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Peer Feedback to Improve Writing Skills Using Digital Tools

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Written communication can be a laborious skill to master for EFL students. Considering, effective written skills are needed for students' higher education and professional life, it is necessary for them to improve this skill to their best ability. Some difficulties have been shown by students when rendering written tasks since the pandemic started and online classes had to be implemented in the country. Due to time constrictions present in online classes, giving feedback to all members of a classroom can become troublesome. Consequently, there is a need for a mean of communication in which students could receive comments on their written work.

Students rendered effective written assignments after improving drafts with the help of their peers. Knowing that, adopting peer feedback was a needed component in multi-drafts process oriented in the second language (L2) writing instructions (Khalil, 2018). Students worked on different assignments using their classmate's notes to improve their writing skills (Buabeng-Andoh, 2012; De Bortoli, et al., 2013).

Difficulties such as poor vocabulary or organization of ideas is commonly seen when written communication is used. Students found themselves struggling to express their ideas in the style needed. Others, have low vocabulary skills in order to better explain themselves. Also, the use of grammar structure for formal written work was of need. It was noticeable, that extra work was needed for students to properly convey their ideas for different type of written communication.

The present action research was applied in a private high school in Guayaquil, Ecuador during a four-week long process. Fifteen students participated in this research, in which they had to present written several written tasks for academic and communicative purposes.

Literature Review

In order to fulfill the research, concepts related to EFL were used. The concepts included relate to writing, feedback among peers and collaborative learning.

Writing

Writing is claimed by Cheung (2016) to be a "complex activity" and understanding its complexity is the key to effective teaching of writing. Throughout the years, teaching academic writing has had different approaches. Since primary grades, written compositions are an integral part of instructions as specified in the Common Core Standards (Olinghouse, & Troia, 2013). After sentence formation, the production of written discourse is fundamental for communicative goals.

According to Berry (2018), students need to receive opportunities in which they can communicate by writing using various contexts and formats. The knowledge of which terminology to use only comes when engaging students in different scenarios. If writing an email to a friend about your holidays is the extent of writing practice in a class, not much is being done for students to properly acquire in the L2. After the implementation of online classes and online work, most communication was done by writing. Therefore, allowing students opportunities to further practice communication through message exchange.

The process for writing production also depends on ones' critical thinking process. Pally (2001) categorized its processes as: (a) grasping, understanding, and synthesizing claims or support form a range of sources; and (b) nothing the social, economic and political contexts of claims and support, questioning or challenging them, formulating and presenting ideas

(positions) of their own. Students with a high level of English proficiency are prompt to succeed in using this approach. Nevertheless, lessons can be adapted so students of any level can participate in this type of approach to improve their skills.

Collaborative Learning

In recent years, student-centered classes have proved to be one of the most effective learning methods to be used. Students' role in the learning process aims "to make sense of what they are learning by relating it to prior knowledge and by discussing it with others" (Brophy, 1999, p.49). By having their peers' comment and evaluate tasks, students have increased their possibilities of becoming an active participant of their learning journey. In this active research, students worked together to identify components from the mentor text to carry out their writing assignments. These self-motivated students turn to be independent learners who direct their own learning and develop their communicative skills through discussions with their peers, "collaborative work requires individual transformation that leads to participation and contribution." (Rivera, 2018, p. 123).

Collaborative learning also presents an enigma. Negative effects can be seen respecting self-efficacy, instructional design, technology use; leading to a decrease in the learning performance in online collaborative learning settings (Jung, 2012).

Peer Feedback

According to Topping (1998) and Shute (2008), formative peer feedback deals with performing a task whilst communicating with a peer with a similar level to better their writing skills in an academic scenario. Hence, the implementation of peer feedback for writing has the

potential to increase students' level of understanding of different writing criteria such as grammar structures, vocabulary, and relevance, among others.

The use of peer feedback in the classroom depends on students' attitude towards the lesson. Rollinson (2005) declared peer feedback activity as time-consuming when the learners are not familiar with the process because it involved reading, taking notes, collaborating and reaching a consensus with the order reader. Providing comments to the author is also another part of the process that consumes a significant amount of time. This was the case in the present research. Most students were not used to working on commenting on their peers' work, making it a difficulty to overcome with time.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning

CALL is defined as "the search for and study of application of the computer in language teaching and learning." (Levy, 1997, p. 1). Due to the innovation and progress technology has made throughout the years, it is possible to use technology in the classroom for students to be active participants of their learning process.

