



**Peer - feedback for Improving English Writing in Higher Education**

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Academic Article (Action Research)

Presented as Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of Magíster en Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros con Mención en la Enseñanza de Inglés. CES: RPC-SE-19-N°.140-2020. Cohort 2019 - 2021. [fernando.intriago@casagrande.edu.edu](mailto:fernando.intriago@casagrande.edu.edu).

Guayaquil, November 26th, 2021.

### Abstract

This action research proposes peer feedback as a viable strategy for improving university students' advanced (B1 - B2) writing skills. Its potential was tested during a university writing course of sixteen weeks offered at a private university in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Both quantitative and qualitative instruments were used to determine if sixty freshman university students would improve writing skill in structure, fluency, and accuracy through a pedagogical innovation that included a rubric for guiding the feedback sessions. Results were measured by these instruments: a pretest and a posttest; followed by an open survey on students' perceptions towards writing and their experience during the peer feedback sessions for improving this skill. The main results show students improved their own writing at a Cohen's *d* of 0.39, moderate improvement achieved after five peer feedback sessions. Students' views reported difficulties when they wrote in English and participated in the sessions; nevertheless, they regarded this strategy as beneficial for improving writing. Any teacher or researcher interested in knowing about peer feedback strategies for academic writing should read this article. It is also intended for institutions looking to implement pedagogical innovations that help students awaken their writing potential for higher education.

*Keywords:* EFL writing, university writing, peer feedback, rubric

### Resumen

Esta investigación de acción propone la retroalimentación entre pares como una estrategia viable para mejorar las habilidades avanzadas (B1 - B2) de escritura en estudiantes universitarios. Su potencial fue probado durante un curso de dieciséis semanas ofrecido en una universidad privada en Guayaquil. Se utilizaron instrumentos cuantitativos y cualitativos para determinar si sesenta estudiantes universitarios de primer año mejorarían su estructura, fluidez y precisión mediante la innovación pedagógica con su rúbrica para orientar las sesiones. Los resultados fueron medidos por una prueba previa y prueba posterior; seguidas por una encuesta sobre las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la escritura y su experiencia durante las sesiones pares para mejorar esta habilidad. Principales resultados muestran que los estudiantes mejoraron su escritura con  $d$  de Cohen de 0.39, mejora moderada después de cinco sesiones de retroalimentación entre pares. Estudiantes informaron dificultades cuando escribieron en inglés y cuando participaron en las sesiones; sin embargo, consideraron que esta estrategia era beneficiosa para mejorar la escritura. Docentes e investigadores quienes deseen saber sobre estrategias de retroalimentación para mejorar la escritura deben leer este artículo. También está destinado para instituciones que buscan implementar innovaciones pedagógicas para despertar el potencial de escritura en sus estudiantes para su Educación Superior.

*Palabras clave:* escritura EFL, escritura universitaria, retro alimentación entre pares, rúbrica

### **Peer - feedback for Improving English Writing in Higher Education**

In life, humans socio-culturally develop their use of language for academic and professional purposes, becoming exposed to psychological and cultural tools from their specific context (Vygotsky, 1978 in Verenikina, 2003: 10). The writing system is a tool which allows learners to enhance cognition and code in their communication with others upon undergoing a formal education, being able to analyze and construct real life linguistic contexts from their worlds into socially powerful discourses for archiving information across time and captivating audiences worldwide (Verenikina, 2003).

Writing has become the crucial skill for participating in higher education and publication research opportunities; like Salma (2015) stated, “writing has become central element of academic language... and any field should consider the multidimensional nature of writing in instructional practices, assessment and knowledge development” (Salma, 2015: 74). This is why, in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the role of writing holds great importance for acquiring or improving knowledge; especially for students seeking to excel in higher education.

But challenges prevail for teaching this skill across the formative education of students around the world. Internationally, the writing skill has been known as the most challenging for both native and non-native learners of English (Jahin & Idrees, 2012). Since there tends to be a less practical use of the writing skill in the EFL classroom, many students seldom write, also failing to correct errors in grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, organization of ideas, even at university level (Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh, 2007). These failures further affect the motivation to write proficiently, which undermines students’ language use in professional contexts, revealing a lack of knowledge and organization about structure, fluency, and accuracy (Belhabib, 2014).

