

Educational Design Research: Enhancing English Academic Writing through a Blended Learning Framework

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Abstract:

This study explores the integration of a blended learning framework to enhance the English academic writing proficiency of first-year undergraduate students in a Philippine higher education institution. Utilizing Educational Design Research (EDR), the study addresses the persistent challenges Filipino students face in academic literacy, such as literature synthesis, argumentation, and adherence to citation standards. Through two iterative cycles of analysis, design, and evaluation, the research implemented a suite of technological and pedagogical interventions, including localized interactive modules, instructional videos, peer feedback forums, and collaborative writing tutorials. Qualitative data were gathered through digital surveys, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews with instructors. The findings reveal that while digital tools like interactive modules and videos provide valuable flexibility and technical guidance, their effectiveness is heavily dependent on their alignment with specific course rubrics and social support systems. The study highlights a significant cultural dimension in the Philippine context: students' hesitancy toward peer feedback in online forums contrasted with their high valuation of communal, face-to-face (synchronous) tutorials. The research suggests that improving academic writing in blended environments requires a holistic "ecosystem" approach where technology scaffolds rather than replaces human interaction, emphasizing the importance of social learning and iterative design in fostering writing competence.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Academic Writing, Educational Design Research (EDR), Higher Education, Pedagogical Interventions.

Introduction:

Blended learning has emerged as a promising instructional approach for enhancing English academic writing, particularly in contexts where learners face persistent challenges in language proficiency. Studies consistently indicate that combining face-to-face instruction with digital learning tools allows instructors to address both linguistic and cognitive demands of academic writing.

In ESL and EFL contexts, blended learning environments provide students with extended exposure to writing input, opportunities for revision, and flexible access to instructional resources, all of which are essential for developing higher-order writing skills (Hajan & Padagas, 2021; Sumbayak et al., 2025).

Research focusing on teacher education programs highlights the effectiveness of blended learning in supporting first-year students' transition into academic discourse. Scott, Ulmer-Krol, and Ribeiro (2020) found that blended learning environments enhanced Bachelor of Education students' ability to structure arguments, apply citation conventions, and engage in reflective writing practices. Their study emphasized that the integration of online modules and guided

in-class activities allowed instructors to scaffold complex writing tasks more effectively, particularly for novice academic writers.

From a linguistic perspective, blended instruction has been shown to influence how students engage with academic language features. Tan Jr. and Tarusan (2024) demonstrated that blended learning environments support students' awareness of grammatical accuracy, cohesion, and formal register through repeated exposure to authentic academic texts and digital writing tasks. Their findings suggest that technology-mediated instruction can reinforce language form while simultaneously supporting meaning-making processes essential to academic writing.

In the Philippine context, the social dimension of blended learning has been identified as a critical factor in writing development. Villanueva et al. (2024), using the Community of Inquiry framework, found that cognitive presence and teaching presence significantly influenced student engagement in blended learning environments. Their study underscored the importance of structured interaction, instructor guidance, and collaborative dialogue in fostering meaningful learning experiences, particularly in tasks that require critical thinking such as research writing.

Despite these documented benefits, scholars caution that the effectiveness of blended learning depends largely on pedagogical design rather than technology alone. Hajan and Padagas (2021) observed that while students valued online resources, they still required explicit guidance and timely feedback to translate digital engagement into writing improvement.

Similarly, Sumbayak et al. (2025) concluded that blended learning interventions are most effective when they incorporate continuous feedback loops and opportunities for social learning. Collectively, these studies suggest that blended learning can significantly enhance English academic writing when grounded in intentional instructional design, contextual sensitivity, and sustained human interaction.

Literature Review:

Blended learning has gained increasing prominence in language and writing instruction, particularly in response to the growing demand for flexible and technology-enhanced pedagogies in higher education. Defined as the strategic integration of face-to-face instruction and online learning environments, blended learning has been widely adopted in English language teaching to address persistent challenges in academic writing.

