	6	%66

	es	.66	
	3	%33	
o		.33	
	9	100	
otal		%	

of   Moodle platform.
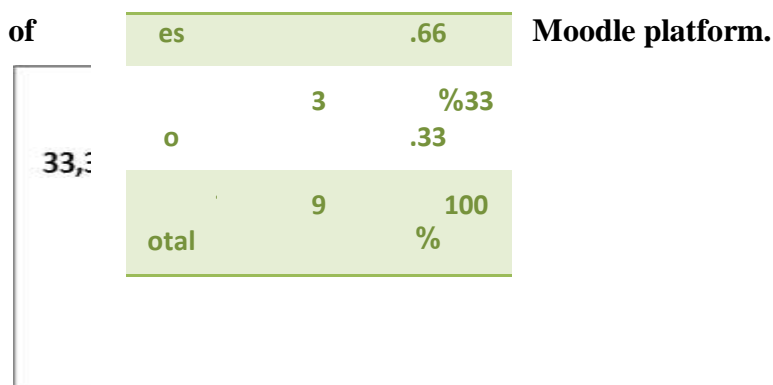
33,3

Figure 2: Written expression teachers'use

of Moodle platform

Analysis and Discussion:

By asking this question we aim to check whether the written expression teachers have been using Moodle platform for teaching. From the results shown in the table and graph above, 33.33% of the teachers state that they do not use Moodle to teach writing.66.66% of the teachers state that they do use it. This can be referred to the fact that the portal does not provide equal opportunities to all users. It can also explained by the teachers adaptability to the platform, lack of training, as well as internet connection difficulties.

Q3) - If No, which application have you been using to teach?

Table3. **The applications used in online**

written expression classes.

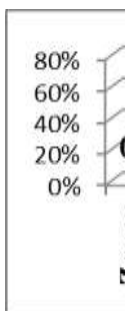| Zoom	Telegram	Skype	None	Total
0	3	0	6	9
0%	33.33%	%0	66.66%	100%

80%
60%
40%
20%
0%

Figure 3: The applications used for online

written expression classes.

Analysis and Discussion:

Through the results displayed on the table and the figure above we notice that 33.33% of the teachers use telegram to teach writing since they do not have access to Moodle platform. The teachers poor experience with Moodle experience forced them to look for other useful and practical devices.

Section III: Teachers' teaching practices in face-to-face and on-line leaning

Q4) - How many sessions of written expression do you teach per a week?

Table 4. **The number of written expression sessions per week**

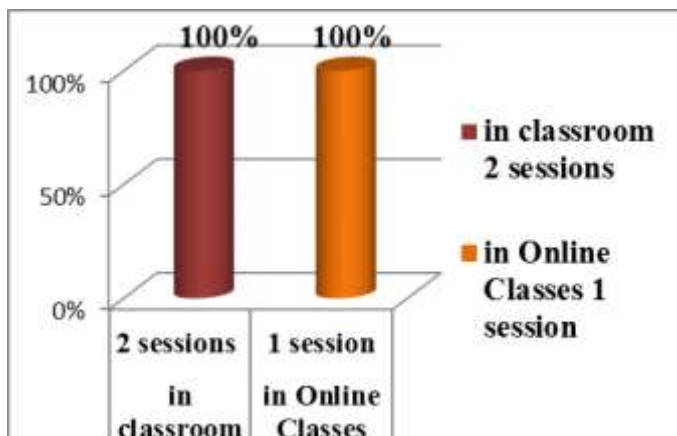|		
In online classes	1ses sion	1 00%
Total	9	1 00%
In classroom	2 sessions	1 00%
Total	9	1 00%

Figure 4: The number of written expression Sessions per week

Analysis and Discussion:

According to the statistics mentioned in the table and graph above all the teachers (100%) declare that they teach written expression module two sessions per a week in classrooms and one session per a week during online classes. This finding shows that the teachers are still opting for the classical teaching method due to their technological disabilities, technical problems and the students' interactivity with the online mediums.

Q5) - **As written expression teacher where do you engage your students more in written activities?**

Table 5. **Students' engagement in written Activities**

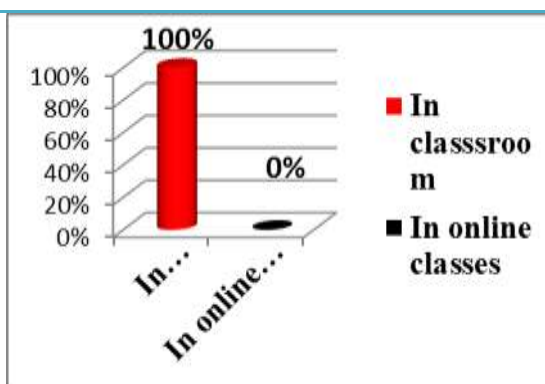|		
In classroom		**%100**
In Online Classes		**%0**
Total	9	**100%**

**Figure 5: Students' engagement in written activities.**

Analysis and Discussion:

When asked how engaged their students are in the various planned activities, all the teachers say that they engage their students more in the classroom than in online classes. This shows that lecturers are unable to engage students in tasks during online lectures due to a lack of physical interaction, a lack of student enthusiasm, and a problem with adapting to this newly integrated teaching method.