In the context of Ecuador, English skills are taught and measured in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2018), and have placed students from this country 65 in the ranking out of 80 Latin American countries in terms on English knowledge and use; this test situated Ecuador at an even lower level for the writing skill. Given the persisting problems with the writing skill among the Ecuadorian academic and professional population (Consejo de Educación Superior del Ecuador, 2016), EFL teachers and institutions ought to conduct action research on strategies that can be implemented in academic programs to augment number of proficient English writers for academic and professional participation and development in various fields of study (Tsui & Ng, 2000).

One of these strategies is peer feedback, in which capable peers, beyond teachers and parents, provide assistance for better understanding and reinforcement of a given skill. In the case of writing, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) determined that giving or receiving peer feedback helps develop the students' ability to critically examine their own writing, which offers them self-feedback and greatly improves their writing skills. Many studies support the idea that peer review can be extremely effective for a variety of reasons when used correctly (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Paulus, 1999 in Lundstrom and Baker, 2009). However, peer feedback can also be considered pointless when students are not trained on how to give and use feedback properly to help each other's writing abilities (Min, 2006).

There are studies about the importance of enabling a peer reviewing stage in the reading process (Perlaza Estupiñán, 2020) and writing process (Albán, Miller & Ramírez-Ávila, 2020); however, there are no studies that report an investigation in EFL students at proficient university level in Ecuador: there is a gap in research related to how peer feedback enhances writing skills and knowledge in higher education settings

connected to academic publication and research; there is also a gap related to college students who, though exhibit B1 - B2 proficiency levels in skills such as reading, listening and speaking, have failed to develop an apt level for writing. The present action research was applied in a private university in Guayaquil, Ecuador, during an eighteen - week long semester course. Sixty students participated in this research through a university writing course, in which they had to practice English writing for academic contexts. Following this introduction, the main concepts from this action research are discussed to guide the following research questions:

1. To what extent does peer feedback improve writing in B1 - B2 higher education students?
2. What are students' perspectives on writing and feedback?

### **Literature Review**

Studies related to writing, assessment, collaborative learning, and peer feedback in language learning have been conducted since the rise of EFL as a field. Here is the literature review on these concepts to frame this innovation.

### **Writing**

Even to this age, writing remains an academic practice and identity connected to specific cultural and technological tools, such as laptops and phones, now to be defined as an important skill for genuine communication, linked to “expression of feelings, thoughts desires and plans in black and white” (Azizifar et al, 2020).

Laksmi (2006) affirms writing has important stages: pre writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing, recursive non sequential stages for writers. With these stages incorporated in class pedagogy, participants can render better writing outcomes and increase their motivation for producing quality writing, as corroborated by Özdemir and Aydin (2015), who investigated how to integrate several stages of writing with

computers provided students with collaborative opportunities to improve writing.

### **Assessment and its Relevance for Improving Writing Skill**

The goal of assessment is to support students towards improving their knowledge and skills. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) assert teachers provide assessments to support student learning. Though some may need more guidance than others to reach transfer goals, students are intrinsically eager to understand how to progress and what to work on. So, teachers should plan formative assessments before providing a complex performance task and measure improvement (O'Connor, 2007).

Regardless of how long some students may take, well - designed assessments keep them in the loop of their performance and moving in the right direction towards learning goals set for a course. Regardless of the modality, reviewing other students' writing is a viable and important activity to improving one's own writing, findings which can benefit students in their higher education, especially if they have not fully developed their writing structure, fluency nor accuracy prior to entering university (Paulus, 1999 in Lundstrom & Baker, 2009: 34).

### **Collaborative Learning / Writing**

This kind of learning has been studied and promoted because it emphasizes a sense of community that generates learning. Brown (2000) mentioned interdependence stimulates an atmosphere of cooperative responsibility, mutual respect, and a sense of group identity that should be replicated in academic environments. Chen (2017) also asserted collaborative activities can promote second language learners' academic progress and learning motivation by having more opportunities to practice their problem-solving, communication and social skills. Castillo, Heredia, and Gallardo (2017) added collaborative work improves academic competencies of post graduate students, even in online environments.