In the Philippine context, this approach has been further accelerated by curricular reforms and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting educators to reconsider traditional instructional models (Tupas & Linas-Laguda, 2020; Alvarez Jr., 2020). Research suggests that blended learning holds particular promise for writing instruction, as it allows extended practice, multimodal input, and iterative feedback beyond classroom constraints.

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of blended learning in improving students' academic writing skills. Scott, Ulmer-Krol, and Ribeiro (2020) demonstrated that first-year Bachelor of Education students exposed to blended writing instruction showed notable improvement in argument development, organization, and citation practices.

Their findings highlight the value of combining online writing modules with in-class workshops to scaffold complex writing tasks. Similarly, Sumbayak, Saragih, and Natalia (2025) found that blended learning positively influenced students' English writing performance, particularly in coherence and grammatical accuracy, when instruction included guided practice and feedback cycles.

Learners' perceptions and experiences within blended writing environments have also been widely explored. Hajan and Padagas (2021), in their study of ESL secondary learners, reported that students viewed blended learning as beneficial for research writing due to its flexibility and access to digital resources. However, they also noted challenges related to self-regulation and the need for clearer instructional guidance. These findings suggest that while blended learning enhances autonomy, its effectiveness depends on intentional pedagogical design and instructor support.

From a linguistic standpoint, blended instruction has been shown to support the development of academic language features essential to effective writing. Tan Jr. and Tarusan (2024) explored linguistic patterns in English blended instruction and found that students demonstrated increased awareness of formal register, cohesion, and syntactic accuracy.

The integration of digital texts and online writing tasks enabled repeated exposure to academic discourse, reinforcing both language form and function. This linguistic dimension underscores the potential of blended learning to support not only writing processes but also language proficiency.

The social and interactive dimensions of blended learning have likewise been emphasized in recent research. Villanueva et al. (2024), using the Community of Inquiry framework, examined blended learning interactions in Philippine schools and found that teaching presence and cognitive presence significantly influenced learner engagement and understanding. Their study highlights the importance of structured interaction, instructor facilitation, and collaborative dialogue in blended environments—factors that are particularly relevant to writing instruction, which is inherently recursive and social.

Despite its advantages, blended learning presents several challenges that may hinder its effectiveness if left unaddressed. Alvarez Jr. (2020) identified issues such as inconsistent faculty readiness, uneven access to technology, and increased workload for instructors as common barriers. Similarly, Ramos and Rodriguez (n.d.) observed that during pandemic-induced blended instruction, students struggled with limited feedback and reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction. These studies emphasize the need for faculty development and well-designed instructional strategies to ensure that blended learning supports, rather than complicates, writing instruction.

More broadly, blended learning has been positioned as a key approach in developing 21st-century skills within higher education. Eslit (2023) argued that blended learning fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy—competencies closely linked to academic writing proficiency.

When aligned with contextual needs and institutional goals, blended learning can contribute to internationalization efforts and academic literacy development. However, existing literature also reveals a gap in context-specific, design-oriented studies that examine how blended learning interventions can be iteratively refined to enhance academic writing, particularly among Filipino undergraduate students. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Methodology:

This study employed an Educational Design Research (EDR) methodology to examine and refine instructional interventions aimed at improving students' academic writing skills. EDR is distinguished by its collaborative, responsive, and iterative nature, emphasizing the development of practical solutions to authentic educational problems through systematic design and evaluation. This approach was deemed appropriate as the study sought not only to understand students' writing challenges but also to design, implement, and improve pedagogical interventions within a real instructional context.

The study was conducted in a mandatory first-year course for Bachelor of Education students. The research was initiated in response to recurring instructional observations that many students experienced difficulty elaborating on key ideas, maintaining coherence, and sustaining alignment with their stated research questions. These challenges highlighted the need for targeted instructional support within the course, providing the contextual foundation for the design interventions examined in this study.

