

Learning Continuum in a Blended Mode: A Case of a Skill-based Course

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ABSTRACT

The shift from 'content focus to learner focus' allows the teachers to include meaningful activities in their class, which creates better learning solutions. The present study seeks to identify ways to advance a culture of learning continuum in higher education as an innovative teaching strategy with the appropriate use of a blended learning approach helping the teachers to design teaching and learning activities and the students to progress along the continuum. The paper describes a conceptual framework and the implementation of the learning continuum of a skill-based paper in a blended model. The paper discusses an array of technological solutions, resources and assessment methods relevant for the course and the student's specific context. The conceptual framework is tested in a skill-based paper, 'Written Communication and Analysis' in an MBA Programme and B.Tech Programme in Odisha in the first year of their study involving instruction in both offline and online mode. The paper assesses the student's experience and perception of the blended learning approach from the results drawn from an online survey. Research findings suggest that the implementation of the learning continuum in a blended mode enables the creation of active learning environments and the student's development in their writing skills. The results from the survey point towards exploring the present status of blended learning in higher education in India.

Keywords: Learning Continuum, Blended Learning, Written Communication Skill

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study is conducted on the premise of learning continuum in blended teaching-learning method of a skill-based paper that requires development in the framework of the learning continuum. Technology has been long used in school as well as university teaching, specifically in the teaching of English. The syllabus and the learning have been taken on a learning continuum mode. Since Blended learning has become one of the most used modes, particularly during and after the Covid-19 lockdown, there is a growing trend in University providing an opportunity to the teachers to develop formal education programs using appropriate tools, access, strategies and structure [1]. With the

objective to support the student's engagement, learning process and success in a course, learning

continuum approach with the blended design was adopted. The aim of the course was to enable the students to learn and enhance their academic writing skills. The current study is significant because of the adoption of the digital tools and readiness, flipped class models used in response to the student's learning needs and their attitude to the flipped learning approach. The key concept of this approach is to engage students with materials in advance before attending a class that provides opportunities for higher-order thinking skills [2].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As per the Northwest Evaluation Association [3], a continuum of learning sequenced knowledge increases in complexity from level one to level two and the next.

Its role is to enable teachers to find the level of learner diversity in the classroom and share with them how teaching materials are taught at an increasingly higher level of competence. It will be an important resource for improved curriculum or curriculum development. Learning continuity allows learners to focus on his/her own learning because the learning goals set by the teacher have to be understood and achieved by each learner.

Blended learning has become the “new normal” in course delivery [4]. Blended learning is a pedagogical method that has a combination of classroom effectiveness and the opportunities for socialization with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment. The whole process is a redesign of the instructional model with the following characteristics:

- A shift from teacher-centric to the learner-centric instructional method in which students are active participants and interact more (this shift should apply to the entire course, including F-2-F sessions);
- The level of interaction between teacher-learner, learner-learner is enhanced with learner-content and external resources;
- Integration of formative and summative assessment mechanisms for learners and teachers.

According to Graham, blended learning is viewed as the “ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments” between the traditional teaching on face-to-face and on the other the expansion of the learning environment that has grown exponentially with the advancement of newer technologies that have expanded the possibilities of communication and interaction. Researchers have rightly pointed out the importance of learning right at an appropriate age and for every individual from school to college and has expanded to home and office [5]. In this truly “most significant development of the 21st century”, BL has responded to the demands of the present education and knowledge society [6]. This method removes the inflexibility of the age-old, traditional education system, and researchers have found that students have shown more engagement in this method [7]. Students can practice, communicate and enhance their learning from other important players other than their traditional teacher-centered classroom, which gives the students less opportunity for collaboration [8].

Previous studies have discussed the advantages of flipped classrooms as teachers understand student’s learning style, their difficulties and student’s positive response to the approach. The class time can be

effectively and creatively used, and the learning needs of the diverse group of students can be met with customization of the curriculum and personalized attention. Studies have also reported better student engagement than in the traditional lecture mode and their positive emotions towards learning in flipped classroom model [9]. Vaughan [10] discuss that, in the age of Millennial learners, engagement is a more important consideration than ever, arguing that Millennials are more intolerant than other generations to traditional lecture-style pedagogies.