Q6) -   Which activities did you find most effective in engaging your students to write? (You may select more than one option.)

Table 6. **The most effective activities in engaging students to write.**

Summarizing	Paraphrasing	Essay and report writing	Story writing	Paragraph writing	Total
3	6	9	6	9	33
9.09%	%18.18	%27.27	18.18%	27.27%	100%
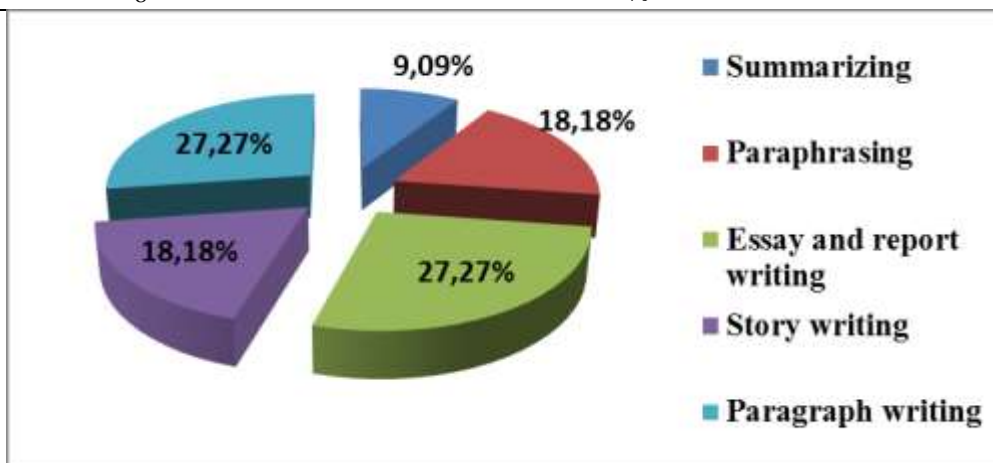
Figure 6: The most effective activities in written expression.

Analysis and Discussion:

Paragraph writing, essay and report writing are found to be the most helpful activities to foster the students' writing skill (27%) followed by story writing and paraphrasing (18.18%). Summarizing is found to be rarely used as illustrated in both the table and the figure above. The teachers add that creative writings as poetry and short tales to be an effective activity that they also use to improve the students written performance. From the obtained results, it is apparent that teachers opt for a variety of activities to improve their students writing skills.

Q7) Where did you have the opportunities to use various teaching techniques to enhance students' writing capacities?

Table 7. **Written expression activities.**

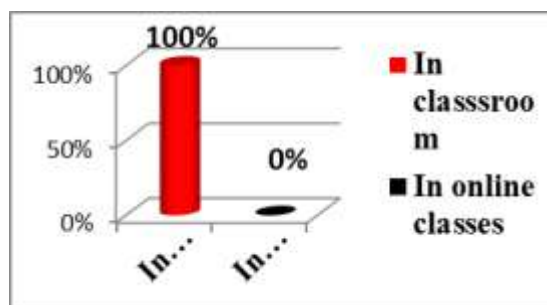| In class room	9	%100
In Online Classes	0	%0
Total	9	100%

Figure 7: The written expression

teaching techniques.

Analysis and Discussion:

Based on the table and figure above, all of the teachers agree that they have more opportunity in the classroom to apply various teaching strategies and to improve students' writing abilities than they do in online classrooms. This might be attributed to a variety of variables, including the students' limited engagement and interaction and the difficulty in diagnosing their requirements and needs. Furthermore, technological constraints that impede the provision of a diverse range of activities as well as the immediate teacher feedback.

Q8) – From your experience with blended learning, where did you find your students more motivated?

Table 8. **Students' motivation.**

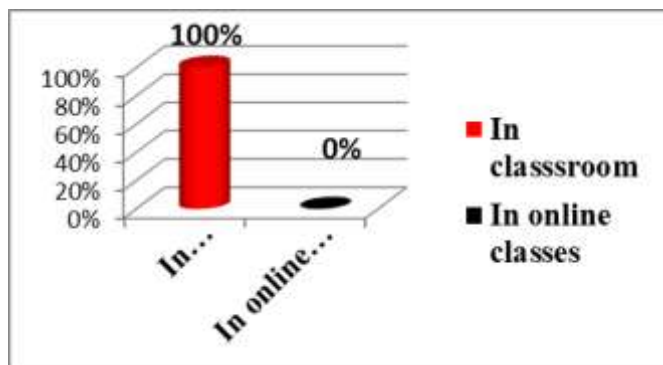|	
In classroom	**% 100**
In Online Classes	**% 0**
Total	**1 00%**

Figure 8: Students' motivation.

