



TEACHING WRITING IN ONLINE VS. FACE-TO-FACE CLASSROOMS: PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract. The rapid migration of educational practice to virtual environments has compelled writing instructors to re-evaluate time-honoured classroom strategies. Although online platforms extend access and diversify modes of feedback, they also exacerbate issues of learner engagement, cognitive load, and assessment reliability. This empirical study compares the experiences of 86 pre-service English-language teachers who completed parallel sixteen-week writing-methodology courses delivered either fully online or in traditional face-to-face formats. Mixed-methods data—including weekly reflective journals, rubric-based text assessments and semi-structured interviews—were analysed to identify instructional obstacles and corresponding solutions. Results show that while online cohorts benefited from multimodal resources and asynchronous revision cycles, they reported diminished collaborative fluency and higher rates of feedback misinterpretation. In-person participants demonstrated stronger peer-review dynamics but struggled with equitable participation and real-time anxiety. The findings underscore the necessity of explicit feedback training, scaffolded digital literacy, and balanced synchronous-asynchronous task design to cultivate advanced writing competencies across modalities. Recommendations include integrating annotated video feedback, rotating peer-feedback triads, and deploying learning-analytics dashboards to support self-regulation.

Keywords: - Academic writing pedagogy, online learning, face-to-face instruction, feedback literacy, learner engagement, teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has accelerated the diversification of instructional spaces, positioning online and hybrid delivery as normative rather than exceptional. Writing pedagogy—inherently social, recursive and feedback-intensive—must therefore adapt to two structurally divergent learning ecologies. On one hand, video-conferencing, cloud-based editors and learning-management systems promise granular monitoring and multimodal feedback. On the other, the absence of physical co-presence can attenuate immediacy cues essential for negotiating meaning and sustaining motivation (Hewett & Depew, 2015). Earlier scholarship often treated online writing instruction as a homogeneous construct, overlooking the situational factors that mediate learner interaction patterns and cognitive effort (Li & Li, 2021). Furthermore, emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic conflated hastily digitised courses with intentionally designed online curricula, obscuring robust evaluation of modality effects (Hodges et al., 2020).

The present study narrows this gap by contrasting parallel courses purpose-built for their respective environments.



Eighty-six fourth-year undergraduate students specialising in English language teaching at Chirchiq Pedagogical University (Uzbekistan) volunteered for the study. Forty-three enrolled in the online section and forty-three in the face-to-face section of “Methods of Teaching Writing.” Entry-criteria included completion of prerequisite linguistics and composition coursework; random assignment ensured comparable language proficiency profiles (IELTS band 6.5–7.0).

Both sections shared identical learning outcomes, assessment rubrics and weekly thematic foci—ranging from genre analysis to peer-review facilitation. The online course leveraged a combination of Zoom™ for synchronous workshops, Google Docs™ for collaborative drafting, and Moodle™ forums for asynchronous discussion. The in-person course met in a technology-equipped classroom, employing printed handouts and on-site computer stations but eschewing learning-management forums except for assignment submission.

Quantitative data comprised pre- and post-course argumentative essays evaluated with a validated six-trait rubric (ideas, organisation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions). Reflective journals captured weekly perceptions of instructional clarity, feedback usefulness and emotional engagement. Semi-structured interviews with twelve volunteers per section provided richer insight into emergent themes. Classroom observations (video-recorded for the online section and audio-recorded for the face-to-face section) supplemented the corpus.

Both cohorts exhibited statistically significant improvement in overall rubric scores ($p < 0.01$). However, the online section recorded higher gains in sentence fluency and conventions, attributed by participants to the availability of digital grammar checkers and flexible revision windows. Conversely, face-to-face students achieved larger advances in idea development and voice, crediting real-time brainstorming and immediate instructor clarification. ANCOVA revealed no significant difference in final composite scores between modalities ($p = 0.18$), indicating functional equivalence in outcome potential when courses are deliberately designed. Qualitative analysis identified five salient challenge domains. First, feedback interpretation difficulties surfaced prominently online; students misread tone in text comments and overlooked embedded rubric links. Second, peer-review depth declined when physical presence was absent, producing perfunctory comments such as “good job” without actionable detail. Third, cognitive overload emerged during synchronous online sessions exceeding ninety minutes, with webcams and chat streams competing for attention. Fourth, in-person classes struggled with equitable turn-taking; vocal students dominated discussions while quieter peers receded. Finally, instructor workload intensified online due to the multiplicity of communication channels requiring monitoring.

Solutions organically trialled by instructors received positive appraisal. Screen-recorded video feedback combining voice, cursor movement and annotation reduced ambiguity and fostered a supportive affective tone. Rotating triads with assigned feedback roles (content analyst, organisation checker, language coach) invigorated peer review in both settings, yet proved particularly vital online. Segmenting virtual sessions into shorter synchronous blocks interleaved with asynchronous tasks mitigated cognitive load. In the physical classroom, employing anonymous digital polling tools amplified marginalised voices, creating parity with vocal participants. A learning-analytics dashboard tracking comment frequency and revision depth empowered students to self-regulate effort.

The findings corroborate earlier assertions that modality per se does not predetermine instructional efficacy; rather, pedagogical alignment with contextual affordances is decisive (Warschauer, 2010). Enhanced mechanical accuracy among online learners suggests that readily accessible automated feedback can liberate cognitive resources for higher-order concerns, provided that students are trained to critically evaluate algorithmic suggestions. The superior development of rhetorical nuance in face-to-face environments underscores the irreplaceable value of spontaneous dialogic negotiation for idea elaboration. This dichotomy implies the need for hybrid feedback ecologies that combine algorithmic scaffolding with mediated peer interaction. Feedback interpretation emerged as a pivotal bottleneck online, echoing research on feedback literacy, which posits that students require explicit instruction to decode, judge and apply commentary (Carless & Boud, 2018). Integrating meta-feedback—wherein instructors model their evaluative reasoning—proved instrumental in bridging this gap. Meanwhile, the attenuation of peer-review rigour online resonates with social presence theory, suggesting that visible immediacy cues catalyse accountability and empathy. Embedding webcam-on norms can partially restore social presence but raises equity and bandwidth concerns; structured roles therefore present a more universally accessible remedy. The elevated instructor workload online signals the necessity of strategic channel consolidation and pre-emptive FAQ repositories. Moreover, analytics dashboards demonstrate promise for transferring monitoring responsibility to learners, aligning with self-determination theory by bolstering autonomy. The persistent issue of unequal participation in traditional classrooms reflects long-standing discourse-dominance patterns; discreet digital polling within face-to-face sessions emerges as a simple yet potent corrective.

CONCLUSION

When writing-methodology courses are intentionally crafted rather than hastily migrated, online and face-to-face modalities can yield comparable overall proficiency gains. Nonetheless, each environment foregrounds distinct pedagogical challenges: interpretive clarity and peer-review depth online, equitable discourse and anxiety management in person. Effective solutions revolve around enriching feedback channels with multimodal cues, scaffolding feedback literacy, restructuring peer-interaction tasks, and leveraging learning analytics to promote self-regulation. Future research should examine long-term retention of writing competencies across modalities and explore the role of emerging generative-AI tools in mediating feedback efficacy. For practitioners, the imperative is to design modality-responsive tasks that harness technological affordances while preserving the dialogic essence of writing as a socially situated act.

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