Collaborative activities in any form of classroom help student academically, socially, and psychologically as it improves critical thinking and develops social support for students and teachers (Roberts, 2005). In the matter of EFL writing, Khatib and Meihami (2015) mentioned the importance of writing collaboratively for achieving meaningful communication and to for improving components such as content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Yan (2019) described collaborative learning can successfully decrease students' fear of writing and to develop confidence in that skill and respect peer's opinions. For Moreira (2019), collaborative writing gave her students the opportunity to provide feedback and improve, sharing their efforts as a team and taking responsibilities for the job done.

### **Peer Feedback**

In his publication, Seliger (1983) mentioned students could be the ones to provide feedback as a means for improving writing quality when collaborating with each other, referring to it as a peer feedback strategy. Golparian et al (2015) defined peer review as a feedback practice in which students must take turns on being the reviewed and the reviewer, to foment a relationship in which participants give, receive and appreciate different styles of learning. Yu and Lee (2016) have highlighted that peer feedback strengthens the collaborative environments in classrooms because it allows students to take on responsibility together for developing their own skills.

Peer feedback has a strong influence on students' confidence, since they get to improve their use of vocabulary, transitions and author's claim (Money Penny et al, 2018). Learners also convey their thoughts better through writing if they are working under this modality with teachers and partners, as well as by sharing feedback and



correction (Kim, 2010); as long as these interactions are to be consistent and serious for improving a partner's writing sample, as well as the knowledge about effective writing (Liu & Hansen, 2002).

However, peer feedback is considered a practice whereby students may provide and receive unsatisfactory feedback, especially if the feedback exchanged is not accurate (Nicol et al, 2014). Tsui and Ng (2000) asserted students prefer to receive feedback from their teachers rather than their partners, which is why peer review requires such detailed instruction from teachers first, as well as other instruments, to fall within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and avoid overwhelming the students with this practice to ensure better transfer goals in the writing skill (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

Despite setbacks, Ferris and Hegdcock (2014) suggested that even if students do not initially provide useful feedback to peers, they benefit from reading one another's papers and from the relationship and classroom community that grows through peer review activities. Huisman et al (2017) stated the effectiveness of peer-feedback ultimately relies on successfully interrelating student writing abilities with their reviewing abilities.

### **Communicative Language Teaching**

A pedagogical field which advocates for principles such as communication, task-based learning and meaningfulness to be incentivized and studied in classrooms from all ages to better understand what communicative tasks work best and how education can evolve from these innovations (Belchamber, 2007).

### **Gradual Release of Responsibility**

Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) framework focuses on better guided instructions that allow more autonomous exploration and student collaboration. Fisher

and Frey (2008) stated that the GRR model has four phases of the GRR Model were: Focus Lesson – "I do it," Guided Instruction – "We do it," Collaborative – "You do it together," and Independent – "You do it alone", for allowing better transfer results.

### **Innovation**

The following innovation aimed for student participants to improve their University Writing (UW) after five peer feedback sessions, enhancing their abilities to identify and correct errors in structure, fluency, and accuracy in their written work, in accordance with a rubric provided for guiding the sessions throughout the semester.

This innovation took place through a 16 - week period, when sixty freshmen and sophomore students took a university writing course to improve their academic writing in English. To guide the peer feedback process, the instructor used a customized UW rubric to familiarize students with the goal referenced features of English writing to be studied throughout the course. Students had to engage in five peer feedback sessions using this rubric, which not only to help improve writing criteria for each other's final research paper on a socio environmental topic of their choice, but also to improve their writing abilities in regards to English structure, English fluency, and English accuracy. By following the rubric consistently throughout the sessions, they would be better able to transfer this knowledge and acquired skill to their writing of posterior research papers. The goal of the innovation was to get students to rely on their collaborative learning interactions to produce a better-written APA paper, while getting them to also think and improve their knowledge about English writing at higher proficiency levels.

As the lesson plan shows (Appendix 1), the innovation was interwoven with the semester long course starting on the third week, when the instructor asked the students to start a creative journal about a socio environmental topic of their interest. During this week, students were exposed to a series of videos and documentaries as examples of the

topics they could reflect on through their "journal turned paper". Then, students were introduced to the rubric with the writing criteria to be practiced; the main rule for the semester became to respect this rubric for writing and peer feedback purposes.