Analysis and Discussion:

All of the teachers agree that their students' motivation increases exclusively in the classroom. They argue that face-to-face learning is preferable to distant learning, particularly in written expression, because the teacher is in direct contact with his students and can diagnose their needs. They also believe that writing is a process, and that the teacher must evaluate what students are writing. E-learning, according to teachers, is a novel experience for students, and skills such as writing should be taught and monitored carefully in the classroom.

Q9) - How do you assess your student's competencies in writing?

Table 9: Teachers' assessment strategies in written expression module.

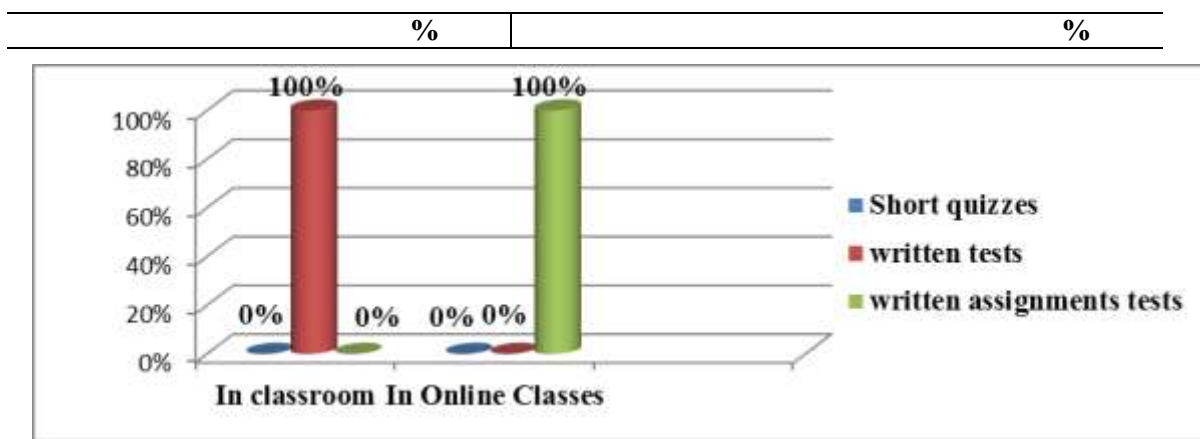| In classroom			In Online Classes		
Short quizzes	C	**%0**	Short quizzes	0	**%0**
Written tests	9	**%100**	Written tests	0	**%0**
Written assignment tests	C	**%0**	Written assignment tests	9	**%100**
Total	9	100	Total	9	100

%	%

Figure 9: Teachers' assessment strategies in written expression module.

Analysis and Discussion:

The graph and the table reveal that all teachers (100%) use written test to assess their students' written abilities in classroom while Written assignments is the way in which teachers assess their students written abilities via online mediums.

Q10) – To what extent do you find distance learning effective in written expression instruction?

Table 10. **Written expression view about distance learning effectiveness.**

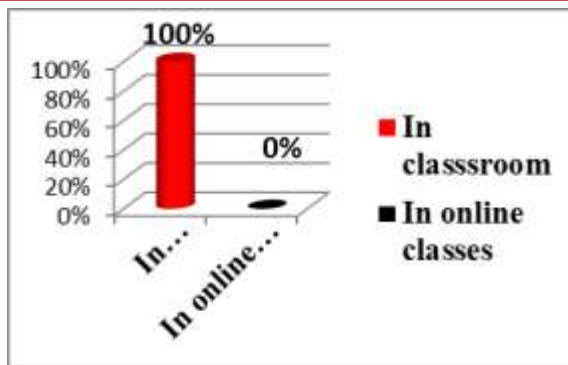| Effective	moderately effective	not effective	Total
0	9	0	**9**
%0	%100	%0	**100 %**

Figure 10: Written expression teachers' view about distance learning effectiveness.

Analysis and Discussion:

It is clear from the graph that all teachers (100%) find their teaching strategies more effective in classroom than in online classes.

Q11) - How did the distance learning affect the students' written performance?

According to the teachers, although, theoretically speaking, distance learning has proven to be an effective teaching strategy due to the benefits it offers such as the possibility to practise more when they are at home, it did not prove its effectiveness in practice as more plagiarism was

detected in the students' productions. Furthermore, they assume that the students are demotivated and less interactive and responsive due to the aforementioned factors.

