Improving Writing Using Peer Assessment through WhatsApp

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Modality: Research Report

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Writing makes it possible to connect thinking with the content learned (Alharbi, 2015). When students write, they become creative because they have to write their ideas and associate them to produce a text with new meaning (Klein, 1999, as cited in Alharbi, 2015). More than creativity, writing activities improve students' comprehension (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Rivard, 1994; Wiley & Voss, 1999, as cited in Alharbi, 2015), because students write after reading, this facilitates a better understanding of a reading text.

Writing is considered a productive skill; it implies the appropriate use of vocabulary and grammar (Sholihah & Setyandari, 2019) and requires practice to obtain high levels. Mastering writing is difficult for the learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and it is challenging to improve students' writing skills (Umme, 2015). Learning English in a country without using that foreign language makes it even harder to develop this skill (Umme, 2015). These two aspects affect learners if they are not modified adequately and timely during the process by the teacher.

The most common difficulty is that learners translate their ideas from their native language into the target language (Ellis, 1997, as cited in Pimpisa & Normah, 2015). Likewise, Ecuadorian EFL teachers mostly use books and texts focused on grammar and vocabulary, but poor activities focus on productive speaking and writing skills (Alvarez & Guevara, 2021). Among the difficulties that EFL students find in writing descriptive essays is the confusion they have when identifying the schematic structure of the text and the lack of linguistic features that make them make a lot of mistakes (Siahaan, 2013). In the same vein, Farooq et al. (2020) pointed out the lack of vocabulary, L1 interference, poor grammatical structure, and poor

spelling as other difficulties that EFL learners have when writing texts. In terms of collaboration, some students' challenges are the unfamiliarity with peer collaboration, unequal proficiency in communication among partners, and the lack of clear instructions regarding the steps to be followed (Bhowmik et al., 2019).

Regarding peer assessment to foster students' writing skills in EFL contexts, several studies have been conducted. For instance, Meletiadou (2021) carried out research in Cyprus, where peer assessment helped students to overcome some difficulties they had in writing performance related to mechanics, organization, vocabulary and language use. Similarly, Chen (2021) stated that in EFL blended learning, to apply peer assessment efficiently, they have to teach the correct way to provide peer assessment before applying it. Thus, to get knowledge to demonstrate their abilities to provide feedback when the activities happen.

After identifying these difficulties students face when improving writing, a great interest was born in enhancing this skill. This research study focused on peer assessment facilitated by WhatsApp as a technological tool to motivate students to improve their writing. As mentioned before, peer assessment was applied because students needed to be part of the learning process and be able to assess their classmates. As claimed by Topping (2009), "peer assessment takes the form of feedback" (p.21), and providing feedback is harder for students since it is not familiar to them. This project sought that the students got closer to feedback and got them to be more critical and learn from their peers.

According to Alqahtani et al. (2018), teachers can take advantage of the technology at the moment of teaching because smartphones have become an essential item in students' lives and among students. However, specifically in Ambato, Tungurahua province, there is still scarce

research demonstrating the effects of using peer assessment and technology to enhance students'
writing skills. Besides, students always have faced problems related to writing, being specific in
organization, language use, and lack of vocabulary. Consequently, this study strove to contribute
to the EFL learning process by combining technology and a unit plan designed to get better
results in students' writing skills.

Literature Review

Assessment

During the last decade, assessment has been paid more attention to, and different types of
assessment have been implemented in class. Assessment involves more than judging and grading
students; it refers to students being part of the learning process by measuring learning outcomes.
A way to make students be part of the assessment process is by implementing peer assessment
and peer feedback (Bircnbaum & Dochy, 1996, as cited in Dochy et al., 1999).

Peer assessment and peer feedback.