On the fifth week, following the GRR framework, the instructor did a live peer feedback demonstration with a student's initial text, exemplifying how to use the rubric, before randomly assigning peers for the first feedback session. Then, on the seventh week, students kept their randomly assigned pair and met synchronously for a second peer feedback session of a second draft of the journal, which included an introduction.

On the ninth week of the semester, students participated in a third peer feedback session; this time, they met in smaller groups of two pairs for discussing their writing in reference to the rubric's criteria. During this time, class tasks became centered around the rubric's criteria, especially to reinforce what each question featured in this rubric meant on the text; providing examples of poor and excellent writing, with regards to structure, fluency, and accuracy.

On the eleventh week of the semester, students performed peer feedback session asynchronously. Since most of them had begun turning the sections of their creative journal into academic texts, they had to revise and provide feedback on longer and complex samples of writing, which included an introduction, a body with researched and cited information, and research questions for guiding an argumentative line. During this fourth session, asynchronous peer feedback was provided on a Blackboard forum, where each student had posted his or her link to the paper draft; thus, the peer had to access the link, read and analyze the document according to the criteria, and answer each question featured on the rubric in paragraph form. The same was done on the fifth session, releasing responsibility, letting each randomly assigned pair to revise the text one last time, looking to improve the structure, fluency and accuracy of ideas in each other's

papers. The latest and most improved version of the paper was submitted on the fifteenth week, followed by a brief and individual mock paper defense.

However, student participants had indirectly and subliminally been introduced to the rubric criteria before the third week; during the first week, the writing criteria had been featured in the pretest (Appendix 2), as part of the acquisition learning process. This analytical rubric, which was aimed at identifying the criteria relevant to the pretest assessment score, progressively became the guide for whether the students were reaching the course's transfer goal. This rubric helped for all purposes of the course: introduction of knowledge, formative assessments and review for summative assessment of the course. Before getting a peer feedback by random selection, all participating students were exposed to the ubiquitous writing criteria, so that they could gain familiarity with the goal.

Since the rubric was designed for simple use through straightforward questions, students could revise different versions of their peer's text by checking each question proposed in each category. Overall, student participants posted five entries for peer feedback to check and complete their written papers, all the way to the sixteenth week, when the posttest, which also included the rubric, was used to measure improvement in the student's knowledge and writing skill about the three criteria evaluated and shared since the beginning of the course, in contrast to the pretest results.

### **Methodology**

An action research “enables teachers to perceive complex problems and their solutions can only be discovered when participants play a decisive part” (Papadopoulos & Kosma, 2018: 4). This was the research through which the pedagogical innovation was implemented: improving writing in higher education students by involving them in how to improve their academic texts in five peer feedback sessions. The quantitative and

qualitative data for this action research was collected during the semester course. Participants and instruments are explained in the following sections:

## **Participants**

### **Sample/Participants**

The sample 60 participants (26 males and 34 females) who range from 18 to 28 years old; all come from Hispanic backgrounds and 57 have an Ecuadorian nationality. These participants study at a private university in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Participants have B1 - B2 level of English, according to international certification, which allowed them to take this course in their career's curriculum to improve their university writing; thus, the exclusionary factor is that all participants were enrolled in this institutionalized paid course from May to August, 2021 and had to prove this level before participating.

### **Variables of study**

For the purpose of this research, there are three important concepts that should be defined for the measuring improvement in writing in the delimited context of EFL university writing: structure, fluency, and accuracy:

**Structure**, within the EFL context, refers to a sentence that follows Subject + Verb + Object word order, and can stand on its own. Harris (1976) discussed how this order guarantees fuller meaning to be conceived from an Anglo-Saxon tradition, because of its concise and straightforward order.

Words like fluency remain intertwined with punctuation and linkers in terms of improving writing, given that these two features of language draw from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) to better help understand how humans connect ideas and relate to each other without much confusion or lack of continuity (Meletiadou, 2021).

