

Effectiveness of Non-Face-to-Face Online Academic English Writing Instruction on Korean EFL College Learners' Writing Skills and Writing Anxiety

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of online English writing instruction on university students' writing performance and their anxiety. A total of 34 participants completed the pre- and post- writing tests as well as the surveys regarding perceived anxiety toward English writing. Reflection papers and interviews were employed to triangulate the results of the questionnaires. Quantitative analysis of learners' writing outcomes and surveys revealed that online writing instruction helped improve students' writing skills and reduce writing anxiety. The interviews and reflection papers demonstrated that learners found the writing instruction helpful in reducing somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior, and cognitive anxiety. The current study suggests that adopting non-face-to-face online writing instruction aids EFL students in developing their writing and alleviating writing anxiety.

Keywords: *Non-face-to-face, Online, Academic Writing, Writing Skills, Writing Anxiety, EFL (English as a Foreign Language)*

1. INTRODUCTION

Non-face-to-face online education has been gaining increasing attention in the wake of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. With online education gradually evolving and diversifying, and subsequent comprehensive transformation in the education field becoming inevitable, EFL practitioners are required to be adequately prepared [1]. Furthermore, English writing ability has been a core competency since non-face-to-face communication has become increasingly popular owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. Considering the far-reaching effects of radical changes, it is imperative to seek an effectual model of EFL writing instruction in an online environment.

In line with changing times, recent EFL needs analysis also provided certain implications for future studies on online writing instruction. College teachers believe that learners lack essential, productive language skills, such as writing; therefore, they have difficulties in successfully performing academic tasks [2]. Effectively, learners wish to take writing courses, yet they perceive writing as the most challenging task, necessitating systematic guidance [3]. Particularly, for tertiary level EFL writers, teachers' attention and assistance are vital because English composition may trigger anxiety in psychological aspects as well as the cognitive burdens associated with creative thinking activities.

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Even though EFL writing instruction in Korea has been aiming to introduce a change in liberal arts education since 2012 and has also registered achievements, studies suggesting practical teaching methods online are not abundant [4]. Specifically, regarding online writing instruction, its effects on productive skills and affective aspects remain underexplored. Therefore, to meet the top-down and bottom-up needs mentioned above, this study aims to explore the effects of non-face-to-face online writing instruction on EFL undergraduates' writing performance and anxiety level.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Anxiety, as an affective aspect, is considered to be a significant factor in the fields of foreign language and distance education. Writing anxiety refers to the tendency of learners to avoid writing when performing a writing task to be assessed or to fear that they would not be able to successfully compose it [5-6]. It is generally agreed that second language writing anxiety, which occurs in second language (L2) writing contexts, negatively affects L2 writing development. However, considering that anxiety can be sufficiently changed by adequate instruction procedure and circumstance, the study of L2 writing anxiety in the online environment is even more worthwhile. Notably, anxiety can take on a new dimension in an online environment, but relevant studies are limited and need to be further explored [7].

Lee and Park made suggestions for future research on the effect of online EFL education. According to them, online English education had a greater influence on improving productive language skills than receptive skills, implying that more research on writing is required [8]. Essentially, there is limited knowledge about the impact of complete online instruction in a general English course on composition skills. They also reported that intervention effects should be discussed considering learner variables such as language proficiency, course goals, and instructional methods. Hence, follow-up studies need to be conducted. Concerning the effect of online college English classes on the affective domain, they underscored that research should verify the change in the affective domain through a pre-post design rather than a one-time-only questionnaire, which is prevalent in existing literature.

In this regard, recent empirical research has been reviewed, and it provides some implications for the current study. Kim recently examined the cognitive and affective effects of an online collaborative writing course on college learners [9]. Despite suggesting an online collaborative writing model, the research methods do have certain limitations, such as: (1) the participants in the study were elementary-level, working in groups; therefore, future studies should include students of different proficiency levels, working individually; (2) the second language anxiety scale was obsolete, and its validity and reliability must be examined; (3) supplementary qualitative data should be included to comprehensively understand learner anxiety.

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

The participants included 34 Korean EFL college learners (21 males and 13 females) who majored in various disciplines. They voluntarily took a general English writing course in an asynchronous distance-learning environment to learn academic writing skills following the process-oriented and learner-driven approach. Their self-reported English proficiency generally ranged between 685 and 865 on the TOEIC, which is roughly equivalent to B1 and B2 on the CEFR scale (i.e., independent user). None of the learners had taken any writing courses.