In order to graduate from college and University and compete in a highly competitive global economy, students need to achieve proficiency in writing, and it is essential that students are introduced to formal writing and also develop the attitude to publish their writing. The professional context demands them to write logically, coherently supported by well-researched evidence and with sophistication. It is evident that students are using newer technological tools for a better writing experience. The tools are redefining student’s writing skills, but prior to completing formal written tasks, they should understand the writing process, the principles of writing, types of writing, sentence structure to mechanics of grammar while attaining a sense of inspiration to write, revise and edit and finally achieving a sense of confidence about the work of writing which is their own. In a blended teaching-learning approach, a teacher can incorporate a range of technological tools systematically and strategically in which learning can place effectively in physical and virtual environments extending and enhancing student’s learning through student’s unrestricted use and production of materials at the same time following the norms of plagiarism and common creative licenses [11]. Several studies have discussed the use of word processors in collaborative writing, which benefits in the higher cognizance of the learning process [12]. Studies pertaining to the use of technological tools for communicative competence of second language learners reveal about effectiveness and benefits of the tools to improve written as well as oral skills [13]. Research is also needed to ascertain the benefits and the use of new technological tools to learn higher-order writing skills of college students. The need to provide a more engaging learning experience is central to the interest of blended learning and the choice between traditional face-to-face learning or online learning is no longer a matter of concern. Blended learning here may be defined as a combination of pedagogies to support the achievement of learning goals. Technology-enabled learning, face-to face learning and collaborative learning are the key components of blended learning.

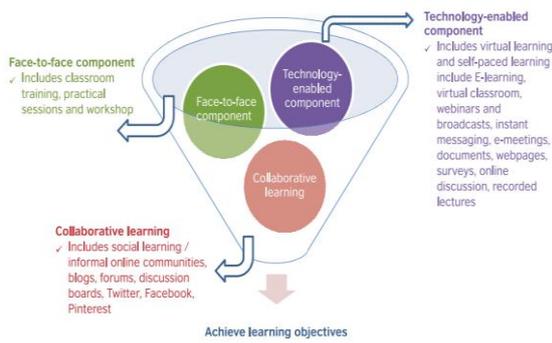


Figure 1: Active learning objectives [14]

It is useful to discuss three models which have emerged from the business context: attitude-driven, skills-driven, and competency-driven learning [15]. Reid-Young (n.d) identified three more 'typical' examples in this: 1. course model, 2. reference-based learning and 3. pre-assessment model.

Blended learning (BL) has been emerged and accepted as one of the most popular pedagogical principles in higher education and in EFL and ESL contexts at the beginning of 2000 [16]. The WhatsApp-like apps are integrated with Mobile-based Blended Learning Systems to make things easier for learners and teachers.

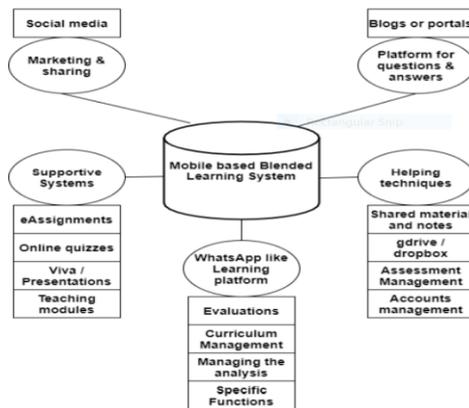


Figure 2: Mobile-based blended learning system

Online learning has proven to be providing a higher degree of learning autonomy [17]. Students can have access to meaningful and rich content that helps them to develop their thoughts. According to Bloch [18], blogs are an ideal resource for the teaching of writing because they are easy to access, free which the students can create and maintain. These online contents encourage students to be better and more prolific writers that make their writing easier to share, support group work, send and receive feedback, and collaborate, providing students opportunities to write

beyond their class. Moreover, the students can link to the related texts, and multimedia provides students with a sense of authorship and ownership, and all this can be used in various ways by the teacher. Looking beyond products to the multidimensional ecologies of writing development, argued Yancey [19], would finally pivot writing instruction beyond rigid attention to form and writing as testing. The argument points toward “creating the fully articulated research base, the theories of composing, and the planned curriculum” that are missing” for many years.