Accuracy refers to how correct learners' use of the language system is,

including their use of grammar and vocabulary for writing purposes (Meletiadou, 2021). These variables of study became the criteria by which the rubric guided the peer feedback sessions explained in later sections, as their analysis throughout the second language acquisition process of non native English users can bring improvement, not always in a sequential order, but definitely exposed to these criteria for transfer goals (Krashen, 2013).

One more final variable is peer feedback as the epicentral strategy for improving writing in higher education. For Wiggins (2012), peer - feedback's effectiveness depends on it being goal-referenced, tangible and transparent, actionable, user-friendly, timely, ongoing, and consistent. Effective feedback is also considered descriptive, objective, and accountable for students to reference and transfer these into improvement (Nicol et al, 2014).

### **Instruments**

In order to answer the research questions, these were the instruments:

1. To answer the first question, a writing pretest and a writing posttest were administered, corresponding to quantitative research to better measure and understand the extent of the improvement.
2. To answer the second question, a reflection semi structured interview was administered to seven of the sixty students. The survey could help retrieve perceptions about the peer feedback strategy.

### **Pretest**

For the pre-assessment, students' prior knowledge was activated through a test with two parts: first, through a section that required students to improve four paragraphs, which had specific errors concerning each of the criteria featured in the rubric. For the first paragraph, students had to analyze its problems with structure; for the

second paragraph, problems concerning fluency; for the third paragraph, analyze what was wrong with accuracy; in the fourth paragraph, students had to look for problems alluding to all three criteria. This section was a starting point to measure knowledge and allow students to identify common errors that could be mended by simply paying attention to the questions in the rubric criteria.

The second second part of the pretest instructed a writing piece about a specific question: What socio environmental topic is relevant nowadays and why? The rubric to grade this sample included the criteria of structure, fluency, and accuracy (and objective support) of ideas conveyed, with the additional instruction of writing 700 - 1000 words in under two hours and include at least two cited sources to objectively assert students' answers. The pretest was administered during the first week of the semester, which was on May 2021(Appendix 2).

### **Posttest**

After the five peer feedback sessions, as well as the multiple tasks connected to the reinforcing the knowledge provided by the questions in the rubric, students took a posttest with a rather similar format to the pretest; students were once again asked to analyze and correct erroneously written paragraphs in the first section; then asked to write an answer to the following question: How can young entrepreneurs contribute to building a better socio environmental reality nowadays? This question was meant to provide closure to semester - long reflections on socio environmental topics explored (Appendix 3).

The results from this posttest were comparable with those of the pretest: the first sections were straightforward in their grading, asking students to improve the same number of errors for each paragraph; both writing questions also asked for the same word count, under the same time limit, and using the same minimum number of sources

to be graded with the same writing rubric. Both tests had the same format and type of knowledge tested to determine an increase in the knowledge and the skill for English writing in higher education, thus an improvement in their writing. Pretests and posttests were turned in by each student participant before via the Blackboard platform.

### **Survey with open questions**

The survey was used to understand the participants' perceptions about writing and about the innovation implemented during the semester. It was sent to seven random participants and helped compile qualitative knowledge for answering and discussing the second research question.

The students for the sampled survey were randomly selected from the participant sample. The survey included solely open questions and was carried out confidentially via an online Google Forms; no consent form was necessary since all participants were of age. The data was collected from both quantitative and qualitative sources to ensure research questions could have enough discussion data. The open questions referred to three initial codes: writing, peer feedback, and improvement, but other codes appeared as this research moved forward.

Specific interview questions in the survey:

1. How long have you been studying English?
2. Do you enjoy writing? Why or why not?
3. Can you explain the principal difficulties you have had with this skill?
4. Have the five peer feedback sessions been helpful to understand what to improve?
5. Which advantages does this strategy offer for teaching writing?
6. Which disadvantages have you noticed about peer feedback?
7. Do you think peer feedback is a good strategy to improve writing? Why or why not?

### **Data Analysis**



Data was analyzed according to the research questions explained below.

RQ#1: To what extent does peer feedback improve university writing?

All tests were graded, one by one in accordance with the rubric criteria; their results were plugged into separate Excel sheets with the acronym of each student participant's name. Then, the instructor proceeded to calculate descriptive statistics from these test results: minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation. Instructor used the descriptive statistics from both tests to calculate Cohen's  $d$  for analysis and paragraph writing in the results section of this paper.