3.2 Class Procedure

The course objective was two-fold: (1) to realize that the writing process is cyclical and non-linear, and (2) to develop paragraph writing skills. Accordingly, the current study, referring to the literature, adopted a self-directed writing instruction model consolidating theory and practice. Figure 1 shows the whole process not as a fixed sequence but as a dynamic and recursive process. As Raimes stated, writers can go backward or forward in time to any of the steps involved in composing [10]. As demonstrated in the left column of Figure 1, students learned what to write and how to write effectively through a pedagogic cycle during the video-recorded lectures. The instructor, using writing models and practice activities, helped students grasp key concepts and how to apply them in their own writing. To put theory into practice, the students wrote using three different genres of writing: listing–order, cause–effect, and comparison–contrast, guided by a self-directed and a process-oriented approach. As illustrated in the right column of Figure 1, students planned and prepared their writing by strategically generating ideas and creating outlines. During the implementation stage, students composed their first draft, followed by a self-check using a provided rubric. They received the teacher’s feedback individually, i.e., the necessary comments and suggestions. Subsequently, they completed their final draft by making revisions and editing. Through the entire process, the students were constantly reminded and encouraged to consult their teacher regarding questions, at any time, via SMS or email. The instructional model is demonstrated below.

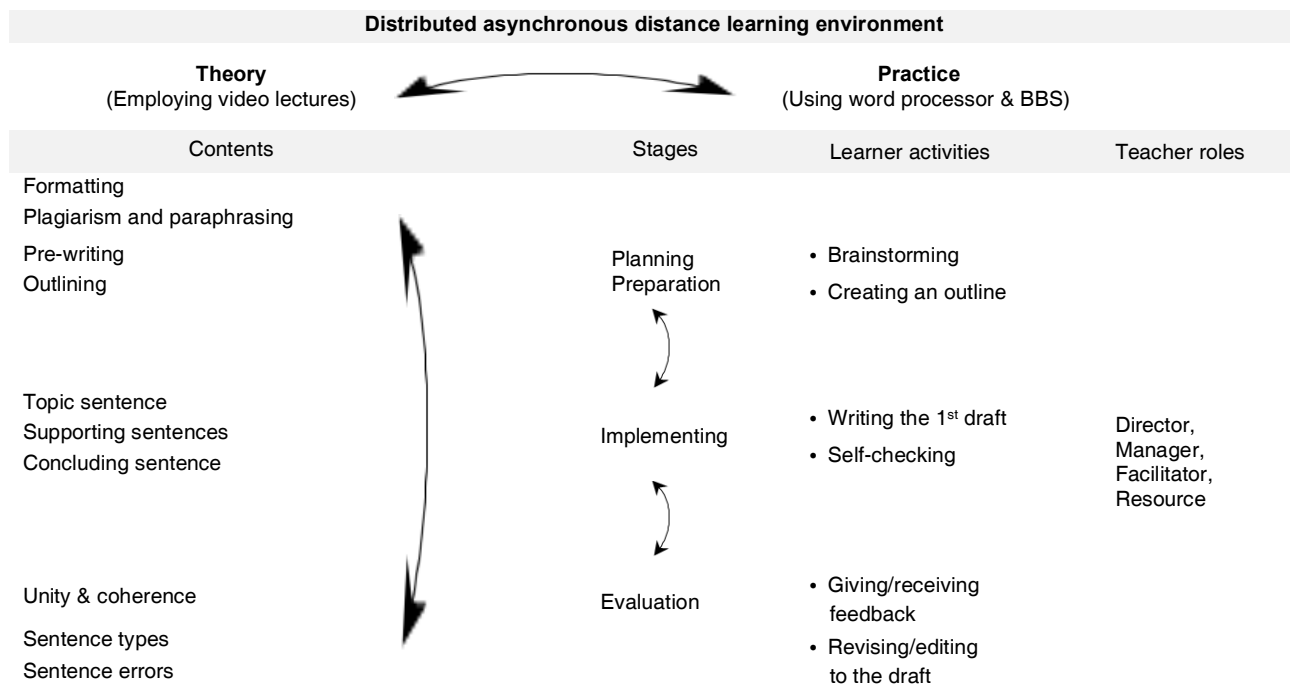


Figure 1. Non-face-to-face online EFL writing instruction model

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

A mixed-method research design was employed in this study. Specifically, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. To examine the effectiveness of the online writing instruction on students’ English writing achievement, pre- and post-writing tests were performed and analyzed using SPSS. Moreover, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory, developed and validated by Cheng [11],

was administered as pre- and post-surveys on a 5-point Likert scale to check whether the instruction was effective enough to change their level of writing anxiety. The Cronbach's α yielded a reliability estimate of .933. The coefficient α was .870 for the somatic anxiety subscale (seven items), .843 for the avoidance behavior subscale (seven items), and .896 for the cognitive anxiety subscale (eight items). Students' perceptions were further triangulated through journals and interviews. Five students volunteered to be interviewed to share any changes in their behavioral and psychological aspects toward English writing. The semi-structured online interview using Zoom lasted approximately 20 minutes for each participant; the participants were asked to respond to the following aspects: (1) description of their physiological and psychological reactions connected with their writing anxiety; (2) specification of how writing anxiety affected their writing processes and behavior; (3) specification of cases where they experienced writing anxiety; and (4) explanation of the reasons for their anxious feelings. The transcribed interviews and journals were coded from open to selective coding to examine emerging themes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Effects of Online English Writing Instruction on Korean EFL Undergraduates' Writing Skills

Table 1 indicates the mean score of students' pre- and post-test writing performance with a total score of 20. The data reveals that students gained a higher mean score ($M = 12.46$, $SD = 2.31$) in the post-test than in the pre-test ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 1.90$), and the mean difference was significant ($t = -9.631$, $p = .000$). The results further reveal that students significantly progressed in all areas of writing performance. Per criterion, a significant improvement was observed in organization ($t = -8.942$, $p = .000$), content ($t = -10.766$, $p = .000$), vocabulary ($t = -5.368$, $p = .000$), grammar ($t = -6.02$, $p = .000$), and mechanics ($t = -5.91$, $p = .000$). It can be assumed that online academic English writing instruction delivered in this study positively affected students' overall writing development.