3. LEARNING CONTINUUM

The paradigm shift with the teaching-learning practices has moved from ‘content focus’ to ‘learner focus’ education. Traditional classroom teaching has typically focused on course design, classroom delivery, and structured learning. Processes and procedures create conditions for continuous learning and innovation. The shift of focus in the learning continuum process frameworks is with respect to attaining course objectives, from understanding to creating as per the revised Bloom's Taxonomy and the use of technologies to facilitate the multiple ways of learning across the entire learning continuum. The American Society for Training and Development conducted a poll of some of the major organizations across the industry as per their usage of the technology landscape and learning tools for 2011, as illustrated in Table I. All these tools were discussed in the industry context having the maximum usage of LMS, Assessment tools and Authoring Tools, but after a decade, all these technological tools and even more advances are used in the education sector.

Table 1: Learning Tools

Learning Tools/Technology Landscape, 2011	
Learning Management System	Assessment/Testing tools
Authoring tools	Audio conferencing, Web conferencing, Games, Podcasting, Mobile learning, Online mentoring & coaching, Content integration, Courseware/libraries, Virtual classroom

Previous studies have discussed the several benefits of learning continuum and have suggested conceptual

frameworks which pertain to providing learning environments that support informal to formal learning, knowledge acquisition to knowledge creation, the continuum of knowledge, skills and attitude, continuum of performing simple tasks to a complex task, of learning in the personal space to learning in collaboration, use of simple technologies to more advanced tools. Sinha [20] discussed the need to use the continuum to “build requisite knowledge and skills, create continual learning opportunities.”

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In his conceptual learning continuum framework, Bonwell and Sutherland make a clear distinction between simple task and complex task; simple task does not consume long class duration and are very structured, while complex tasks are of longer duration and carefully planned and structured. The continuum can maximize students' intellectual engagement, and both ends of the continuum are desirable [21]. The study focuses on active learning strategy, the necessary tasks and course objectives on the premise of what do the teachers want their students to know, to do and feel with a proposed diagram to explain the relative weight to give to the three.

Continuum of course objective

Acquisition of knowledge-----Acquisition of skills/Attitude

The personal style and degree of interaction between teacher and student is dependent on the type of the course and the course objective, preference for a particular method, comfort, personality of the teacher, as pointed out by Bonwell & Sutherland. The study did not discuss though the use of technology use can be along the line of the continuum. From writing a sentence, a paragraph to drafting, writing an essay and publishing, the degree of the use of technological tools will be in the line of the continuum.

Level of Interaction in a Classroom

Limited interaction-----Extensive interaction

Level of difficulty in Activity

Simpler task-----Complex task
 Simpler Tasks- Writing sentence, paragraph writing/short passage/correspondence

(Complex Tasks
 Writing a composition/Editing/Proofreading, Creating visuals & Publishing)

Use Technological Tools

Simple tools/e-activities-----Advanced tools/difficult e-activities

5. OBJECTIVES

- To develop a learning continuum for a skill-based Written Analysis and Communication course.
- To develop a conceptual framework for the implementation of a learning continuum of a skill-based writing course in a blended mode.

6. METHODOLOGY

This paper examines how blended learning continuum practices can be applied in skill-based writing classes. The literature review is organized around "Learning Continuum", "Blended Learning", "Blended Mode", "Developmental Writing Continuum", "Online Learning", "Blended Learning Tools and Technology", "Blended Learning Methods", "Blended Learning Models", "Technology-enabled learning", "Mobile Blended Learning", "Blended Learning Practices", "Hybrid Blended Learning" and "Face-to-Face Learning".