RQ#2: What are students' perspectives on writing and peer feedback?

At the end of the semester, during the sixteenth week, a survey with open questions made with Google Forms was sent via institutional email to a sample of ten students; only seven responded to all the questions by the end of the implementation. Questions in the survey were organized and classified according to what each student answered on a separate Excel sheet, highlighting main themes, which stood out from the qualitative information: views on writing, difficulties with writing, experience with peer feedback session, disadvantages and advantages of this innovation, and overall views of peer feedback for improving writing. Data collected was transcribed and organized into Excel sheets. Test results and main themes have been archived on an Excel separated into different sheets (Appendix 4).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This action research was implemented with the ethical considerations from the institution in which the UW course was taught. Since the beginning of the semester, students were informed about the peer feedback innovation and how it would be

implemented during the sixteen - week period. Papadopoulos and Kosma (2018) assert these dialogues with participants can help highlight research constraints, so that other researchers further apply them in subsequent ideas.

The implementation of the research was carried out with honesty and integrity, making sure participants could benefit for the innovation, since they wanted to gain better access on the writing skill for academic purposes and university level. At the same time, the confidentiality of the participants was maintained, always using acronyms for tabulating their test results, as well as their views on writing and the innovation implemented to improve this ability.

Throughout the semester of sixteen weeks, the actions from the researcher made sure to save reliable data obtained from each applied instrument. The research avoided bias in the procedures, data collection, and data analysis. For presenting the results on this paper, participants' confidentiality was also respected, and their names were not disclosed at any moment of this paper.

Therefore, this paper has been written with ethical disclosure of the results, regardless of the failure and criticism it may ignite among readers about the sessions for providing peer feedback to improve high level writing skills in university students.

## Results

The first research question: To what extent does peer feedback improve university writing?, quantitative results are shown in Tables 1.

**Table 1**

### Pre and posttest results

	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
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<b>Pre</b>	60	5	18	13.17	2.96
<b>Post</b>	60	8	19	14.18	2.14

Table 1 demonstrated the improvement of the participants from the pretest to the posttest, after the application of the action research. Cohen's  $d = (141833 - 131667) / 150995.27916 = 0.39$ . The innovation had a moderate impact on improving the students' writing. There was moderate improvement, according to these results.

The second research question: What are students' perspectives on writing and peer feedback?, the results are decoded as follows:

When it came to views on writing, two out of seven students said they did not enjoy writing, despite most of them having practiced this skill for more than 10 years; one student even mentioned "it has always been a source of stress for my performance". When asked about the difficulties in writing, three of the interviewees mentioned that structuring or organizing ideas were the biggest challenge; the other four mentioned the biggest difficulty had to do with weak connectors or overall vocabulary scarcity, which meant imprecision for expressing ideas; one even said "scarcity of vocabulary limits my capability of expression".

In regards to their experience with the innovation of peer feedback sessions, one student mentioned the peer assigned had helped with better organizing ideas, improving connectors for fluency in the text, and even helping eliminate redundant pronouns like "I" or "We". Four of the students praised their peers for helping them notice unnoticed errors, reducing wordiness and redundancy, and emphasizing better organization for ideas in the text. Nevertheless, two of the participants mentioned that peer had not

helped at all, asserting he or she did not check work, or simply praised the text without much feedback.

When asked about advantages of this peer feedback strategy for university writing courses, the interviewees mentioned: betterment of ideas, external insight for improvement, awareness of unnoticed errors, expansion of knowledge, and sharing of ideas and ways to convey different vocabulary. Only one of the interviewees responded by saying “there were no clear advantages after this experience”.

When asked about disadvantages of this peer feedback strategy for university writing courses, only one person could not come up with one. The rest of participants concluded peer was not always “accurate and trustworthy”. Some reasons disclosed were that: writing styles could not be peer assessed because of stylistic discrepancies, that feedback could be untimely, and that lack of commitment and responsibility could compromise the reliability of the comments and / or corrections.