Following the Educational Design Research framework proposed by McKenney and Reeves (2012), the study progressed through three interrelated stages: analysis and exploration, design and construction, and evaluation and reflection. These stages were implemented across two iterative design cycles, allowing for the continuous refinement of instructional strategies based on emerging findings and participant feedback. This cyclical process ensured that the interventions remained responsive to students' needs while generating practice-oriented insights.

Data were collected using multiple qualitative sources to capture diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of the interventions. Anonymous digital surveys containing short-answer questions were administered to gather students' perceptions of the blended learning strategies. In addition, focus group interviews were conducted to elicit more in-depth and nuanced accounts of students' learning experiences. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with the course instructor and teaching assistant to provide instructional insights and triangulate student responses.

All qualitative data were analyzed thematically through systematic coding procedures. Responses were examined for recurring patterns, categories, and meanings related to students' interpretations of intervention effectiveness, usability, and impact on writing development. This analytic process enabled the identification of salient themes that informed both the evaluation of the design interventions and subsequent refinements.

The Interventions (Design and Construction):

Four primary instructional interventions were designed and implemented to support major course requirements, including a research synthesis task and a seven-page research paper. These interventions were developed in alignment with the study's design principles, emphasizing purposeful technology use, collaborative learning, and continuous feedback to address students' academic writing challenges.

The first intervention consisted of interactive writing modules developed using platforms such as Articulate Storyline. These modules focused on foundational academic writing skills, particularly the application of APA citation conventions and the construction of clear, thesis-driven arguments. The modules were designed for self-paced engagement, allowing students to review key concepts as needed while providing structured explanations and examples relevant to course assignments.

The second intervention involved the use of online discussion forums embedded within the learning management system (LMS). These forums served as spaces for students to share works-in-progress and receive formative feedback from both peers and instructors. The intention was to encourage reflective writing practices and collaborative learning by enabling students to engage with multiple drafts and perspectives throughout the writing process.

The third intervention comprised out-of-class writing tutorials conducted as voluntary, collaborative sessions. During these tutorials, instructors deconstructed assignment requirements, modeled effective writing strategies, and provided sentence-level frameworks to guide students' development of ideas. The informal and communal nature of the sessions aimed to reduce writing anxiety while fostering a supportive environment for dialogue and peer learning.

The fourth intervention, introduced during the second design cycle, involved the use of instructional videos to support a flipped classroom approach. These videos provided targeted guidance on locating peer-reviewed sources and composing key sections of academic papers, such as introductions and conclusions. By shifting foundational instruction outside the classroom, the videos enabled students to arrive at tutorials and in-class sessions better prepared, thereby maximizing opportunities for higher-level feedback and discussion.

Findings and Discussions:

Student Perceptions of Technology:

Student perceptions of technology-mediated writing instruction were varied, reflecting both the affordances and limitations of blended learning environments. Interactive writing modules elicited mixed responses from participants. The APA citation module was consistently valued for its technical clarity and step-by-step guidance, which helped students navigate complex formatting conventions.

In contrast, the argumentation module was often perceived as insufficiently aligned with specific assignment rubrics, limiting its perceived usefulness. Several students also reported difficulty locating these resources within the learning management system (LMS), suggesting that usability and instructional alignment play a critical role in students' engagement with digital tools.

These findings resonate with earlier research emphasizing that technology alone does not guarantee effective learning outcomes. Alvarez Jr. (2020) noted that poorly integrated blended learning components can create confusion rather than clarity, particularly when students lack clear guidance on how digital resources connect to assessment tasks. Similarly, Tupas and Linas-Laguda (2020) argued that blended learning initiatives in the Philippine context must prioritize coherence between instructional goals, learning activities, and assessment to maximize effectiveness. In this study, the perceived disconnect between the argumentation module and course requirements underscores the importance of pedagogical alignment in blended writing instruction.