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach. The samples were taken from the School of Management and School of Engineering in Odisha from January to July 2021. Students of management and engineering were the participants of the developmental writing continuum. A case study is presented to examine how blended learning practices were integrated into the written communication classes and their analysis. The data from the writing worksheets and online platforms are coded for patterns, and a rich description is provided to support the findings.

7. THE BLENDED LEARNING CONTINUUM: WRITTEN COMMUNICATION AND ANALYSIS

A student’s ability to express his/her ideas in writing in a second or foreign language and to be able to do so with coherence and accuracy is a milestone [22]. Learning to write is a unique activity, and it is argued that since texts are tools for mediating messages between a sender and a receiver, writing is far beyond learning a range of vocabulary and grammar. Writing is a technique that requires time and practice. Writing is one of the most complex tasks [23], drawing on a large number of language skills and cognitive abilities. In the present study, it is observed that students are speaking mostly in their native language, i.e., Odia, as the University is in a state in India known as Odisha. Hindi is the most used and the default language of all. The majority of students lack adequate proficiency in

speaking and writing in English, which is a matter of grave concern for both the teachers and the Management because communication skills are the top employability skills, and the lack of it is seriously affecting their employment opportunities [24]. To address the challenges, “Written Communication and Analysis” was introduced at the University across all schools. It is the writing process - from writing topic sentences to web publishing that provides a concept map for thinking about supporting students in the writing classes.

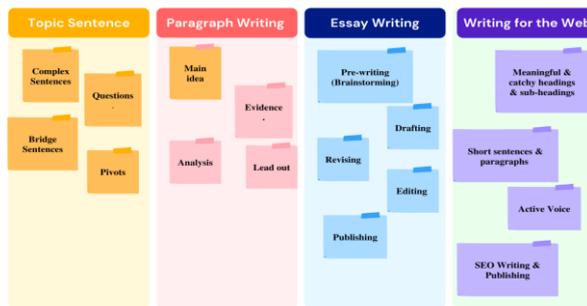


Figure 3: Learning continuum of written communication and analysis course

The learner begins with a topic sentence, e.i, develops the controlling idea of a paragraph which is expressed in a single sentence. The topic sentence could be in the form of a complex sentence, question, bridge sentence or pivots. ‘*The world that we live in today is dominated by advertising*’ is the controlling idea of the sample paragraph (Figure7). In the enabling stage, learners begin to locate topic sentences which are located either at the beginning, middle or end of the paragraph. Teachers use the web exercises to assess the students’ knowledge on locating topic sentences
<https://www.monash.edu/rlo/research-writing-assignments/writing/clear-communication/writing-clear-paragraphs>

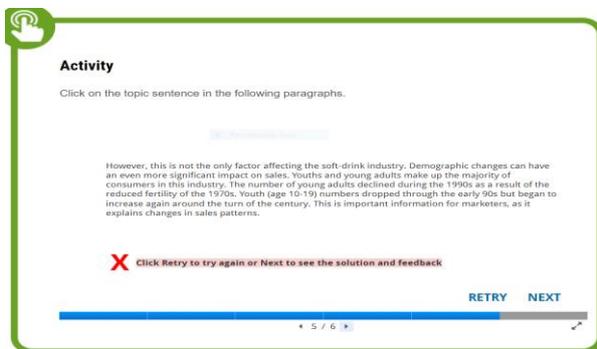


Figure 4: Topic sentence in academic writing online platform (<https://aso-resources.une.edu.au>)

Learners use short and simple sentences, learned words and phrases, and questions when writing. In the enhancing phase, learners create simple paragraphs. Learners visualize and create idea maps on the paragraph structure.

