Improving Writing Skills through Peer Feedback Facilitated

by Facebook among Students from Remote Areas: Research Report

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Writing is one of the most challenging skills for L2 learners. The sub-skills involved in writing are quite complex. Moreover, the degree of difficulty increases if their language level is low (Richards & Renandya, 2002). According to Education First (2021), Ecuador was ranked 90 out of 112 countries and had the lowest level of proficiency in the Latin American region. In addition to that, teaching strategies influence the learning process. Different aspects of the teaching staff such as the specific training capacity, their interpretive schemes, and their instructional criteria influence classroom decision making (Farrell & Oliveira, 1993). Furthermore, it is necessary to mention that the unexpected shift from the face-to-face environment to virtual mode under pandemic circumstances affected education in the country. The students consider that they are learning less (UNICEF, 2021).

The Ecuadorian National Curriculum proposes an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program that emphasizes the Communicative Language Teaching approach. The aim of teaching a foreign language is to train up individuals to become proficient in the use of the second language for oral and written communication. In the sublevel Bachillerato General Unificado (BGU), writing skills are essential for learners to acquire knowledge for academic purposes and the professional world (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2019). EFL students at the public high schools only dedicate four hours per week to English learning (Macías, 2019). Moreover, under pandemic circumstances, educational activities demand internet accessibility but online coverage in Ecuador is deficient (Vallejo et al., 2020). In consequence, students in remote areas receive information by WhatsApp (Vásquez, 2020) and the time for English classes was reduced to one hour per week through Zoom platform. Therefore, educators have to solve these problems by incorporating new strategies.

In contemporary investigation, Sarwar et al. (2019) suggested adopting social media sites to develop educational plans. Social media ponders effectiveness because of their mechanism for communication, collaboration, and connections (Ruleman, 2012). Among social nets, Facebook stands out as one of the most popular sites where users interact by posting, commenting, and sharing content (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020). This interchanging feature of Facebook facilitates reciprocal responses among users. In addition, peer feedback is a technique in which students receive comments from a classmate on how well they are doing a task. Higgins et al. (2010) noted that meaningful feedback helps students become interested in the content under study while reflecting on others´ works as on their own.

A group of EFL A2 level students from a public school in a rural area in Ecuador had difficulties writing a text with coherence. During the first year of the pandemic Covid-19, they received information only by WhatsApp once a week. Their interaction was limited to reading and sending written messages. Most students had connectivity access and received classes for one forty-minute period per week through the Zoom platform in the current school year. Thus, they have become familiarized with social media and virtual environments. This research aims to analyze the effect of peer feedback in descriptive writing enhancement using Facebook as a facilitator instrument of writing learning.

Literature Review

Peer Feedback

According to Lundstrom and Baker (2009), peer feedback is an activity in which the students use the language in meaningful interaction that contributes positively to improve oral and written performance. Liu and Lee (2013) considered that students can make constructive modifications to their work with the help of feedback from their online peers. Meanwhile, Corgan et al. (2004) said that online peer feedback has a positive correlation with

sense of community and learning increasing. If used efficiently, peer feedback increases the quality of discussion and the quality of learning in the online setting.

A further important aspect of *receiving* feedback is that students may also benefit from *giving* peer feedback. Liu et al. (2001) suggested that, when students are asked to review peers' tasks, students advance beyond the cognitive processes needed for developing a given assignment, as they must now "read, compare, or question ideas, suggest modifications, or even reflect on how well one's own work is compared with others" (p.248). In this way, every learner can become an expert, and the instructor provides the apprentices the opportunity to expand their language abilities. Sackstein and Berkowicz (2017) stated that feedback is a reciprocal process. The relationship between the giver and the receiver of feedback helps students make aware of their own learning. They deepen knowledge and master skills by asking, sharing information, identifying challenges, and adopting collaborative work.

Social Media

Recent research has shown the increasing use of social media in the educational domain and their integration as an elemental instrument of remote learning (Piotrowski, 2015). In Ecuadorian backgrounds, adolescents are frequent users of different social nets. Indeed, the data showed that teenagers are the fourth largest user group of Facebook (Statista, 2021). They use the website to check posts, share, and comment. From an educational perspective, the social aspect of Facebook makes it enjoyable and stimulates the learning process. Learners regularly publish or comment about their experiences, opinions, interests, and schoolwork (Hewitt & Forte, 2006 as cited in Balcikanli, 2015). Therefore, this social website is considered easy access and engaging learning assistance tool. The nature of its written interaction facilitates reciprocal responses to engage in writing abilities.