The results further suggest that students' engagement with technology is closely linked to their academic stress levels. Difficulties in navigating the LMS and uncertainty about the relevance of online materials may contribute to cognitive overload and anxiety. Ortega et al. (2023) identified academic stress as a significant concern among college students in blended learning environments, particularly when instructional expectations are unclear. The present findings support this view, indicating that clarity, accessibility, and relevance of digital writing tools are essential to reducing learner stress and enhancing perceived value. Beyond usability concerns, the findings highlight the centrality of pedagogy over platform in determining instructional effectiveness.

Consistent with Lentz and Foncha (2021), the results indicate that the specific technologies employed are less important than how they are embedded within the instructional design. When digital tools are explicitly linked to writing tasks and accompanied by instructor guidance, they are more likely to support students' development of academic writing skills. Conversely, when tools are perceived as supplementary or disconnected, their instructional impact diminishes.

The emphasis on pedagogy over platform aligns with broader discussions on 21st-century learning and academic literacy. Eslit (2023) emphasized that blended learning should foster critical thinking, autonomy, and reflective learning rather than serve as a mere repository of digital content.

In the context of academic writing, this implies that technology should scaffold higher-order thinking processes, such as argument construction and synthesis, rather than focus solely on technical skills. The mixed reception of the interactive modules in this study suggests that while technical support is valued, deeper cognitive scaffolding remains essential.

Moreover, the findings support the notion that effective writing instruction operates within an interconnected instructional ecosystem rather than through isolated interventions. Ramos and Rodriguez (n.d.) observed that during pandemic-era blended instruction, students benefited most when online tools were integrated with guided feedback and instructor presence. This interconnectedness mirrors the present study's findings, where the perceived effectiveness of technological interventions depended on their alignment with course pedagogy, instructor support, and opportunities for clarification.

Thus, the importance of intentional instructional design in mitigating the challenges of blended learning while enhancing student engagement. Research by Cubacub and Jimenez (2024) demonstrated that student engagement increases when blended learning environments are structured, interactive, and responsive to learners' needs. Similarly, Esperanzate (2025) highlighted that successful academic writing instruction for ESL/EFL learners requires a balance between technological affordances and human mediation. Taken together, these findings suggest that blended learning can effectively support academic writing development when guided by clear pedagogical intent, strong instructional coherence, and sustained instructor involvement.

Challenges of Online Feedback:

Online discussion forums received predominantly negative feedback from students, revealing significant challenges in peer-based feedback practices. Many participants expressed hesitancy and nervousness when asked to comment on their classmates' work, citing fear of causing offense or "crushing" their peers' feelings. This emotional discomfort limited students' willingness to provide critical and constructive feedback, resulting in cautious and often vague responses. Such findings reflect broader concerns in blended learning environments where affective factors can inhibit meaningful academic interaction.

In addition to emotional barriers, students questioned the credibility and usefulness of peer feedback. Several participants described the feedback they received as a “mixed bag,” noting inconsistencies in quality, depth, and relevance. This skepticism diminished their trust in peer responses and reduced their motivation to engage actively in online discussions.

Similar observations have been reported by Tarrayo et al. (2022), who found that students often perceive peer feedback in online writing classes as less authoritative than instructor feedback, particularly when expectations are not clearly defined.

From a pedagogical perspective, these challenges highlight the absence of sufficient scaffolding in online feedback activities. Esperanzate (2025) emphasized that ESL/EFL learners require explicit instruction on how to evaluate and respond to academic writing, especially in digital environments. Without guided models and clear criteria, students tend to default to surface-level comments that focus on praise rather than substantive critique. The findings of this study support this claim, suggesting that unstructured online forums are unlikely to foster meaningful peer feedback on their own.