Table 1. Paired t-tests of students' English compositions (N=34)

	Test	M	SD	t	p
Total	Pre	7.80	1.90	-9.631	.000
	Post	12.46	2.31		
Organization	Pre	1.21	.41	-8.942	.000
	Post	2.60	.81		
Content	Pre	1.44	.53	-10.766	.000
	Post	2.69	.64		
Vocabulary	Pre	1.65	.60	-5.368	.000
	Post	2.49	.57		
Grammar	Pre	1.32	.44	-6.02	.000
	Post	2.04	.60		
Mechanics	Pre	1.99	.77	-5.91	.000
	Post	2.90	.62		

4.2 Effects of Online English Writing Instruction on Korean EFL Undergraduates' Writing Anxiety

As shown in Table 2, in addition to overall anxiety, all aspects of writing anxiety reduced. It can be observed that online EFL writing instruction significantly lessened students' fear and nervousness toward English composition ($t = 3.667$, $p < .01$). Specifically, somatic anxiety was found to have a statistically significant difference ($t = 3.048$, $p < .01$).

Table 2. Paired t-tests of students' writing anxiety (N=34)

	Test	M	SD	t	p
Total	Pre	3.25	.72	3.667	.001
	Post	2.79	.49		
Somatic anxiety	Pre	3.22	.917	3.048	.005
	Post	2.74	.666		
Avoidance behavior	Pre	3.30	.672	3.197	.003
	Post	2.92	.636		
Cognitive anxiety	Pre	3.22	.882	3.359	.002
	Post	2.71	.735		

The following quotes illustrate how students ultimately managed their somatic anxiety.

Initially, my hands started to tremble and sweat when I began writing. I was really nervous throughout the timed writing. I didn't know what and how to write, so I couldn't manage my time properly. However, I learned from experience about the writing process and the way in which I develop my writing skills, which somewhat helped ease my tension in the end. (Student C, interview)

I experience immense time pressure at the beginning as I spent time pondering how to write. During the end-of-the-semester writing, however, I completed the task in 25 minutes and showed grace under pressure. (Student D, interview)

Learners' perceived responses to avoidance behavior were transformed to a statistically significant extent ($t = 3.197, p < .01$). The level of avoidance act reduced as the mean scores changed from 3.30 to 2.92. This result is confirmed by the following two excerpts.

I was always apprehensive about writing in English and never participated in tasks that involved English. However, while being involved in the class, my attitude toward English composition changed tremendously, and I could perform well without fear when working on English tasks. (Student Y, journal)

I had never written in English before, but I ended up thinking that I would continue to write to express my own ideas in English. (Student Z, journal)

A significant difference in cognitive anxiety was observed ($t = 3.359, p < .01$). A reduction in students' cognitive anxiety levels is interesting in that it may be associated with a Korean socio-cultural aspect. As Jeon pointed out, Korean EFL students tend to be conscious about losing face [12]. Although the findings should be interpreted with caution, it seemed that the self-directed, process-oriented online writing instruction positively influenced the reduction of students' cognitive anxiety. The following excerpts exemplify how students eventually changed their sentiments and eased the burden of the composition and assessment process.

Since the teacher was the evaluator, I felt uneasy about the errors I made and the feedback I would get. However, the multi-draft process helped reduce my anxiety because I didn't have to feel upset about the one-shot assessment. Rather, I learned that writing is a recursive process, and the understanding helped ease my tension. (Student B, interview)

At first, I was gripped by fear when I opened the teacher's feedback file. However, on the journey of the online writing process, I naturally came to accept my errors and understood the process as a way of learning without fear of criticism. (Student C, interview)

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of non-face-to-face online writing on the writing performance and anxiety of Korean EFL college students. The paired *t*-tests on pre- and post- writing

indicated that online composition instruction could serve as a feasible method to enhance English learners' overall writing skills. Paired comparison of students' writing anxiety and student interview data also showed that self-directed, process-oriented instructional interventions could gradually lessen their anxiety. It is noteworthy that the online instruction in this study could be helpful in reducing writing anxiety across all three subscales: somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior, and cognitive anxiety. Considering the findings, the all-in-one writing instruction in the ubiquitous learning environment helped students to better perform by cementing the link between theory and practice of English composition and to feel less concerned and have a liberal attitude. Significant gains can be achieved if future research includes the control group and extends the writing genres.

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