Descriptive Writing

Writing is a challenging skill for L2 learners to become proficient. The complexity of generating and organizing ideas and transforming these ideas into a clear text requires great skills. Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that EFL writers have to "focus on higher-level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower-level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on" (p. 303). Moreover, psychomotor skills while writing a document. Developing and arranging thoughts and their translation into a coherent text is a challenge (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Hence, coherence is an implicit ingredient in good writing since it implies expressing harmonious ideas in a text. Coherence in writing helps the reader move fluently through the composition (Rahmtallah, 2020). Among types of writing, descriptive, narrative, and argumentative are the most prevalent.

Descriptive writing uses sensitive words and phrases to produce passages that seem real for the reader (McCarthy, 1998). Axelrod and Cooper (2013) declared that a vivid story creates an intense, detailed picture that seems to bring the words to life. Some authors consider Descriptive writing as a basic form of writing which is used in many genres. The Ecuadorian curriculum emphasizes this writing style from earlier levels. In this regard, Asmayanti and Hajaruddin (2017) asserted: "there is no one way to teach writing but many ways" (p.51). The most common approaches to teach writing are the process approach and product approach. The product process focuses on the accuracy of the final result. On the other hand, Raimes (2002) mentioned that a process approach pays attention to how a piece of writing evolves, comprising four stages: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Therefore, this emphasis on the process promotes writers' creativity.

Innovation

The innovation was applied for five weeks and consisted in improving descriptive paragraphs by applying peer feedback facilitated by Facebook. The teacher created a private Facebook group to post paragraphs and students´ interaction. Participants commented on one

peer´s Facebook post after class during the first four weeks. They used a rubric including descriptors to assess vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and paragraph structure for that purpose. Learners received reading material from Ministry modules and website blogs to learn new vocabulary and text structures. At the end of the unit, they had to write a post on Instagram. It was assumed that students would enhance descriptive writing, recognize the importance of peer feedback in their learning process, and build collaborative work.

At the beginning of the study, the group composed a descriptive paragraph watching a picture from an Instagram post, which was considered as a pretest. The paragraph was scored with a rubric (See Appendix 1). Once the students took the test, they were taught and trained to use the rubric to give peer feedback. The rubric verified if the components specified were incorporated before posting a descriptive paragraph (See Appendix 2). During the implementation, the learners were taught vocabulary, grammar rules, mechanics, paragraph structure, and the use of connectors. After that, the group practiced how to write a good paragraph. Then, students were expected to use the rubric for peer feedback each time they reviewed partners´ paragraphs on Facebook. Students wrote about topics related to cultural issues asynchronously.

The backward design was used to plan lessons applying interactive activities like describing traditions and facts of different places in Ecuador and worldwide (See Appendix 3). Students pretended to be tourists in their favorite city or country in the performance task. This final description was posted on the Instagram app, which was considered as a posttest.

Methodology

Action research in education is used for teachers who aim to improve instruction by studying a specific problem (Lesha, 2014). This study was an action research report with an analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative and qualitative instruments were developed to collect information and answer the research questions.

General Objective

To describe the effect of the use of peer feedback to enhance descriptive writing through social media.

Specific Objectives

* Examine the effect that peer feedback has on descriptive writing.

* Describe the benefits and difficulties of peer feedback.

Participants

This report research was conducted with students from the third baccalaureate of a public Ecuadorian high school in a rural area. A Cambridge test showed that students were at an A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. There were six participants in this research in which there were four female students and two male students. Their ages ranged between 16 and 17 years old. They were from the average lower middle class. Students´ native language is Spanish.

Regarding technology accessibility, all of the students had internet at home, and the knowledge of this tool was intermediate according to the teacher´s demands. Most of the students joined classes by cell phone. Additionally, they were frequent social media users.

Instruments

The researcher employed different instruments to answer the research questions. The quantitative instruments used in this research were a pretest and a posttest. The qualitative instruments were a survey, teacher´s field notes and an interview.

Research Questions

Q. 1. To what extent does peer feedback enhance descriptive writing?

To analyze students' writing improvement, there was a writing sample at the beginning and a writing sample at the end of the implementation. These instruments are considered pretest and posttest. For the pretest, students needed to describe a picture of a place. To apply the posttest, they were required to describe a trip experience. The researcher graded the pretest and the posttest using the rubric. The rubric used to score the tests was based on the elements identified in the breakdown of the transfer goal, which included vocabulary, mechanics, grammar, and structure.

