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**Hanife Bensen Bostanci<sup>1</sup>**

**Aida Ariannejad<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language Teaching, Near East University, Near East Boulevard, PK: 99138, North Cyprus, Mersin 10 Turkey/RCALL



## English as a Foreign Language Student Experiences of In-Class and Online Writing Courses

Hanife Bensen Bostanci<sup>1</sup>, Aida Ariannejad<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language Teaching, Near East University, Near East Boulevard, PK: 99138, North Cyprus, Mersin 10 Turkey/RCALL

Email: hanife.bensen@neu.edu.tr, aida.ariannejad@neu.edu.tr

### ABSTRACT

Online teaching especially in the Covid-19 pandemic era was made a must. Education institutions shifted from face to face to online instruction. This shift raises the question to which type of writing instruction is preferred by English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Taking this into account, this study sort to reveal the perspectives of university students majoring in the English language teaching (ELT) department in a private university in North Cyprus with regard to their experiences of writing courses designed both in-class and online. During the online implementation of the course, the students were engaged in UZEBIM: a Moodle designed by the institution. To be able to achieve the aim of the study a qualitative research design was employed. Two semesters were allocated in which the first was taught face to face and the second online. Both courses employed the same methodology to teach writing. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were administered to 17 participants after the online implementation of the writing course. It was made evident from the results of the study that the majority of the students preferred online writing courses to in-class (face to face). The reasons behind their choices could be attributed to the students' motivation, working in their own time and pace, and having illegible hand writing.

**Keywords:** Online, in-class, writing courses, English as a foreign language, learner perceptions.

### INTRODUCTION

Due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic which has influenced the world, most higher education institutions in northern Cyprus had to resort to education online. The immediate shift from face to face education to online education influenced both teachers and students in the university environment. This was reflected in student performances and teachers' evaluations at the end of online courses (Nadeem, 2020). Online education in this regard was considered inevitable. After this emergency remote teaching, university education is still continuing online until safety measures are taken. However, teachers and students are now more experienced and prepared for online courses.

Considering the writing skill, students' prior knowledge of learning writing with traditional approaches at schools in Northern Cyprus (Bostanci & Cavusoglu, 2018) have lead them to memorize model texts which do not have positive outcomes in the long run. One reason for this outcome could be attributed to the temporary effect memorization has on students' learning. Consequently, traditional approaches lack the incorporation of technological devices which are ubiquitous in the current era. Thus, little consideration is given to the students, focusing on teacher-centeredness. Some studies blended online and face to face education in writing courses and had effective results (Bensen & Cavusoglu, 2017; Bostanci & Cavusoglu, 2018). So, students in this specific context, are somewhat aware of the online nature of teaching and learning in university settings. However, the transfer to online teaching and learning leaves a gap in literature regarding the perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) students with regard to a writing course carried out online as compared to in-class in the Turkish Cypriot context. This study thereby aims at fulfilling this gap.

Online teaching and learning was seen to be time consuming and cost convenient in the study of Kutluk and Gulmez (2012). With regard to EFL students' opinions again in a similar context (Turkish), those who took online education elucidated that they had neutral feelings towards it (Orhan & Ay, 2017).

Taking the above into account it was of significance to find out the perspectives of EFL students who have taken both in-class (face to face) and online writing courses.

To be able to achieve the aim, the following research question is posed to be answered:

1. What are the English as a foreign language students' perspectives on their experiences in a writing course designed online as compared to in-class?

### **Literature Review**

Four major approaches to teaching EFL writing have been presented in the literature, namely, product, process, genre and process genre (Harmer, 2007; Badger & White, 2000).

### **The Product Approach**

Among the approaches the product approach is considered the most traditional. Students in this approach are required to produce the correct textual form that conforms to the model provided by their teacher. In this approach the focus is on the final product produced by the students, which concentrates on correct linguistic form. Thus, students are taught to deconstruct and reconstruct model texts to develop competence in specific modes of written communication (Christmas, 2011). Traditionally, this approach was used by many EFL teachers all around the world. In other words, in this approach to EFL writing the final piece of writing is judged according to vocabulary and grammatical use, mechanical accuracy (spelling and punctuation) and content and organization (Badger & White, 2000), focusing on producing correct text.