Ahmadi (2018) claimed that using technology provides students with equal opportunities no matter their background. Considering, not everyone is skilled in the use of technological tools even though we are living in a digital era (Bennett, et al., 2008). Therefore, by providing students the opportunity to be skilled in the use of technological tools could increment their opportunities to further improve their skills and be prepared for the digital future and its demands.

The National Research Council (2000) stated however, that "the inappropriate uses of technology can hinder learning" for example of English as a second language. The desirable attitude towards classroom tasks when using technology needs to be targeted by correct time

management. In this way, students will make the most of their time by focusing on researching, communicating and improving their ideas.

Backwards Design

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) provided three stages when planning backward. The first stage involves recognizing the desired skills to be achieved as a result. The second stage focuses on determining assessment to validate evidence. The target of the final stage is to establish the instructions to be followed.

However, it is important to note that Wiggins and McTighe (2005) mentioned that the lessons to be learned need to build on students' previous knowledge and it needs to be applied to authentic situations. The desired results are modeled to the students' real-life connections to the classroom.

Backward design is defined by Ziegenfuss (2020, p. 107) as "a process of planning instruction that begins by reflecting about the end of the course and identifying first the learning outcomes you hope students will achieve." By using this type of model, students are presented first with a sample of what is expected of them at the end of the class. Students work collaboratively in identifying and achieving the goals set for the class lesson (see Appendix A).

This type of model can become a longer process to use. It is necessary for students to be committed and to be actively involved in the learning process. Help might be needed from the educator, especially if students are of young age or their level of English proficiency is not high. According Mohamed and Adbulrahman (2020), it is part of the role of a teacher to use methods to enhance students' written production. Lessons must be planned according to students' level.

Innovation

The innovation took place in four weeks. Each one of them focused on different tasks. They were adapted from a textbook unit regarding food and health. Each week, students had to do a written assignment implementing different criteria. That being, the use of a specific grammar structure, vocabulary or style. Pupils were randomly assigned a partner to work in groups of two. The pairs would work together to provide feedback for the weekly tasks. Therefore, having another opportunity to develop their composition skills. After learning the criteria of the week, students created a checklist as a tool to be used during their process.

The innovation plan started with a pretest. It consisted of having as a written task for students to compose an email to their school principal commenting on their experience with school food sold at the bar and suggesting possible improvements. No further detail was given. The purpose of the activity was to check students' prior knowledge on email structure and style.

Students were then showed a mentor text (See Appendix B) to be analyzed and to be used as a guide. They analyzed the format, style, grammar structure and tenses used. Once they had recognized enough information, they were asked to create a checklist to ensure students were including all the elements for the type of text. By the end of the week, students improved their writing assignments once their peers provided feedback of the first draft. (See Appendix C)

The second phase focused on teaching about healthy habits. Students learned about the food items that are part of an 'eatwell' plate. Additionally, students had to classify a variety of meals into healthy or unhealthy types. Students learned about food categories and the correct ratio to be eaten daily. Students were given worksheets in which they had to prove their

knowledge on healthy eating. Students' assignment for the week was to send an email to a hotel, indicating a healthy menu choice for a weekend stay.

The third phase centered on learning about passive voice structures for academic writing. Students learned the advanced structures of the passive voice using reporting verbs for formal communication. Pupils focused on popular food myths and explained the history behind them using the new structures seen in class. By the end of the week, they had to work in small groups to create a 'Did you know?' pamphlet with information about common food myths using passive voice. Students' week assignment was to send an email to a family member or friend who was planning on visiting Ecuador. They had to indicate the new travel safety precautions during the pandemic using passive voice for advanced structure.

The last phase targeted students' experience with food at school. A discussion took place after students watched a video of parents reacting to school lunches. After that, students worked individually on their email to the school principal stating everything learned since the beginning of the innovation. The purpose of this was to ensure students understood the importance of choosing healthier options for the school bar. Instead of a checklist, students were grated using a rubric that detailed all the topics seen since the beginning of the innovation. (See Appendix D)

Research Methodology

The methodology chosen for this graduation project to be successful was action research. This is "a process for improving educational practice. Its methods involve action, evaluation, and reflection. It is a process to gather evidence to implement change in practices." (Clark et al., 2020, p.8).