Q. 2. What are the advantages and challenges of peer feedback for A-2 students?

The teacher's field notes (See Appendix 4) and a Likert scale survey (See Appendix 5) provided information on the advantages and challenges of peer feedback implementation. They were based on the unit learning objectives. Teacher's field notes collected data from students' daily work. Meanwhile, the survey collected information from students' opinions. It was answered in Spanish since participants were A2 level- students. In this instrument, there were ten agree/ disagree statements that students had to answer. They were related to what and how they felt about giving and receiving peer feedback; likewise, a section of six open questions was part of the survey.

Q. 3. What are students´ perspectives towards peer feedback implementation?

The researcher employed an interview to answer this question. Three participants were selected in the following manner taking into consideration their posttest scores: One student with the lowest grades, one from the middle of the list and one student with the best scores (See Appendix 6). The interview was designed with four questions: Do you feel more relaxed or more pressured doing peer feedback? How did peer feedback contribute to improve your writing? How do you know you have learned to write a descriptive paragraph? How does peer feedback result difficult for you? The interview was conducted in Spanish, and it was allowed to be answered in Spanish since participants were – A2 level- students.

Data Analysis

Regarding to the first research question, "*To what extent does peer feedback enhance descriptive writing?*" A pre and posttest were applied to measure different elements of descriptive writing; the following parameters were considered: vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and structure. The maximum grade students could achieve was ten points in both the pre and post-test. Quantitative data were analyzed by comparing pre and posttest results. The data were entered in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to get descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation).

Concerning the second research question: *"What are the advantages and challenges of peer feedback for A-2 students?"* The data collection was based on document analysis through teacher´s field notes. The researcher identified themes and relevant details to analyze data. Another instrument used was a Likert survey at the end of the innovation. The researcher scrutinized the responses of the students and reflections to meet participants' arguments and perspectives about the significance of peer feedback on descriptive writing enhancement. Finally, the survey data were tabulated in an Excel worksheet to obtain the frequencies of each element.

For the third research question: "*What are students´ perspectives towards peer feedback implementation?*" To answer this question, the researcher interviewed three participants out of six, through Zoom platform. Each interview lasted about ten minutes. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed for general themes. During the open coding step, seven themes emerged (Attitude, Challenge, Mechanics improvement, Structure and Organization, Edition, Vocabulary, Benefits) by assigning categories to relevant quotes from each interview transcription (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Themes were then reviewed by the researcher to check for accuracy of the thematic categories.

Next, the researcher conducted an axial coding step. During this step, each theme was reviewed and defined. This resulted in the *Mechanics Improvement, Structure and Organization, Edition, Vocabulary and Benefits* themes combined into *Benefits for Skills Development* theme since they pertained to how students perceived usefulness from feedback. The *Attitude and Challenge* themes were combined into *Attitude towards peer feedback* theme because they were concerned with how students felt during peer feedback implementation.

These themes were then organized into two broader categories (*Applying Peer Feedback* and *Benefits for Descriptive Writing*) during the selective coding step. The researcher then reviewed the categories and how well each theme fit into its corresponding category. This resulted in a general category. The *Applying Peer Feedback* and *Benefits for Descriptive Writing* themes were combined into the *Peer Feedback Influences the Development of Writing Skills* theme because they were related to students' perceptions about peer feedback (See Appendix 7).

Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical standards were explicitly followed, the researcher had the principal vet and permission to implement the innovation. The primary objectives and the activities were explained when obtaining the approval. Students were notified about the benefits and implications of the study for their academic achievement. Further, the researcher addressed letters to get parents' consent, hence; the letters clarified the process and its purpose. Due to the significance of the investigation, ethical considerations were mentioned. No personal identification from the participants was published.

Results

The findings of this study are presented according to the results obtained from the data collected during these five weeks. To answer the first research question "***To what extent does peer feedback enhance descriptive writing?***" The researcher found out that learners did not write descriptive paragraphs with coherence at the beginning of the study. Table 1 shows that after the innovation, students improved their descriptive writing. The minimal grade on the pretest was 5 over 10 and the maximum 7 over 10. On the other hand, the minimal grade on the post-test was 8.75 over 10 and the maximum 9.50 over 10.