Students practice paragraph writing in academic writing online platforms such as <https://aso-resources.une.edu.au/academic-writing-course/paragraphs/beginner-paragraphs/>

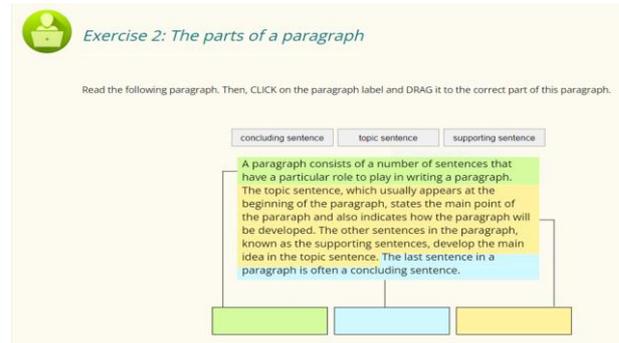


Figure 5: Paragraph writing practice in online mode (<https://saylordotorg.github.io>)

The pre-writing models involve five phases of the writing process - prewriting, outlining, writing the first draft, revising and editing. In the written communication and analysis course, students are familiarised with the writing process and strategies in F-2-F learning https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_business-english-for-success/s11-the-writing-process-how-do-i-b.html. Some of the prewriting strategies include outlining, idea mapping, freewriting, asking 5-Wh Questions Who? What? Where? Why? and How? Brainstorming, reading and writing. In the performing stage, the learner writes to improve with an understanding of the essay structure in F-2-F learning and performing on the online platform.

Students use Write & Improve, a learning tool that helps the learners to improve their English writing. Students write, get immediate feedback to revise writing and raise the proficiency level (see Figure 6). The tool allows the learners to make changes and check for improvements. During the enhancing phase, it is noticed that though the students are exposed to the essay writing process, they are not meticulous about the coherence and cohesion, sentence patterns, grammatical forms, vocabulary and structure.

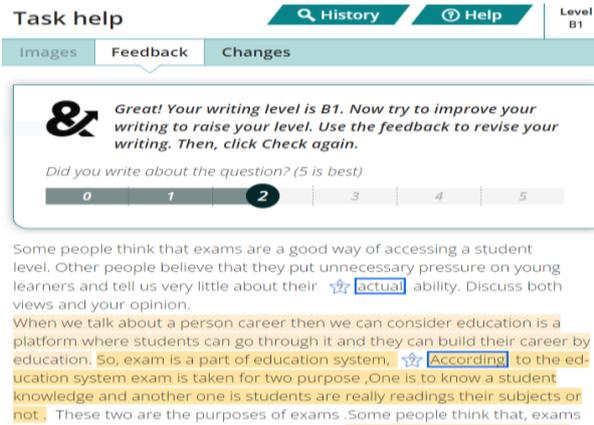


Figure 6: Essay writing practice in Write & Improve

It is encouraging to see that during the performing stage, the learners are clear about essay/long composition writing assessment criteria from IELTS - task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resources and grammatical range and accuracy. The learner moves to the B2 Level or above level in essay writing in the performing stage. Student Assignments are taken for class discussion as given in Figure 7.

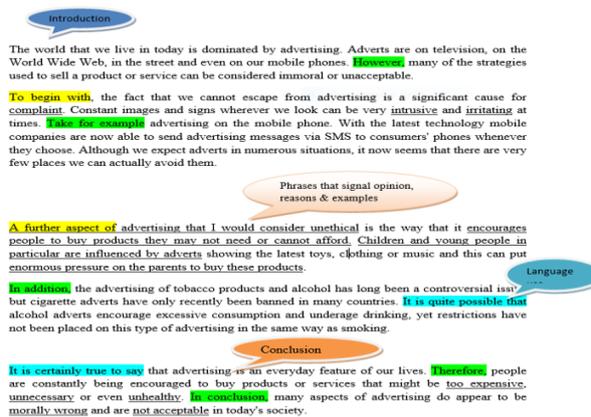


Figure 7: Text Analysis

A critical analysis is suggested for the short essays with the following questions:

- Does it have a proper beginning, middle and end?
- Does it contain the information instructed?
- Is the information presented clear and comprehensible?
- Does it include a wide range of vocabulary?
- Does it employ various grammar forms correctly?