### **The Process Approach**

In contrast to the product approach, the process approach mainly focuses on the stages of writing such as planning, drafting, revisiting or redrafting and editing (Harmer, 2007). Learning in this approach is seen non-linear and discursive, and methods of teaching play a pivotal role (Badger & White, 2000). Thus, the writing process is advocated as recursive in this approach.

According to Tribble (1996) this approach poses four stages: prewriting, composing/drafting, revising, and editing. Students in this approach are able to make personal connections to a topic and come to understand the processes they follow when writing it (Bensen & Cavusoglu, 2017). Teachers encourage learners to see writing not as grammar exercises, but as the discovery of meaning and ideas (O'Brein, 2004).

### **The Genre Approach**

This approach combines an understanding of genre and genre teaching together in the writing class. The main emphasis of the genre approach is on social contexts (Widodo, 2006). Writing is seen as a social act together with linguistic and social activity. That is to say, students present their work with a certain purpose to a particular audience in a particular context (Santoso, 2010). Texts are perceived as attempts to communicate with the readers (Miao, 2005).

According to Hyland (2002) writing instruction in this respect may be considered as containing three stages: modelling the target genre, analysing the genre through teacher-student negotiation and constructing a final text (p. 21). In this approach, the focus is on the reader and on the conventions that a piece of writing needs to follow in order to be successfully accepted by its readership (Bensen, 2014). The student produces texts that fulfil the expectations of its readers with respect to content, grammar and organization (Muncie, 2002).

This approach sees writing as an extension of the product approach because the students have the opportunity to study a vast variety of writing patterns, such as, academic reports, research papers and business letters (Badger & White, 2000). This approach enables learners to produce their written products and to successfully be able to communicate with others in the same discourse community (Bensen, 2014).

### **The Process Genre Approach**

The last approach to EFL writing was introduced by Badger and White (2000). This approach is the synthesis of both the process and genre approach in which learners are able to study the relationship between form and purpose for a specific genre while using the recursive processes of prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing (Bensen, 2014). These steps enable learners to develop their awareness of different text types as well as the composing process.

According to Badger and White (2000, pp. 157-158) students go through the following steps when acquiring the process genre approach:

1. Preparation. Teachers define a situation that will require a written text and place it within a specific genre, such as a persuasive essay arguing for or against an issue of current interest. By doing this the schemata is activated and therefore it allows students to anticipate the structural features of the given genre.
2. Modelling and reinforcing. Here, the teacher introduces a model of the genre and encourages students to consider the social purpose of the text and lets them determine the audience. For example, the purpose of an argumentative essay is to persuade the reader to act on something. Here, the teacher discusses how the text is

structured and how its organization develops to accomplish its purpose. The students may do some comparisons with other texts to reinforce what they have learned about the particular genre.

3. Planning. In this step, many meaningful activities are introduced to activate the students' schemata about the topic. These include brainstorming, discussing, and reading associated material. The aim is to help the students develop an interest in the topic by relating it to their experience.

4. Joint constructing. This step will facilitate later independent composing. The teacher and students work together to begin writing a text. While doing so, the teacher uses the writing processes of brainstorming, drafting, and revising. The students contribute information and ideas, and the teacher writes the generated text on the board or computer. The final draft provides a model for students to refer to when they work on their individual compositions.

5. Independent constructing. At this point, students have examined model texts and have jointly constructed a text in the genre. They now undertake the task of composing their own texts on a related topic. Class time can be set aside for students to compose independently so that the teacher is available to help, clarify, or consult about the process. The writing task can be continued as a homework assignment.

6. Revising. Students eventually will have a draft that will undergo final revision and editing. This does not necessarily mean that teachers have to collect all the papers and mark them one by one. Students may check, discuss, and evaluate their work with fellow students, as the teacher again guides and facilitates. Research literature has widely discussed different aspects of peer-editing pedagogy, which will be further discussed in the following sections on feedback. Some of the benefits of incorporating peer revision in writing instruction include students working in a friendly environment, gaining insights regarding their own work by reading other work, to see other approaches and perspectives of an issue in the given writing, improve students' ability to read a paper critically and strengthening student communication skills, especially in respect to critiquing and providing feedback.

### **Online Writing**

In terms of the teaching and learning of writing online, educational technological enhancement for example, computer programs, networks, the Internet and e-mail have made it possible to develop learners' writing skills and abilities (Al-Jarf, 2007). These platforms can be incorporated both verbally and visually into teacher syllabi to teach students to write.