Both terms include peer involvement. The main goal is to increase students'
understanding of what is supposed to be assessed by analyzing criteria and how to provide
helpful judgment. With this in mind, it is appropriate to differentiate the use of these two terms.
Peer assessment relates to students' grading of any task using a rubric that contains criteria.
While peer feedback is the interaction between two learners analyzing any work for advising
how to improve it based on the standards to be evaluated. In this regard, peer feedback is a
learning element of peer assessment (Falchikov, 2001, as cited in Liu & Carless, 2006).

Benefits of peer assessment.

Undoubtedly, peer assessment can take the learners to a level of improvement in learning. By applying it, the teacher is not the only assessor; instead, students are assigned as assessors, too (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1998, as cited in Topping, 2009). Consequently, it awards some benefits to teachers and students.

In the first place, applying peer assessment promotes providing feedback to fellow peers. The kind of feedback provided can be suggestive and corrective, with the only purpose of decreasing errors and enhancing learning outcomes. Peer assessment can focus on the writing process, such as drafting, planning, or editing, which improves students' writing pieces each time. Topping (2009) mentioned that "students who were engaged in peer assessment wrote rough and final drafts that were significantly superior to those of students who received teacher instruction on revision only" (p.23). This reasoning evidences the second benefit. Thirdly, it enables students to become more cognitively and metacognitively active. Hence, their judgments and comments result from a previous analysis that needs to be accurate and helpful in identifying and correcting errors. Therefore, feedback production will demand an intelligent reflection for getting peers closer to the desired results (Topping, 2009).

How to teach peer assessment?

It is crucial to practice to master any skill or ability. The same happens with peer assessment because students require practice on how to provide it. By practicing, students will gain confidence and will express appropriate feedback. Concerning how to implement it in class, Spiller (2012) argued that "other classroom practices can also help to prepare students for peer assessment, such as exchange and discussion of lecture notes" (p. 12).

Descriptive Paragraphs

There are many types of texts, but this innovation focused on descriptive text. A descriptive text helps students describe something clearly by what is given to students at that time (Rusmawan, 2018, p. 66). Besides, a descriptive text supports writers in creating a particular atmosphere or describing a place so that the reader can create vivid pictures of characters, places and objects (Rusmawan, 2018, p.67). This kind of writing was selected for this innovation because students had to submit a postcard at the end of the unit, including a descriptive paragraph advertising a tourist place.

Description of the Innovation

Due to the COVID -19 pandemic, it was necessary to modify the unit plan from face-to-face modality to online teaching, it lasted 10 hours of online classes through the Microsoft Teams platform. The researcher planned a unit using the Backward Design Model (BDM; Appendix A). The participants peer assessed partners paragraph by using a peer checklist as a form to ensure that each participant accomplished all the required details in the descriptive paragraph. The checklist contained the following criteria: name of the place, location, activities to do, typical food, use of vocabulary and expressions taught in class, and graphics and pictures. Besides, it should contain a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence.

This project was developed into three stages. In the first stage, the participants were part of an induction process related to the topic they had to cover in the unit and how to use the rubric and checklist to assess their peers. In this case, the topic was Touristic places in Ecuador, and it was developed by following the BDM plan. This first stage contained the transfer goal, enduring understandings, essential questions, and main objectives of the unit. Thus, students were

introduced to the topic during the four classes by performing different tasks using the four primary English skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking.

The second stage covered the performance tasks and assessments that students must bear in mind to achieve the desired results. Finally, the third stage focused on the teaching instruction and learning activities, and material that students used to understand the topic better and developed the performance tasks efficiently.

To start the unit, the 4 participants worked with the main topic. In the first and second lessons, they had to do different activities such as reading and matching texts with pictures, completing word-search, and finding information about a tourist attraction in Ecuador. Furthermore, students had to use and develop some readings and activities provided by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education that connect students' learning and Ecuadorian National Standards. Lastly, in the third and fourth week, students practiced different ways to describe a tourist attraction by reading paragraphs, writing summaries, and watching videos. It was important to emphasize that students were working with WhatsApp as tool to share their activities and homework. Students started to write some paragraphs and provide feedback based on some criteria of the final rubric.