Q12) -Did you encounter any difficulties in teaching written expression through distance learning?

The majority of the teachers stated that determining whether students are sincere in their writing or simply copying from the internet is challenging. They go on to say that because personal efforts are not evident, the teacher will have difficulty appraising his distant students. They also claimed that learning to write any form of piece of writing necessitates guidance. As a result, reading, analyzing and evaluating the student in class is more effective. Furthermore, they stated that because it is a new experience for them, they are unable to cope with blending on-line and face-to-face courses in a principled manner.

Section IV: Suggestions & recommendations

Q13) - Do you have any suggestions for effective e-learning of writing expression?

Teachers advised that in order to create successful online written expression courses, e-learning should be kept under control. They also demand that all regions and people have access to the internet, as well as the appropriate technology. Another suggestion made by teachers is that both students and teachers be trained to use these online platforms. In addition, they expressed their need to be encouraged to design their own curriculum that combines face-to-face to online learning teaching methods in a principled by organizing continuing professional development meetings (CPDs).

5. Discussion

The data gleaned from the teachers' responses help to answer the research question and achieve the goals set forth. According to an in-depth analysis of the statistics, 33.33 percent of teachers do not utilize Moodle to teach writing and are compelled to use other programs such as telegram and reduce their weekly on-line written expression sessions. This is consistent with Jin et al. (2020), who identify internet access, specifically Moodle, as a major impediment.

When it comes to student engagement, all of the teachers claim that their students are more engaged in the classroom than in online classes, where the most common activities are composing essays and short paragraphs. Teachers attributed this to a lack of motivation on the part of the students as well as inadequate involvement. Furthermore, in such a context, active learning activities such as collaborative learning, discussions, and presentations are significantly reduced, and teachers are forced to use written tests to assess their students' written competencies, owing to the students' difficulty of adapting to on-line learning, which is for the most part teachers and students a newly integrated teaching method. This finding, in fact, is not consistent with many previous studies, such as the ones by Scott et al. (2020) and Cui and Hu (2018), who found that an online learning context engages students more and fosters social and academic learning outcomes.

As far as the effectiveness of the on-line learning of written expression is concerned, all the teachers confirm that it is moderately effective compared to face to face learning, and just a small number of them mention some of its advantages. This finding is, in fact, completely unexpected when compared to the previous research findings such as the findings of Adas and Bakir (2013), who revealed that ESL learners can enhance their writing skills in areas such as topic sentence, spelling, grammar, punctuation marks, and capitalization by using a blended learning method.

From the teachers' responses, it was revealed that a deep gap exists between what they believe about the on-line leaning of written expression and what they experience on floor. Accordingly, they recommend that students, instructors, and institutions must put up enormous effort, because challenges such as poor staff training, poor technical competence among students,

poor connectivity, and administrative concerns can make the blended learning strategy difficult to implement. This complies with what Lien (2015) set as recommendations in his study.

6. Limitations of the study

There are a few limitations to the current study that must be revealed. First and foremost, the study makes no attempt to generalize its findings. Second, the sample size is a constraint; a larger sample would have produced more accurate results. The study focuses solely on written expression, but it should be expanded to include other language skills.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of written expression teachers on blended learning of English writing skills at the department of English at M'sila University. Despite the fact that the majority of the participating teachers were aware of the benefits of blended learning, such as improving students' writing skills through the exchange of written information and access to a variety of online reading materials, as well as improving their written communication skills, self-esteem, and interest in learning English writing, their experiences revealed the opposite.

These surprising findings were attributed to a variety of factors, including internet access, teacher and student training, student demotivation, and teacher and student adaptability to the online-teaching method. Accordingly, a set of recommendations were summed up out of the teachers' experiences and their own suggestions such as:

✓   Encouraging teachers to design their own curriculum that combines face to face to online learning teaching methods in a principled way taking into account students level, quality of topics (interesting topics, motivating ones)

✓   Both teachers and students need training with regards to online learning implementation.

✓   Making technological mediums flexible and easy to access.

✓   The platform's content must be essential to the learning process, not just a repository of files that may be transferred via other means.

✓   Training has to be provided for new students to facilitate their utilization of the university website.

✓   The website has to be re-designed with an interactive user interface that would increase students' engagement and retention and increase productivity.

✓   Services such as real-time chatting and video conferencing should be added to the university portal.

✓   There should be an active system of notification that will render the site a primary source of information related to students' university life.

✓   The platform has to integrate a principled on-line system of evaluation and assessment that is part of the educational career of students.

✓   Administrators should be involved in the e-learning process.

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