The learners pay attention to the verb tenses, concord, sentence structure, spelling and punctuation, restate the main ideas and use transitional devices, e.g., 'However,' 'In addition, 'Therefore' to achieve clarity

and make the essay comprehensible. The use of appropriate vocabulary and phrases as highlighted in Figure 7 signal opinions, reasons and examples to improve the quality of writing.

The use of new technologies and tools is important to the instructional goals of education. For large-scale change to occur, teachers must integrate the potential of new technological infrastructures into the thinking of the overall curriculum. This paper explores pedagogical tools used by the teachers such as social networking sites, blog sites, and websites to motivate students to write and improve.

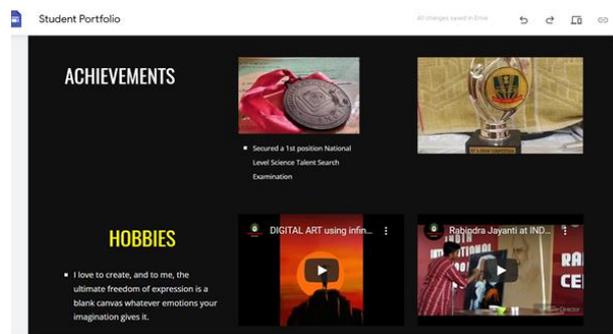


Figure 8: Screenshot of student portfolio

Learners prepare the text and audiovisual content for sharing with an audience or public with attention given to the form and style of the text. Some of the outcomes of this approach were student engagement in planning, organization, proofreading, revision and publishing to develop writing proficiency. Publishing online gives a sense of ownership to the students. Students push each other with positive peer pressure. Thus, the teachers use various tools and strategies (Table 2) in order to promote the writing skills of the students.

Table2: Tools used in the writing classes

Learning Continuum	Teaching Methods/Strategies	Tools (Face-to-Face/Online)
Topic sentence	Read & Write, Drag and Drop	e.g., https://www.pearson.com/content-dam-one-dot-com-one-dot-com/us/en/higher-ed/en/products-services/course-products/mcwhorter-2e-info/pdf/sample-chapter-c01.pdf https://iso-resources.unc.edu.au/academic-writing-course/paragraphs/beginner-paragraph/
Paragraph Writing	The WEED Model, PIE Method, Process Writing	e.g., https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_business-english-for-success/v11-the-writing-process-how-ds-2-b.html https://www.monash.edu/rfo/research-writing-assignments/writing-clear-communication/writing-clear-paragraphs
Essay Writing	Process Writing, Narrative Writing, Expository Writing	e.g., https://ieltsliz.com/ , https://writeandimprove.com/
Writing for the Web	Self-learning, Collaborative Learning	e.g., Adobe, https://www.weebly.com/in , Google sites, https://www.wix.com/

8. IMPACT OF THE LEARNING CONTINUUM APPROACH I

A feedforward form was shared with the participants of the study to measure the impact of the skill-based course. It reports the impact of the course delivered in a blended model. It is also echoed by other

researchers: "Blended learning model has been proved to be favoured by students as students are provided with freedom, choice in access to a number of mediums and materials and helped the diverse cohort of groups resulting in better performance and learning success [25]". It is quite enthusiastic to see that 90% of the respondents were speaking in favour of the learning continuum of the writing course that was delivered in a blended model. 23.5% of the participants were neutral, 42.2% of the participants expressed satisfaction, and 24.5% of the participants said that it was very satisfactory.