Table 1

Descriptive statistic of pre-test and post-test

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Pretest	6	5.00	7.00	5.9167	.81650
Posttest	6	8.75	9.50	9.0833	.30277

Table 2 displays the results of four assessed elements of writing in the pretest and the posttest: vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and structure. The Vocabulary descriptor in the posttest scores evinced a significant difference against the pretest results. The minimum in the pretest about this descriptor was 5 and the highest 7. Thus, this result showed an insufficient knowledge about vocabulary related to vivid adjectives. Meanwhile, the minimum in posttest results was 8 and the maximum 9.

Furthermore, data collected reflected the Grammar descriptor demonstrated a considerable difference between pretest and posttest outcomes. The minimum in pretest results was 5, and the maximum was 7. By contrast, posttest results evinced higher values; the minimum was 9 and the maximum 10. At the beginning of the implementation, these data

revealed a low cognition of grammar, including verb tense, subject-verb agreement, and complete sentences.

| | **Pretest** | | | | | **Posttest** | | | | |
	N	Min	Max	M	SD	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Vocabulary	6	5.00	7.00	5.5000	.83666	6	8.00	9.00	8.8333	.40825
Grammar	6	5.00	7.00	6.1667	.98319	6	9.00	10.00	9.1667	.40825
Mechanics	6	5.00	7.00	6.1667	.98319	6	8.00	10.00	9.0000	.63246
Structure	6	5.00	7.00	5.8333	.98319	6	9.00	10.00	9.3333	.51640

According to the reported data, there was a significant difference in the Mechanics descriptor scores between pretest results (M= 6.166, SD= 0.983) and posttest results (M= 9.000, SD= 0. 632). The Mechanics component included spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. The same collected data showed a significant difference in the Structure descriptor between pretest results (M= 5.8333, SD= 0.983) and posttest results (M= 9.3333, SD= 0.516). The Structure component was related to paragraph organization, topic sentence, supportive sentences, concluding sentence, and connectors. The students' interview responses supported these results.

To respond to the second question, ***"What are the advantages and challenges of peer feedback for A-2 students?"*** The outcomes were obtained from a Likert scale survey and teacher's field notes. Likert scale survey consisted of ten items related to comments given and received during peer feedback application with score measures ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and six open questions relating to challenging aspects of the strategy.

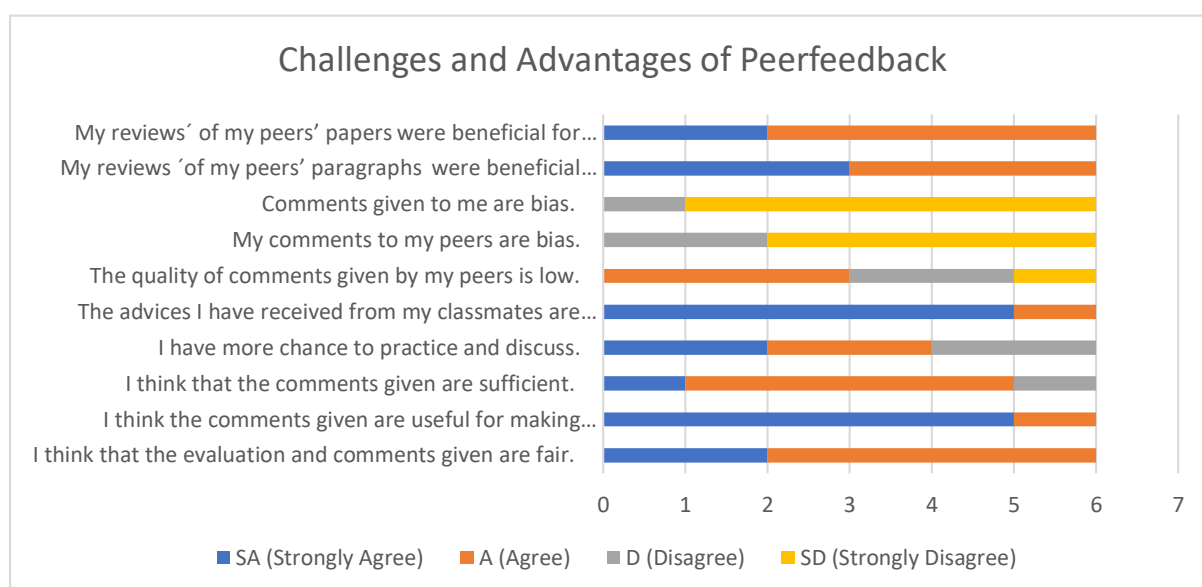*Figure 1.* Challenges and Advantages of Peer feedback

Figure 1 illustrates data from the Likert scale survey. Participants´ responses were positive and demonstrated strong agreement on items like: "*The advices I have received from my classmates are very useful.*" and "*I think the comments given are useful for making improvement*". Also, most participants agreed with these statements: "*I think that the evaluation and comments given are fair.*" and "*I think that the comments given are sufficient.*" In the open section questions, some students expressed difficulties they faced when trying to give peer feedback, some students said:

"*At first, I was afraid that they would take it badly.*"

"*It was difficult to identify errors and correct them accurately*."