In addition to the platforms mentioned, online writing tools are also applicable to teach writing. The study of Miftah and Raya (2018) in which the Edmodo tool was investigated revealed that this tool improved the students' writing skill in terms of writing an argumentative essay. Other online writing tools like forum, blogs, and wikis were all seen to have positive outcomes in terms of improving EFL students' language learning (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010).

The study of Bensen and Cavusoglu (2018) also showed that blending Facebook as a social networking site, e-mail and the Internet into a writing course improved EFL students' writing performances and thus, the students had positive attitudes with regard to the incorporation of online tools.

The current study of Zaghlool (2020) who aimed to investigate empirically the effectiveness of using CALL online writing activities on EFL university students' writing achievement, revealed that the students had positive attitudes towards using CALL online writing activities in the teaching and learning of the writing skill. The students in particular stated that CALL online writing activities were useful, enjoyable and motivating thus, enhanced independent learning and self-confidence.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Procedures**

This study took place at the English Language Teaching (ELT) department of a private university in North Cyprus. To reveal the perspectives of EFL students who are also prospective English language teachers regarding in-class and online learning of academic writing courses, a qualitative research design which included interpretative phenomenological inquiry, i.e. understanding the individual's perspective and experience (Norton, 2009), was employed. The interest was on the 'lived experience' of the research participants.

Two academic writing courses which aimed at improving students' writing skills related to different essay types was the focus of this study. The participants were engaged in a face to face (in-class) writing course (Advanced Writing I) followed by an online (Advanced Writing II) course for two semester (16 weeks of instruction each) by the same lecturer. In both teaching and learning modes, a process genre approach to EFL writing was employed. The participants in the course were expected to fulfil tasks before writing drafts of their essays. For example, they were given sentences of thesis statements and were required to complete the sentence to form an effective thesis statement. Two drafts and a final product were required to be submitted for each essay type. Every two weeks a different essay type was of focus. Two topics for an essay type were presented to the participants to select from. The students were also engaged in individual, peer and collaborative corrective feedback throughout the writing courses. Students were trained on how to give peer feedback and the

institution's code correction criteria was implemented when providing corrective feedback. Before submitting the final version of the essays, they were checked for plagiarism on the Turnitin account provided by the lecturer.

During the online mode of teaching the UZEBIM Moodle was adopted as a platform to place materials, activities, links and recordings of online Google Meet live lecture sessions, the code criteria, assessment criteria, attendance, announcements, videos, reflective feedback questions, scores and grades. With respect to the university's requirements every week the lecturer of the course was obliged to place a material, video, reflective feedback questions, the live lecture recording of the topic being taught. During the Google Meet live lecture students were engaged in tasks and activities similar to the in-class mode and questions were posed to the lecturer. Some tasks were required to also be carried out synchronously. For example, the social media site Facebook was used for instant messaging and reading materials. Students were not restricted to only using the UZEBIM moodle.

### **Participants**

Seventeen EFL students majoring in ELT constituted the participants of this study. Eleven of the participants were Turkish and six were Turkish Cypriot in origin. Nine of the participants were females and eight were males. Convenience sampling which is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling in which members meet a practical criterion such as accessibility and availability at a given time (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim 2016) was employed. In other words, all the participants were conveniently available to carry out the study.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Before carrying out the study, ethical consent was received by the private university. In addition, both written and oral consent were received by the participants. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of their identities.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were administered to the participants after both experiences, namely, face to face (in-class) and online writing, to understand their points of view with regard to their experiences in the courses. Semi-structured interviews are flexible, allowing the interviewer to change the questions and/or elicit further clarification where necessary. "The purpose of a semi-structured interview is to understand the respondent's point of view, so open-ended questions are asked to enable the interviewee to talk more freely" (Norton, 2009, p. 99).

The interview questions were originally set as five questions. However, during the interviews this number increased in order to clarify understanding and misinterpreted questions and to specify information. For this reason, only some of the information from the interviews were used for this study. The semi-structured questions were as follows:

1. Do you prefer writing in the classroom or online? Why?
2. Do you prefer doing tasks in the classroom or online? Why?
3. Do you prefer the previous in-class writing syllabi or online writing? Why?
4. Do you prefer to write by hand or type? Why?
5. What do you think is good/bad about online writing courses? Why?

Each interview question lasted approximately 5-10 minutes, calculating approximately between one hour 25 minutes to two hours 50 minutes in total.