Finally, when sharing their overall use of peer feedback for improving writing, here are the summarized testimonies:

- Student 1 concluded, “Yes, peer feedback is good for improving writing because a peer complements what you might lack”. Therefore, the pedagogical innovation was considered a complementary activity because it allowed different perspectives to bolster knowledge about the writing skill.
- Student 2 concluded, “No, because peers have the same level as you. I think that the one responsible for this activity should be the teacher”. This interpretation suggests what Tsui and Ng (2000) mentioned about peer feedback being such a challenging proposal to get for students who are used to getting all the feedback from their teachers, even looking down to the feedback provided by their partners.

- Student 3 concluded, “It is a great strategy if all those involved would take it seriously”. And this answer suggests the biggest challenge about peer feedback: it can only become effective if those involved make an effort to meet characteristics from Wiggins’ study (2016), which may need extensive training on feedback provision.
- Student 4 concluded, “Yes, peer feedback is a good strategy for improving writing at this level because it enriches our perspective of the written text”. Hence why the pedagogical innovation brought better ideas for writing and let students find added value in the sessions for improving a product.
- Student 5 concluded, “Yes, peer feedback helps look at concrete strengths and weakness from writing works.” Similarly, this answer suggests students found the peer feedback sessions enlightening for how to improve a product and detect what works and what does not in a text.
- Student 6 concluded, “Yes, peer feedback is an interesting way of noticing one’s errors and sharing ideas on how to improve the writing skill.” To cite Lundstrom and Baker (2009), peer feedback makes students feel less overwhelmed with correcting and improving their writing process, perhaps even guaranteeing a more consistent ZPD to ensure better transfer goals. Students may stay more comfortable with the learning process by interacting with each other’s writing during formative tasks, while the teacher monitors and provides final feedback on improvement.
- Student 7 concluded, “It is a good strategy because it helps both peers to realize the errors in their papers, and improve quality of their upcoming submissions.” So, this goes back to what Ferris and Hegdcock (2014) suggested: regardless of feedback not being as good as the instructor’s, students do benefit from reading one another's papers and forming a sense of reviewing community.

### **Discussion**

Findings in this study have shown consistency with the concepts exposed in the literature review, and the following has been discussed based on the research questions:

Q#1: To what extent does peer feedback improve university writing?

The quantitative results have demonstrated a rewarding effect on students' improvement of their writing skills through the pedagogical innovation implemented throughout the semester (Cohen's  $d$  of 0.39). Given the results, peer feedback does have the potential to strengthen students' confidence their writing performances. In the case of this action research, the five peer-feedback sessions led by the rubric helped student participants gain more understanding of structure, fluency and accuracy of their written ideas, as was stated by Money Penny et al (2018).

Moreover, results show student participants were able to share feedback and correction during five consistent and serious sessions that were set up by the instructor, which, as Chen (2017) mentioned, did promote the second language learners' academic progress and learning motivation for improving a challenging skill like writing. This improvement may only be viable if feedback is characterized according Wiggins (2016), who mentioned it should be goal oriented and consistent with tasks set up by the course, as well as its capacity to successfully interrelate student writing abilities with their reviewing abilities through clearly marked writing criteria (Huisman, Saab, Van Driel & Van den Broek, 2017).

Q#2: What are students' perspectives on writing and peer feedback?

The views on writing from the survey coincide with what Gibbs and Simpson (2004) indicated: writing assessments need to support student learning, considering that some of them like writing more than others; and some of them struggle with writing more than others. Therefore, though students tend to be intrinsically eager for progress and

understanding, instructors must provide more guidance to some than others to reach transfer goals for all.

Furthermore, results from the interview suggest that the peer feedback sessions did successfully help develop confidence in the writing skill, in accordance with findings from Yan (2019); nevertheless, the sessions did not necessarily lead all students to respect their peer's opinions. Like Moreira (2019) stated, collaborative writing gave students the opportunity to share their ideas and improve writing samples, but it did not guarantee an increase in the peer's knowledge on effective writing, like Liu and Hansen (2002) mentioned.