""*I tried to comment without appearing hostile because I was trying to give constructive criticism*."

On the other hand, data from the teachers' field notes showed that participants were anxious about giving peer feedback at the beginning of the implementation. They were afraid of partners' reactions to the comments. Immediately, the educator had to intervene to get the students to give feedback on the due date by showing examples. She provided statements for praising and suggesting modifications on partners' posts. The examples motivated them to be

fair and reflective when giving feedback. In the following lessons, the students commented on peers' works on due time. Likewise, they could read all posts and comments on the Facebook group and became more comfortable when expressing their opinions. The social media setting facilitated collaborative work and promoted cooperative learning.

To answer the third research question: **What are students´ perspectives towards peer feedback implementation?** The researcher conducted a structured interview with A2 EFL students to better understand their perceptions towards peer feedback strategy. Results from the interview were positive. The qualitative results showed that five themes emerged as sources of the strategy's benefits, including Mechanics Improvement, Structure and Organization, Edition, Vocabulary, and Benefits. The theme Mechanics Improvement referred to the fact that the participants reported that they perceived writing enhancement in punctuation and sentence structure. One participant illustrated this when she said:

"I only wrote simple sentences, so they helped me to correct punctuation."

The second theme, Structure and Organization, related to the point that the students said that they evinced progress in paragraph structure and ideas organization with the help of peer feedback. One participant explained:

"I have learned to make correct paragraphs using connectors." Another girl said:

"I learned that the paragraph should make sense if it contains ideas, connectors, characteristics, and details."

The third theme, *Edition,* associated the modifications the students had to do in their written work with peers' feedback; consequently, they displayed advancement in the tasks. In this regard, a student pointed out:

"They helped me correct some aspects of my written work."

The fourth theme, *Vocabulary*, regarded how the strategy helped the participants use appropriate words in their paragraphs. One girl exemplified this when she stated:

"Writing adjectives that qualify appropriately the places, the foods, in that way, they (the comments) helped me."

The fifth theme, *Benefits*, referred to how the strategy promoted writing process improvement. Regarding this, the students mentioned some enriched aspects: lower skills, collective progress, reciprocal help, and they became critical evaluators when they reviewed the task of their peers. Some participants illustrated this when they said:

"Constructive comments that they gave me were beneficial for me to continue improving my skills."

"We made comments to support others and to improve ourselves."

"We helped others, and they supported us in improving our writing skills."

Discussion

The objective of the present report research was to examine the effect that peer feedback has on descriptive writing. The outcomes in this study revealed a significant advancement after the intervention. As Table 1 shows, the pretest scores showed a low level of mastery in the different writing elements compared to the post-test results. After implementing the strategy, the learners improved the grammar aspect. Likewise, they evinced vocabulary expansion and the ability to write coherent paragraphs. These positive findings showed agreement with previous studies. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) mentioned that peer feedback contributes to better students' written performance.

Other studies mentioned that students benefit from the process of giving and receiving comments on their works (Liu et al., 2001). Based on the survey results, peer feedback was beneficial for students to improve their performance (See Appendix 8). While they reviewed classmates´ works for correction; they noticed their drawbacks. Also, they measured their improvement when they received feedback from partners.

The interview answered the research question about the students' perspectives towards peer feedback to enhance writing skills. According to the responses in the interview, students found it helpful to assess classmates' writings to improve descriptive paragraphs. They also indicated that using peer feedback strategy enabled the improvement of different micro-skills, including mechanics, grammar, punctuation, and macro skills as planning and organizing ideas. Corgan et al. (2004) mentioned the positive effect of peer feedback on learning progress and a sense of community building.