The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed one by one and analysed. In this process, stages of qualitative data analysis put forth by Miles and Humberman (1994) were followed. The interviews were transcribed and transcripts were examined individually at first and then emerging themes were explored across all transcripts to validate the codes. Data was first coded and sorted into coded classifications then systematical patterns in the data were recognised (Berg, 2001).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **In-class vs Online Writing**

When the participants were asked whether they preferred writing in the classroom or online writing, 16 out of 17 of the participant's preferred online work and one out of 17 preferred classroom-based writing work. The reasons for their choices indicated that students felt that online work gave them the flexibility to work whenever they felt ready to work on their writing as well as the opportunity to think and research for a longer time before starting writing. As described as one of the advantages of online work in the literature, it enables students to do their work in their own pace (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Arnold, explained that he "could do the online work on my mobile phone anytime and wherever I want". Willingness to work on their own pace was apparent in Betty's words, who pointed out that she could write when she was "relaxed at home." Similarly, Samantha and Jane stated that online work enabled them to think and research before they write. One student (Sharon) claims that



online writing courses address her needs as she is also working. Sharon uttered in the interview that 'I was able to watch the lecture recording placed on the UZEBIM moodle after work', this enable her to keep up with the work carried out in the online lecture.

Another possible advantage of the online writing courses that students stated was flexibility. Two benefits posed by Marsh (2012) regarding the Blended learning approach are that it provides "a less stressful practice environment for the target language" and "flexible study, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners' needs" (pp. 4-5). Some students were in the belief that they would be able to do their work in their own time in a less stressful environment. Tom stated his opinion by comparing classroom sessions to online work. Doing work at home would be "better because at home I can concentrate there is no pressure on us in class there is pressure but at home we have a clearer mind". Another interesting point put forth by Sharon was that "For me I can learn at home as well because for me, I work, so I will not lose out on anything, I can check. It will be useful for me". Related literature has also put forth that "learners are expected to be able to fit learning into their busy lives especially professional adults and university students" (Hockly, 2011, p. 58). An online writing course, therefore, enables students to do the initial work online in their own pace. In other words, the participants stated that the online writing course was flexible, allowing them to do tasks in their own time and pace.

Another significant point made by a majority of the participants (n=16) was that classroom work was "time consuming and very boring" (Iona). The fact that students were involved in online tasks, i.e. watching video clips, reading 'real live articles, connecting virtually with each other and the lecturer via Google Meet recordings and being engaged in social networking Apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, which are all related to their daily habits, could be one of the possible reasons why students preferred the online writing course to the classroom writing course. An online writing course is seen to motivate students as they find classroom writing boring (Pinkman, 2005; Turgut, 2009; Zhang, 2009). According to Sharma and Barrett (2007), online work is seen a more motivating process.

When students were asked to state their opinions about the possible benefits of online writing courses, most students pointed out that it could be motivating for students to use online technologies as this is part of their everyday lives. It is already claimed in the literature that approaches regarding the use of technology and online learning motivate students as they feel that they keep up with the new technological era (Krebs et al., 2010; Marsh, 2012; Turgut, 2009). This was confirmed in Tanya's words: "The majority of students use internet nowadays. When we write in class, it's boring but when it's for our own pleasure, online, it's not unfamiliar. So it's a benefit". In other words, Tanya pointed out that technology nowadays is part of students' lives outside the classroom environment and utilizing such a tool is important in getting students motivated in taking part in what is going on in the lecture.

Another reason may be associated with the traditional mode. That is to say, learning in class has been an ongoing duty which is considered monotonous. As Jane stated in her interview to the question concerning classroom and online writing "in class we come out of other lessons and my brain doesn't work". Therefore, doing a writing course online was seen to have attracted their attention as it is something they are not accustomed with. In addition, the classroom atmosphere is sometimes seen frustrating, i.e. a place where students are appointed to fulfil tasks, which is also seen as a defect for them. As Mellie stated "writing in class is frustrating". Leakey and Ranchoux (2006) study found that students preferred an online approach "positive and motivating than traditional classroom learning" (p. 357).