The Community of Inquiry framework further helps explain the limitations observed in online feedback exchanges. Villanueva (2020) and Villanueva, Redmond, and Galligan (2022) argued that cognitive presence in blended learning depends heavily on teaching presence and structured facilitation. When instructors do not actively model feedback strategies or intervene in discussions, opportunities for deeper reflection and knowledge construction are reduced. In this study, the lack of visible instructor guidance in online forums likely contributed to students’ uncertainty and limited engagement.

These findings underscore the need for intentional instructional design that prioritizes scaffolded feedback practices. Instructors must explicitly demonstrate how to provide constructive, respectful, and criteria-based feedback before expecting students to engage meaningfully in online peer review.

Research by Cubacub and Jimenez (2024) and Eslit (2023) suggests that student engagement in blended learning improves when tasks are clearly structured and supported by motivational strategies. Similarly, de Vera et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of guided interaction in large blended classes to ensure quality learning experiences. Taken together, these studies reinforce the conclusion that online feedback can be effective only when embedded within a well-scaffolded pedagogical framework that balances emotional safety with academic rigor.

Success of Communal Learning

In contrast to the mixed reception of technology-mediated interventions, the out-of-class writing tutorials were overwhelmingly perceived as effective by students. Participants consistently highlighted the flexibility of scheduling and the collaborative atmosphere of the sessions as key strengths. The opportunity to engage in small-group discussions and observe peers’ writing processes allowed students to recognize shared challenges, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. This communal environment helped reduce feelings of isolation commonly associated with academic writing tasks.

One of the most significant outcomes of the tutorials was the reduction of writing-related anxiety. Students reported feeling more comfortable asking questions and expressing uncertainty in a less formal setting. This finding aligns with Tarrayo et al. (2022), who emphasized that supportive learning spaces are critical in online and blended writing instruction, particularly during periods of uncertainty such as the pandemic. By providing a low-stakes environment for dialogue, the tutorials enabled students to engage more confidently in the writing process.

The communal nature of the tutorials also contributed to increased student motivation. Eslit (2023) noted that blended learning environments that nurture intrinsic motivation through autonomy, relevance, and social interaction are more likely to sustain student engagement. In this study, students’ ability to choose tutorial times and participate actively in discussions fostered a sense of ownership over their learning. This motivational aspect enhanced their willingness to revise drafts and apply feedback more thoughtfully.

Moreover, the tutorials played a crucial role in “humanizing” instructors, a factor that students repeatedly identified as valuable. Seeing instructors as approachable mentors rather than distant evaluators encouraged open communication and trust. Paz (2024) similarly reported that teachers’ visibility and relational presence in blended learning environments significantly influence students’ engagement and perceptions of support. This human connection was particularly important in a writing context, where students often feel vulnerable about their work.

The effectiveness of the tutorials also reflects principles observed in other blended learning models. de Vera et al. (2025), in their study of large blended classes, found that structured yet interactive sessions promote deeper understanding and learner participation. Likewise, Ebron and Mabuan (2021) observed that flipped and blended writing approaches are most effective when face-to-face time is dedicated to higher-order tasks such as discussion, clarification, and feedback. The tutorials in this study functioned similarly, allowing students to apply prior learning and receive targeted guidance.

Finally, the success of communal learning in this study underscores the importance of integrating human-centered strategies within blended learning designs. Ramalingam, Yunus, and Hashim (2022) argued that sustainable ESL education depends on balancing technological innovation with social interaction and instructional support. Consistent with Bobila and Daing’s findings on blended literature instruction, the results suggest that collaborative spaces are essential for cultivating confidence, engagement, and academic literacy. Overall, the out-of-class writing tutorials demonstrate that blended learning is most effective when it strengthens, rather than replaces, meaningful human interaction.

Impact of Flipped Instruction:

The introduction of instructional videos during Cycle 2 was met with high approval from students, reflecting the potential of flipped instruction to enhance learning in blended writing courses. Participants appreciated the ability to pause, replay, and revisit content at their own pace, which allowed for individualized comprehension of complex concepts such as thesis development and literature synthesis. This autonomy in pacing aligns with findings by Lentz and Foncha (2021), who emphasized that providing learners with control over content delivery supports deeper engagement and understanding in first-year academic writing programs.