Results from the interview also suggest that students felt overwhelmed about providing feedback for their partner's work, instead preferring to receive feedback from the teacher, given the high level of competency and knowledge demanded throughout the course, just like Tsui and Ng (2000) concluded in their study. For this reason, views on peer feedback and writing varied according to the students' seriousness to engage with the knowledge provided in the rubric, and their motivation to revise structure, fluency and accuracy in their peers' written work, in this case, their papers on a socio environmental topic of their choice. It should be noted that not all students felt confident or satisfied with the pedagogical innovation implemented throughout the semester, given that some of the tasks were outside their ZPD, so they felt overwhelmed with how to write and provide feedback about university writing, which was similar to what Lundstrom and Baker (2009) asseverated in their own findings.

### **Conclusions**

This action research wanted to inquire if university students could improve their English writing skills through peer feedback sessions. Given the problems in structural organization, fluency and accuracy that students endure in the EFL classroom, many

students do not feel motivated to write and improve their skill, even when reaching higher education levels. This study concludes that pedagogical innovations based on peer feedback can guarantee improvement in writing among students with B1 - B2 level of English, as long as instructors can guide a consistent exposure to the writing criteria.

Peer feedback helps improve university writing and should be implemented in academic programs to augment number of proficient English writers for academic and professional participation and development in various fields of study. This was the case for the sixty student - participants, who were able to provide assistance for better understanding and reinforcement of the writing skill. Whether some students considered peer feedback pointless or whether they considered it useful for improving their writing throughout this university writing course, the results prove that the pedagogical innovation proposed by the instructor did help students become more aware of their writing problems, leading them to write better in a higher education context.

However, the real emphasis should always be put on how well an instructor can guide students towards providing feedback confidently. Motivation and confidence arise when students are gradually trained on the beautiful intricacies of a written text, as well as the improvements it can receive with adequate and enrichment collaborative writing processes; among them, peer feedback.

### **Limitations**

Implementing this pedagogical innovation had several limitations that ought to be mentioned in this paper. The first challenge was having students from different writing levels and experiences. Even though the sixty students were able to read, listen and speak proficiently at a B1 - B2 level of English, the case was not the same for the writing skill. Therefore, it was challenging to prepare all students for the peer feedback



sessions throughout the sixteen - week course. So the instructor had to dedicate a lot of the initial hours from the semester to getting students used to the rubric and the writing criteria.

Also, it was challenging to ignite the same motivation for all of them when it came to improving their academic writing at university level, since those who came from the careers of business, engineering and architecture were not as enthusiastic about peer reviewing the university writing of others. Also, many experienced apprehension or straight up apathy when it came to completing the feedback sessions with their assigned peers. For this reason, the instructor had to create many collaborative tasks prior to the sessions, so that students could become more confident with talking about the writing criteria and getting to know each other.

Finally, the biggest challenge and limitation was supervising the pretest and posttest performance. Even though students were given strict dates and times to complete these, it was extremely challenging to determine if they had done the tests by themselves. This was the case with some students who had confessed to texting other more well trained students during these tests. Given the strict online modality of the semester, students were sometimes able to text or call each other during these tests, so results were limited to these ingenious yet mischievous interactions, which may have affected the validity of the scores. To counteract the copying, both tests demanded paragraph improvement and writing samples, which are less likely to incite copying than multiple choice or short answers.

### **Recommendations**

If this action research is to be replicated, it is recommended to first divide the participants into a control and a variable group. Although this separation was not made possible by strict institutional orders, it would be interesting to compare results between

participants who do not get to undergo the five peer feedback sessions, and participants who do. Moreover, it is recommended for students to take an assessment test prior to entering the study, instead of just entering because it was required for the curriculum, and because they must complete a university writing class as a course requirement, which tends to decrease the level of enthusiasm and commitment among peers.

Finally, it is recommended to install better monitoring programs for the pretest and the posttest; to avoid undermining the validity of the results, these tests could be conducted inside a physical classroom, or through a software program that does not permit the communication between gadgets at home. Perhaps the innovation could be better implemented once the pandemic times have passed and students are allowed to engage in feedback and writing inside a regular classroom. Nevertheless, it is recommended to find digital means to research the impact of peer feedback for improving writing.

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Appendix 1

**Detailed activities in the Lesson Plan:**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 2**  
**University Writing**  
PRETEST – WEEK 1

Available upon request.

**Appendix 3**  
**University Writing**  
POSTTEST- WEEK 16

Available upon request.

**Appendix 4**  
**Results**

Available upon request.