Finally, Zara argued that online writing increased the possibilities for individualised instruction, hence, having more attention on individual progress. She pointed out that "not enough feedback can be given in class as there are many students to deal with". Therefore, it is suggested that an online writing course provides personalized instructor feedback (Pardo-Gonzalez, 2013). The only student contradicting to the other students (Ozie) stated that he preferred classroom writing due to the fact that he liked communicating face to face. On the contrary, related literature suggests that:

Most students nowadays are part of the so-called "Net Generation" that grew up with the Internet. Virtual space has been an integral part of their daily life. Face-to-face classes may exploit this venue to accommodate students who feel intimidated about participating in the classroom. (Ya Ni, 2012, p. 212)

Ozie's preference was most probably attributed to technical issues such as not having continuous Internet access. For this reason, when his peers and lecturer sent him corrective feedback for his drafts, he was not able to check his mistakes at that very moment. Therefore, when collaborative debates and discussions were held regarding the corrective feedback, it was not possible for him to join these discussions as he arrived to the class sessions unprepared. The student in question was individually given feedback after class hours regarding his peer's corrective feedback.

### Tasks

When participants stated their preferences regarding classroom or online tasks, 14 out of 17 of the participants said that they preferred online work and three out of 17 stated that they preferred classroom work. Related literature suggests that students' motivation to learn increases when they are given the same material in different

ways using technology and simulation (Cameron, 2003). Similarly, online work was seen more fun, easier and that there are more ideas and things to think about before actually starting to write (Pinkman, 2005; Turgut, 2009; Zhang, 2009). Arnold added that he is online all the time through his mobile device and therefore he found online work to be less like “work” and hence less boring. This raises the issue of the emerging technologies and their place in the teaching and learning contexts. Larson (2012) puts forth that “an advanced cell phone almost has the computing power and features of a desktop computer from a decade ago” (p. 1). With these technological devices, students are able to both keep track of an online course and socialize on the Internet, in other words work with pleasure. Similarly, lecturers are able to keep track of students’ work and help them through the process, for example, by sharing links connected to the topic and through the logs section created on the UZEBIM Moodle.

An interesting point raised by Tanya, one of the students who preferred online work to in-class work, was that it is easier to keep track of and prove that she had done the work to her lecturer. Ozie, who was also of the same opinion, stated that “every task we did can be proven on the Moodle”. Taking into account that points were deducted for late submitted tasks, students were also able to show their lecturer the dates they had submitted their essays, sent their essays to their fellow classmate for feedback and received their essays after feedback, thus, the dates of the completed tasks were all present on the devices available on the Internet, i.e. What’s App, e-mail, Google Meet, Facebook Messenger, and the UZEBIM Moodle. According to Macdonald (2008) online work is traceable, whereas classroom evidence is lost after the event. In addition, online work is accessible to lecturers as well. Baring this in mind, the lecturer was able to check the date and time of students’ assigned tasks and submissions via the UZEBIM Moodle, the date and time of tasks assigned on the UZEBIM Moodle site and Google Meet recordings, and give marks accordingly. Issues related to late submissions, uncompleted tasks and receiving of essays were easily detected during the online process. Furthermore, online work for Zullu seemed easier as a student and as a future teacher as she stated that:

The track changes tool on the Word page really helps when marking others’ papers. Plus, there is a grammar check, which means I could give an error free paper. I also was able to make use of the synonyms – as you said we shouldn’t use the same words continuously.

These words indicate that the implementation of an online course has a variety of advantages both as a student and a teacher. Scriviner (2011) also put forth many advantages of word processing, which include many of the points Zullu suggested. Race (2010) highlights the benefits of digital technologies that improve marking efficiency and effectiveness of feedback, which include the Microsoft Word programme that could be used to edit containing the features of track change and drawing facility, and PDF text editing tools such as ADOBE and ReMarksPDF. Similarly, Levy (2009) argues that “the word processor has undoubtedly become one of the most widely accepted technologies for writing” the central purpose of which is to “facilitate the flexible manipulation of text” for easy “drafting and redrafting” (p. 772). Likewise, Ho and Savignon (2007) described how the track changes function in Microsoft Word can be used for computer-mediated peer review via email. Both the students and the lecturer had the opportunity to benefit from many features presented in a ‘single’ Microsoft Word document when giving WCF.

A possible advantage of writing online regards the implementation of computers. Computers are seen as a complement in the teaching environment (Ruthven-Stuart, 2003). One aspect of a computer is Microsoft Word. The Microsoft Word programme was found beneficial by most of the participants. It was mentioned by the participants that the Microsoft Word programme enabled them to benefit from the track changes and comment features presented in the document (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Correspondingly, Zullu reported that when “writing online there is a grammar check it’s useful but pen paper I will not correct my errors. Online I will double check as it is in red it makes you check”. One of the strengths of the Microsoft Word programme is the fact that it enables students to check and edit their own mistakes (Race, 2010). This self-editing opportunity of online writing contributes to and fosters learner autonomy (Marsh, 2012).