In the fifth lesson, students learned how to use Canvas. They learned the main features and had the opportunity to use this software while conducting activities in class. In addition, they analyzed postcards to notice bad, better, and excellent paragraphs and practiced peer assessment of a designed postcard asked as homework.

The sixth class was related to the application of Canvas to perform the first performance task, which was considered a pre-test. This performance task was part of the second stage of the

BDM since it provided students with the assessment evidence of their learning and explained how the evaluation was done mostly. On that account, students developed their first postcard that the teacher evaluated using a rubric.

Lessons seventh, eighth, and ninth focus on peer assessment. The principal purpose of this process is to bring students closer to its definition and main characteristics. In this phase, students understood more the importance of how peer assess their classmates to help them improve their projects. This process was achieved by giving concrete, specific, and valuable information and expressing user-friendly comments and suggestions using rubrics and WhatsApp. Moreover, the 4 participants learned some expressions to praise, suggest, and question their peers' work. After that, students worked on the corrections and received feedback from the assigned peer. Finally, on day tenth, students started working on the final performance task, which was considered the post-test of this study.

Research Methodology

This innovation was based on a research report. According to Burnard (2004), a research report is a small scale study that encourages teachers to write up their work in a systematic way; its main elements are the introduction, the aim of the study, review of literature, sample, data collection, and data analysis methods, findings, discussion, conclusion and abstract. Thus, this study focused on the writing process by integrating peer-assessment practices to foster EFL students' writing skills. Furthermore, WhatsApp and Canva were the main tools for collecting ideas and assessing the evidence of students' improvements.

The implementation of the innovation started on April 4th, 2022, in Ambato city, Ecuador. It analyzed quantitative and qualitative data through pre and post-performance tasks and pre-post interviews. The qualitative data explores the perspectives, cultures, and beliefs of the actors involved in different social activities (Allan, 2020). On the other side, the quantitative data provides numerical results comparable and used according to the researcher's objectives (Zhu, 2018).

The research questions for this study were the following:

1. What are students' perspectives towards the application of peer assessment to improve writing descriptive paragraphs?

2. Does peer assessment help students to improve writing descriptive paragraphs?

Participants

Conforming to the aim of this innovation, participants were selected by following purposive sampling. This kind of selection was employed because of the researcher's convenience (Acharya et al., 2013). The participants were chosen in the institution where the researcher worked and based on participants' knowledge and interest in learning English.

The participants included a sample of 4 volunteer students ranging in age from 14-15 years old. There were three females and one male participant. Their native language was Spanish, and their English proficiency level was A1.2. All participants belonged to an Ecuadorian public institution, and they were learning English as a foreign language. The

participants owned technological resources such as smartphones and computers; additionally, they had an internet connection.

Instruments

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected to answer the two research questions of this study. For the first question: What are students' perspectives towards the application of peer assessment to improve writing descriptive paragraphs? The students were part of an interview with open questions related to peer assessment and writing skills.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain information about participants' knowledge regarding peer assessment and their perceptions of implementing this innovation. It was in Spanish because of the low English level of the participants and to make them feel more comfortable answering the interview questions. All the interview questions were translated to English for this paper, and all questions were reviewed by a professor of the qualitative researcher methods module. After making the suggested corrections, the interview was piloted on a student in the master's program to raise validity. The instruments contained questions related to peer assessment and their perception of applying it in their writing tasks (Appendix B).

For the second research question: Does peer assessment help students to improve writing descriptive paragraphs? Pre and post-performance tasks, a rubric, and a peer checklist were used for gathering quantitative data. A rubric was applied to obtain scores for the pre and post-test. Furthermore, the pre and post-performance tasks were related to the descriptive paragraph about a tourist place in Ecuador. The total criteria scored 18 points.

Data Analysis

To analyze and interpret the research questions of this innovation, the quantitative results were uploaded in Microsoft Excel. Using this software made it possible to display descriptive statistics of the pre and post results: the mean, average of results, and percentages were calculated in this process. In the same vein, qualitative data were analyzed by recording the interviews, writing down the transcriptions of participants' answers, and finding possible common themes related to students' perspectives on applying this innovation in their English classes.