Additionally, participants remarked that they faced some drawbacks at the beginning of the strategy implementation. They felt stressed because they had never used a rubric. Consequently, they gave only positive comments to their partners because they were afraid of their classmates' reactions. Once students had a new opportunity to provide feedback, they noticed it was a reciprocal process where they shared opinions, faced similar challenges, and explored new ideas. Thence, they became conscious of their learning and promoted collaborative work when analyzing their partners' tasks (Sackstein & Berkowicz, 2017).

Conclusions

The present study focused on finding out whether peer feedback had an impact on descriptive writing improvement. Similarly, the study attempted to verify that students' attitudes changed after applying peer feedback. After five weeks of intervention, participants improved their proficiency in the different writing micro-skills like vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and organizing ideas based on the evidence. Consequently, they could write a descriptive paragraph coherently.

Furthermore, the survey evinced some advantages of giving peer feedback. It was proved that comments helped improve the writing of students. Though students did not want to write their opinion in the beginning, they saw some examples of comments highlighting good aspects of partners' writing and suggesting improvement in weak ones. They felt

relaxed because they would realize in strengths and weaknesses of a text. Also, comments helped the students reflect on their tasks while assessing peers' work. They became critical evaluators to give fair comments to other writings; this was corroborated with the presented data. Similarly, most participants showed agreement with the statement: "*I think that the evaluation and comments given are fair."*

According to the collected information, students may initially act reluctant because the strategy was unfamiliar; they could perceive the benefits once they were familiarized. A further aspect to mention was the perceptions of the learners; they found peer feedback a valuable strategy to achieve writing enhancement in different aspects and working with partners was profitable.

It is indispensable to remark that the researcher planned the lessons based on the backward design model. This model focus on the learning goals rather than on the teaching objectives. It means that the lesson plan was developed based on students' needs. Meanwhile, the students have never worked with the peer feedback strategy, using a rubric, online modality, and social media as an instrument (See Appendix 9). All these aspects were new for them. Apart from this, the students worked with cellphones; only one student had a computer. Even so, the implementation of the strategy had significant benefits for participants' learning. The outcomes of this research can be taken to support the descriptive writing process in similar contexts to this group under study.

Limitations

The present study faced some limitations during its implementation. The first limitation was the time assigned to apply the innovation. Indeed, five weeks was a too short period to develop and enhance the writing skill. Another limitation was the sample size; the data obtained did not represent the overall population. The theory says that large samples provide more reliable data. The sample was limited to students who had internet at home;

they do not represent the totality of their peers. It is essential to mention the basic services aspect, in the rural zone the electricity and internet services were unstable. Sometimes, the researcher had to explain and develop activities to complete the lessons during extra time. Likewise, participants attributed lateness to technical problems.

Lastly, teaching materials related to the topic were limited; there were no printed English modules from the Ministry, the digital version had face-to-face modality activities. The researcher had to include authentic material from the internet and created personalized exercises using technological tools (See Appendix 10). The activities had to be adapted to interactive digital versions to encourage the participation of the students. It was a time-consuming effort for the researcher.

Recommendations

The present report research must not be generalized. If it is going to be replicated for future studies, the main recommendations that can be given are that the time to carry out the research report should be extended to five months. In this way, the students have enough time to develop micro and macro writing skills. Writing is a productive skill that requires time to master.

Additionally, the effective results of this research suggest that it is essential to incorporate active learning strategies and innovative instruments in classrooms. The experimenter recommends providing students with more meaning-making activities to grasp the skill. Accordingly, the teachers should progressively integrate digital tools throughout the learning process and encourage students' interaction. The educator suggests regularly using the rubric during class activities because the students said they considered this instrument helpful in guiding their tasks. Apart from this, the lesson plan should include curricular adaptations for students with educational needs.

The researcher also recommends using social media as learning facilitators; these digital means promote social interaction and collaborative work and adapt the learning process to new communication norms. For similar future studies, a research question should be included to analyze the effectiveness and perspectives of social media as a facilitator instrument. A further aspect to advise is to have two research groups, one of control and the other one experimental in the following innovations, to obtain data to compare the results.

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Appendix 1

Rubric for Pretest and Post Test

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Rubric for peer feedback Week 2

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Instructional Design for a Unit (Backwards Design)

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Teacher´s Field Notes

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Survey

Available upon request.

Appendix 6

Interview

Available upon request.

Appendix 7

Open and Axial Coding

Available upon request.

Appendix 8

Survey Responses

Available upon request.

Appendix 9

Learning Activities on Social Media

Available upon request.

Appendix 10

Interactive exercise

Available upon request.