### **Opposing Beliefs**

Students who were against an online course appeared to argue that the reason for being against this was their personal dislike towards “new things” (Samantha). One of these students, Samantha, stated that her preference was due to her being a “traditionalist”. In other words, she preferred to write on paper rather than type on the computer. All opposing students also agreed that an online course was a longer process and that there were too many tasks to complete. Eydelman (2013) puts forth that it is a challenge for students to learn to use a new learning environment and adds that “students’ prior learning experience which to a large extent is based on a teacher-centred approach to learning and teaching” (p. 49) has a tremendous impact in this process of adaptation. Therefore, students are affected by the way they had been taught in the past. For this reason, Hailey may have responded in this way.

### **Different Approaches**

A question which arose in the interview with regard to students' preferences between the in-class writing course approach employed in their previous writing experiences (traditional product approach to EFL writing classes) and the writing courses taught with the process genre approach, all students stated that the process genre approach was more effective. Samantha, the student who earlier stated that she was a traditionalist stated that:

In my previous writing courses, I learnt nothing. In these writing courses, I saw my changes and the strategies needed to write an essay. Before, my teachers used to give a topic and I would do it as homework and get points. I like the style we used.

This statement shows that students prefer to see their progress, which became evident in the process genre approach employed in both writing courses. Hailey points out that in her previous experiences, writing would be assigned as homework where students would only get points for a product, ignoring the process of writing altogether. After experiencing the process genre approach and working on her own progress, she stated that in order to write something coherently and error free, students should go through the process of writing rather than producing one final product. Ozie also stated that the traditional style "doesn't teach anything. We just get points for what we write". This statement also shows that traditional writing courses, which are taught using a product approach, dwell upon the product of writing disregarding the process needed in order to be able to write (Bensen, 2014; Bostanci & Cavusoglu, 2018; Raimes, 1983). Therefore, students' reflections on their experiences of the product approach suggest that this approach is more effective than the product approach and that during this process points should be given to drafts rather than receiving points for a final product.

### **Peer Collaboration**

Peer collaboration was one of the important issues that students raised as a positive point for the approach (Process Genre) employed in the courses. Anna, for example, explained that she was "able to learn from my friends and find out missed things [sic]". In other words, she supported collaborative and peer learning. Peer collaboration in writing has been shown to be effective for Learning to Write and Writing to Learn (Graham, Mckeown, Kihara & Harris, 2012; Yarrow & Topping, 2001). Race (2010) indicates that this approach is powerful as it supports students to learn from the process by gaining insight into the approaches used by others. Students are able to put their work into context by reviewing other work that may be weaker or stronger than their own and based on this they are able to recognise how future work could be improved.

Andrew pointed out that "students cannot learn writing strategies on their own and we have to have a path". From this quote, it can be understood that students see writing as a skill that has to be specifically taught (Bostanci & Cavusoglu, 2018; Myles, 1983) and strategies are needed in order to be able to write well (Krashen, 2004). These strategies were not only useful to the students as writers but as Anna stated, "the strategies etc. that we learnt in this course will help us as future teachers". In other words, learning of writing in steps was not only perceived as a course in writing by the students but was also considered as a course in learning how to teach writing. On this issue, Zara explained that "we focused more on writing which taught me a lot about the teaching and learning of writing". This is significant because it shows that students in the ELT departments do not only perceive courses such as this one as learning language skills. It shows that ELT students, as prospective teachers, do observe and learn from their lecturers. In other words, the way that they are taught at this level has a significant effect on the way that they will teach in the future. Therefore, in teaching ELT students, methods and approaches to teaching language does not happen in the courses that focus on teaching methodologies only. The teaching approach adopted in any course at this level, in such departments have a significant effect for their future careers.