Ethical Considerations

The execution of this research covered ethical standards such as avoiding research bias in the research procedures, data collection, and analysis (Qoyyimah, 2014). The researcher obtained the permission of the school principal and parents' participants. Besides, students participated in this research voluntarily. They were assigned numbers instead of using their names. All the data obtained was used confidentially.

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Results

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The qualitative instrument used in this research report provided information to answer the research question RQ#1 What are students' perspectives towards the application of peer assessment to improve writing descriptive paragraphs? The data collected were interpreted in the following categories.

Collaborative learning

Pre-interview

The 4 participants had an idea about peer assessment. They mentioned that it is a way to evaluate their classmates and a form to learn from each one. Student 3 said: *"Peer assessment is a form to share knowledge with our peers to improve any piece of writing."* And student 2 added: *"Peer assessment allows us to learn from our mistakes, and consequently we will be able to guide correct our classmates."*

Post-interview

After the implementation, the participants referred to the same category adding more details regarding peer assessment. More than evaluating and sharing knowledge, they considered that providing positive feedback improved their learning. They manifested that it was necessary to use a rubric to understand what was required in the writing piece and by knowing the parameters and criteria, they could peer assess.

Advantages of peer assessment

Pre-interview

Student 1 mentioned that *"it is better to be evaluated by the teacher because the teacher is a knowledgeable person about the topic"*. However, participants 3 and 4 just indicated they liked being evaluated by their peers. Student 2 considered that "*working in pairs is more accessible due to the level of trust and good communication they have among them, and it makes it possible to say what needs to be improved"*..

Post-interview

The advantages that the participants found by applying peer assessment were that they had to value other work and be kind when producing the feedback. Besides, student 3 considers that analyzing others' work requires being clear on the rubric because it helped them be more critical and objective. Similarly, student 4 said that *"it was mandatory to understand every criteria and parameter to write a useful feedback".*

Challenges of applying peer assessment

Pre-interview

Previous to the implementation of the innovation, the challenges thought by the participants were that *"the peers' comments were not understandable and specific",* as student 2 mentioned. Student 3 referred to the English level saying that "*this will be a challenge at the moment to understand and write the feedback, so they will have to look for help".* While student 4 stated that: "*possibly, this process will not be taken seriously due to the students' age and because this is something new for them".*

Post-interview

The challenge that student 1 claimed was that "*at the beginning, the parameters and criteria of the rubric were not understood at all and sometimes the paragraph was not well organized".* Similarly, student 2 explained that "*the most challenging aspect was recognizing the parameters in the paragraph for later suggesting the changes or missing things".* Additionally, student 4 indicated that "*she felt afraid to write feedback that may be offensive or may discourage the peer".*

Specific aspects that peer assessment improves in writing

Pre-interview

The expectations about improving writing based on peer assessment were related to raising fluency when writing, as students 1 and 2 said. On the other hand, students 3 and 4 were expecting to be able to write a well-organized paragraph.

Post-interview

Participants felt satisfied after the implementation. Their answers demonstrated that they improved their paragraphs. They felt more confident to write well-structured sentences, and they learned new vocabulary that they will use in future activities. Students 2 and 3 stated that: "*they could write a well-organized paragraph and improve punctuation following the rubric.*

Results from pre and post-test

The results of the pre and post-test are explained in the following chart:

Table 1

Pre and post-test results

Criteria	pre-test	post-test
Ideas	2	2.75
Organization	1.5	2
Paragraph structure	1.25	3
Conventions	1.5	2.5
Sentence fluency	1.75	2.75
Vocabulary and expressions	1.75	2.5
Mean	1.63	2.58
Minimum	1.25	2.00
Maximum	2.00	3.00

n=4

These results answer the second research question, RQ#2: Does peer assessment help students to improve writing descriptive paragraphs? Table 1 demonstrates the improvement in all the criteria stated in the rubric to assess a paragraph. The total mean of the pre-test was 1.63, and the total mean of the post-test was 2.58. There was a raising in pre and post-test mean (from 1, 63 to 2, 58). The minimum in all the criteria in the pre-test was 1, 25, and after peer assessment, it had increased to 2, 00. The maximum in the pre-test was 2, 00, and after the implementation, it was 3, 00. According to all the criteria, the paragraph had 18 points; each criterion was worth 3 points. Table 1 shows that students improved their writing skills in all the criteria from the rubric. Through the analysis of these results, it is possible to notice that the most improved criteria are: paragraph structure, sentence fluency, and vocabulary and expressions.

Discussion

The implementation of the innovation lasted ten online classes, and the purpose of the researcher to improve writing through peer assessment was demonstrated by the results.

The qualitative results from applying this innovation relate to a study done by Falchikov (2001). The interview results demonstrated that participants got more familiar with the criteria that the rubric focused on grading and the importance of providing positive feedback to motivate participants to improve their writing. Additionally, after applying peer assessment, participants recognized that they become more analytical and critical, similar to a study. Topping (2019) supported this finding by saying that, when learners apply peer feedback, they become more cognitively and metacognitively active.

In contrast, the quantitative results intended to demonstrate the improvement in academic aspects like the structure of a paragraph, the use of expressions and vocabulary, conventions,

organization of ideas, and sentence fluency. These aspects were similar to a study developed by Rusmawan (2018). He stated that a descriptive paragraph took the learner to a level to create a vivid picture of what will be described. So, the aspects listed before contributed to writing a descriptive paragraph. The results were positive, and all the participants showed an increase in their grades before and after the test.

Out of everything planned, it was a relevant finding for the researcher, the importance of practicing peer assessment. There was a need to offer more classes where students could practice peer assessment, not only in writing. Spiller (2012) stated that other classroom practices such as discussions or exchanging notes improve peer assessment. The participants mentioned that it was not usual to do this kind of activity in class. For that reason, they had some trouble understanding the rubric and providing positive feedback at the beginning of the implementation. The number of peer assessments they had to accomplish during the designed unit, helped them overcome the inconvenience.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, the researcher identified some difficulties learners face when learning English. First, the use of obsolete books based only on grammar activities out of the learners' real context. Through these activities, the learners only worked mechanically without giving meaning to what they were writing. Added to this, there was a flaw in structuring paragraphs, essays, or texts, and the participants were used to writing only sentences, not paragraphs. After the innovation, these difficulties were improved to a certain level, not at all since it took much more time to get students experts when evaluating themselves among peers.

Applying the innovation based on peer assessment was an advantage in overcoming the difficulties mentioned previously. There was a good level of acceptance among the participants. Using the Backward Design Model, the designed unit was helpful because it included the performance task as the primary goal when it finished. The planned unit proposed activities using real contexts such as tourist places in Ecuador. Also, the performance task went beyond writing sentences in isolation. The research provided tools for the learners through peer assessment during the online classes to present their final work. All these aspects made the strategy work and improved learners' writing levels.

Limitations

There were some limitations during the implementation of the innovation. One of them was the level of English that students had. It was not easy because the classes needed to be adapted using Spanish in certain parts. As a result, there were some issues in writing and understanding the feedback in English. Second, even though participants had little knowledge related to rubrics, they did not know how to use them correctly, so the researcher used more time explaining the rubric and how it worked. Thirdly, participants did not connect to the lessons on time, so the time needed to be modified for some classes.

Recommendations

After experimenting with the present study, the researcher suggests planning a unit with more than ten classes. Due to this, it is not enough time to work on the strategy. Peer assessment needs more practice because it involves various aspects that need to be internalized. Finally, it would be better to work with high levels using peer assessment because they already have a more formed criterion, and those levels would be more analytical and right to the point.

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Appendix A

Available upon request.

Appendix B

Interview

Available upon request