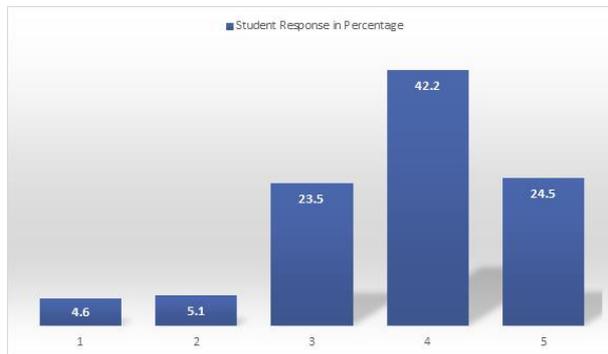


Figure 9: Student perception on the blended learning in a 5-point Likert Scale

Students express their proficiency level in writing before the start and after the completion of the program. Around 70% of students were found on the average level (enhancing level), while 24% of students were above-average (performing). Only 14% of the participants were tracked in the below-average level.

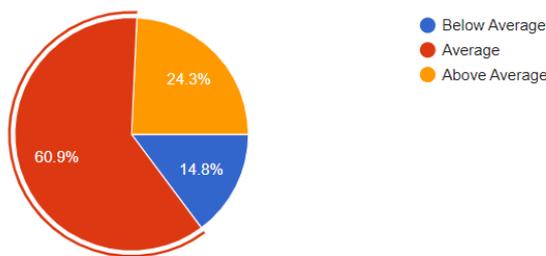


Figure 10: Student perception on the writing skills before the writing program

The respondents say how good they are now, i.e., after the end of the course. 44.7% of the respondents are seen at the average level (enhancing level) while 52% of students are found in the above-average level (performing level). A negligible number of students could be seen in the below-average level.

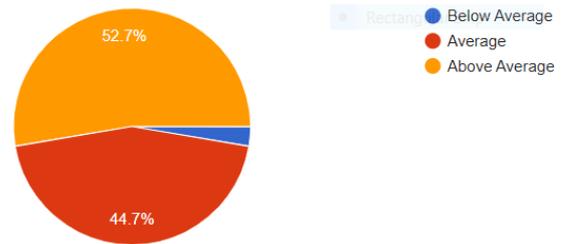


Figure 11: Student perception on the writing skills after the writing program

As per the student feedback, "It is definitely a valuable course, and it is important to practice in order to improve our writing skills," "It gives tips and strategies for successful test preparation and for improving our English language ability," "It enables us to improve our writing skills in a simpler and gradual process."

9. CONCLUSION

The evidence that the learning continuum approach for an advanced skill-based course on "Written Communication and Analysis" with blended learning mode is an effective way to facilitate effective learning which helps students to improve their writing skills and enable them to write in collaboration as well as in their personal space at the same time enhancing their learning strategies and experience. The proposed framework has the blend of learning continuum such as performing simpler tasks to complex tasks, teacher dependent to teacher independent with the integration of technology in blended learning mode. As rightly pointed out by Phan (2021), with the digital age and digital transformation tendency, educators have to integrate computer technology into learning and teaching. Teamwork and social networking are believed to be critical parts of blending learning [26]. Most of the respondents in this study also emphasized the effectiveness of technological tools to improve their writing which supported their independent learning. Several research studies have discussed and concluded the important role and efficacy of the technology, benefiting the teaching-learning process and the students in the ESL and EFL contexts [27,28]. The students have shown a high level of satisfaction due to the opportunities to work in collaboration and individually on innovative online activities and technological tools which they were not aware of earlier [29,30]. The students find more benefit from the e-activities coupled with an automated feedback mechanism and students' self-assessment, which enable them to know their own mistakes and weaknesses. They found Google Docs and Endnote as the best and the most used tools in writing. Several

students used BuzzSumo for the creation of blog content and the Grammarly App to eliminate grammatical mistakes which helped them to be aware of their grammatical errors. Action research and repetition of this study in the next semesters will help provide further insights into the effects of these free writing tools on different writing assignments. During the pandemic, students have already got exposed to a number of e-activities through the podcast, IELTS, Canva, online tests, an online glossary and Grammarly, but during the semester, they understood their usefulness and started using them for their own benefits.

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