A significant benefit of the instructional videos was their role in preparing students to attend tutorials with preliminary drafts already completed. By equipping students with foundational knowledge prior to face-to-face sessions, the videos maximized the efficiency of in-person interactions, allowing tutorial time to focus on higher-order tasks such as argument refinement, feedback application, and collaborative problem-solving. This mirrors the broader literature on flipped instruction in blended learning, which suggests that pre-class exposure to content frees classroom time for active, student-centered learning (Ramos & Rodriguez, n.d.; Cubacub & Jimenez, 2024).

The flipped approach also appeared to alleviate some of the cognitive and emotional pressures associated with academic writing. Ortega et al. (2023) highlighted that college students often experience significant academic stress when navigating complex writing tasks, particularly in blended environments.

In this study, students reported reduced anxiety because they could engage with instructional content repeatedly and seek clarification during tutorials with more confidence. This indicates that flipped instruction not only supports cognitive readiness but also contributes to students’ emotional well-being, enhancing their overall engagement with writing tasks.

The success of the videos in promoting preparatory work and independent learning also reflects the importance of integrating technology thoughtfully within a pedagogical framework. Esperanzate (2025) argued that technological tools are most effective when coupled with structured guidance, scaffolding, and opportunities for feedback. Similarly,

Villanueva (2020) and Villanueva, Redmond, and Galligan (2022) emphasized that cognitive presence in blended learning is contingent upon teaching presence and instructional design. In this study, the videos acted as a scaffolding

mechanism that enhanced cognitive engagement, enabling students to participate more meaningfully during interactive sessions.

The positive reception of the flipped instructional videos reinforces the broader potential of blended learning to support 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, self-regulation, and autonomous learning. Eslit (2023) noted that well-designed blended environments can foster these skills by providing learners with opportunities for reflection, iterative practice, and collaborative engagement.

Consistent with Tupas and Linas-Laguda (2020), these findings suggest that flipped instruction, when carefully integrated into a holistic course design, can enhance both the efficiency and quality of academic writing instruction, ultimately improving students' confidence, competence, and engagement.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the importance of moving beyond an exclusive focus on individual technological tools toward a more holistic approach to instructional design. In the Philippine higher education context, students often experience apprehension or intimidation when receiving formal feedback from instructors, which can hinder their willingness to engage critically with academic writing tasks.

Consequently, creating collaborative learning communities that integrate both online and in-person interactions is critical for fostering a supportive environment that encourages active participation, peer engagement, and iterative skill development. Such communities allow students to share ideas, receive constructive input from multiple sources, and build confidence in their writing abilities while maintaining accountability to academic standards.

By leveraging the affordances of multiple digital platforms in conjunction with face-to-face instruction, educators can provide students with diverse avenues for practice, reflection, and feedback. For instance, interactive writing modules, online discussion forums, instructional videos, and structured tutorials can complement one another to scaffold the development of key competencies, such as argumentation, synthesis of literature, and adherence to citation standards. The integration of these tools is most effective when guided by intentional pedagogical strategies that prioritize learning outcomes and align with course objectives, rather than relying solely on the novelty of technology.

Furthermore, a holistic design approach emphasizes the social and collaborative dimensions of learning, which are essential for reducing student anxiety and fostering intrinsic motivation. By facilitating opportunities for peer review, discussion, and communal problem-solving, educators can humanize the learning process and transform academic writing from a solitary task into a shared, constructive endeavor.

In doing so, students are better equipped to develop not only the technical aspects of writing but also the higher-order cognitive skills necessary for critical thinking and scholarly expression. Overall, this study highlights that enhancing academic literacy requires an ecosystemic approach in which multiple technological and social components interact synergistically to support student learning, engagement, and confidence.

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