### **Handwritten or Typed?**

When students were asked to state the possible benefits of online writing courses, most participants responded comparing handwritten and typed essays. As mentioned earlier, almost all of the participants preferred online work. One possible advantage stated above was the practicality of the Microsoft Word programme and its proofreading functions. Many participants were in favour of online writing courses due to the fact that they had illegible handwriting. So, the employment of such writing courses would be beneficial for them as they would be able to type and produce legible essays. Nevertheless, the few participants who preferred to write by hand should not be underestimated. Jane stated that even though she was in favour of online writing courses, she believed that "writing essays on the Internet is not my preference, handwriting is better". Iona also argued that "I like pen paper than online". Both students believed that handwriting expresses a person's character. Even though they believed that typed work was "much professional writing" (Iona), "Internet is more formal" (Jane), hence less personal. Moreover, from the teachers' perspective students' hand writing has an effect on their marks. Therefore, as Mike, Mark and Barry put forth illegible handwriting would cause difficulties while reading, which would result in the deduction of marks.

Another issue that the participants raised in relation to the employment of computers in general and the Microsoft Word programme in particular was the fact that it helped students with illegible handwriting. Mike



stated that “from my perspective I have bad hand writing, it would be better. My hand writing is illegible”. He also added that “I won’t lose points; I will minimize the chance of losing points”. Similarly, Mark pointed out that he always loses marks due to his illegible handwriting. Interestingly, he stated that “it ruins everything. The lecturer calls me to their office. It’s a waste of time writing by hand for me”. Barry also stated that “for the format and everything Microsoft is there...handwriting can’t read complicated but online no mistakes” [sic]. These statements also indicate that the online writing reduces the possibility of wasting time for students who have illegible handwriting. Thus, compared to pen-paper work, students minimize the chance of losing points as well as saving themselves from embarrassment due to illegible handwriting.

### **Drawbacks**

When participants were asked to state their opinions about the possible bad points of online writing courses, most of them pointed out that online writing could be distracting. In his statement, Arnold put forth that “if chatting with friends at the same time on the net, it could be distracting”. Tom, who was also in the same opinion, stated that students would “spend their time on Facebook chatting or playing games”. Similarly, Tanya stated that:

Students may get distracted because there are lots of things online, they would do things for their own pleasure and this would distract them away from their own work this is for some students.

As can be seen, online writing may distract students’ attention, which is seen as a possible disadvantage by many of the participants. This disadvantage, however, is actually invalid because the tasks given to students in online writing courses are set a specific timeframe. That is to say, the submissions of writing tasks have submission deadlines in which students are unable to upload their writings after that specific deadline.

Another possible disadvantage reflected in the interviews carried out with the participants involved computers and Internet accessibility. Students who do not have access or possess a computer may have difficulties with online writing courses. Iona clearly stated that “I left my computer from panic in Cyprus. I did not have a computer so I had to go to my cousin’s house. So it’s difficult without a computer” [sic]. Likewise, Brian put forth the fact that “students don’t have internet access always,” which could, according to many of the participants, constitute a problem in applying online writing courses.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

It is drawn from the overall findings of this study that writing courses carried out online produce stronger student satisfaction as compared to writing courses carried out face to face (in-class). It could be perceived from the findings that the employment of an online writing course contributed to the writing course in many ways. Firstly, a new mode and experience for the learning environment was introduced for the participants as EFL students themselves and as prospective teachers. In this new environment, “students have to relearn how to learn” (Dziuban, Hatman & Moskal, 2004, p. 10). Students had the chance to experience something different from the traditional learning contexts, where most of the writing courses are carried out in a generally teacher-centred way (Bilgin, 2013). Eydelman (2013) points out that “students’ prior learning experience which to a large extent is based on a teacher-centred approach to learning and teaching” (p. 48) is transformed into a student-centred approach during online exposure.

Students’ motivation was increased during the online writing course (Fleet, 2013) because they were given the choice of working at their own pace. According to Hofmann (2011) in “a learner-centred program...there are opportunities for participants to work in their own pace” (p. 4). Online writing courses offer a flexible learning environment which addresses students with different study habits and schedules. This echoes the point made by Sharma and Barrett (2007) that course participants can “continue working and take a course” (p. 10) at the same time. These findings suggest that online writing courses motivate students and should therefore be employed in writing courses.

As pointed out in the findings, some students may have illegible handwriting which are reflected negatively regarding the student and lecturer. On the other hand, some may feel that through hand-writing their characters and feelings are made more explicit.

Certain technical issues are inevitable to avoid when computers are employed in any course. Technical issues are one of the weaknesses of online education (Heinze & Procter, 2004). Based on the findings, all participants pointed out that an online writing course is only feasible if students have a computer, electricity and Internet access.

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