Action research is an approach that has been used "as teaching methods, learning strategies, as well as other educational field in order to solve problems people are confronted with." (Wang, 2015, pg. 98-99). This type of practice has proved to be effective since it results in positive outcomes. As a consequence, it provides with the opportunity to develop teaching abilities for the educator and learning abilities in students.

In order to have a better understanding of the process and the outcome, two questions need to be stablished. This enquiry measured the qualitative and quantitative results of the research. The quantitative question aimed to answer: what was the effect of peer-feedback in students' written production? The qualitative question aimed to answer: what observations were made when implementing peer feedback in students' written production?

Quantitative data was collected by using checklists on a weekly basis and a rubric at the end of the innovation process. On the other hand, for qualitative data, observations were made throughout the duration of the research.

Participants

The innovation class took place in a private high school located in the north of Guayaquil. Even though the institution is not bilingual since its curriculum does not include other subjects taught in English. The innovation could be done daily due to the fact that the institution has five hours a week designated for English classes. Students are divided into elementary, intermediate and advanced levels at 5th grade. The class of 3rd high school intermediate level was chosen for the innovation. Their ages range between 16 and 18 years old. There were 15 students in total with 7 of them being boys and 8 girls. On average, their level of proficiency ranged between A2 and B1.

Students from the class were characterized for being participative and completing assignments on time and to the best of their ability. They were also used to working in small groups for projects throughout the academic year. However, it was the first time they were involved in this type of learning process. Even though, students had experience with working in collaboration among themselves, they were not used to receiving feedback other than their teachers.

Instruments

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

1. To answer the quantitative question, students did a pretest and posttest focused on writing skills. These tests were done to better understand and measure students' progress.

2. To answer the qualitative question, students were observed throughout the process. Students had one-on-one Zoom meeting sessions with the instructor to check the progress made weekly.

Pretest

The innovation started with a short evaluation in which students were asked to write an email to the school principal detailing their experiences with the food that is at the school bar. This was assessed with the use of a checklist. The checklist grated grammar structure, style, vocabulary and content. Prior to this, students were shown a sample text which guided them to address school authority through emails in a proper manner. Students were asked to work in pairs and identify the structure, style and organization of the content from the mentor text.

Posttest

After the four weeks of the innovation, students were evaluated using a posttest. In which students had to use all the lessons learned previously to write a formal email to the school principal with suggestions for healthier food to be consumed at school. Students had to provide information in their emails as support for their ideas. This email was graded using a rubric that had a set of criteria previously practiced involving grammar structure, vocabulary, style and content.

Observation

On all accounts of the process, students had Zoom meeting sessions so they could be observed during the development of their weekly assignments.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the research was analyzed when answering the questions below:

RQ1: What is the effect of peer feedback in students' written production?

Students' work was graded using a rubric, in which the elements of grammar, vocabulary, style and content had individual grades. This was added into a spreadsheet in Excel using numbers to identify each student. Then, descriptive statistics was used to calculate the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation. Both pretest and posttest were analyzed to measure students learning and writing performance.

RQ2: What observations were made when implementing peer feedback in students' written production?

Due to classes being online, students had weekly Zoom meetings to exchange comments and check progress. Meetings were recorded and notes were taken to detail students' performance and attitude towards the innovation.

Ethical Considerations

Students chosen for this research were informed from the beginning of the process that they were being part of a new methodology, in which peer feedback was applied. Students were aware that their role as active participants in the classroom was crucial. Foster and Eperjesi (2021) claimed that taking copies of our students' work without their permission would be unethical since it demonstrated a lack of respect for the owner of the evidence being analyzed. Any academic research implemented by gathering information or data from participants requires mentioning the source. Therefore, the importance of informing students about the project.

Likewise, since the sample group were teenagers, it was needed to have permission from their tutors or guardians. Fleming (2018) stated the importance of obtaining approval before starting gathering data for research since participants cannot approve it once the research has already started. Since students chosen for this research are underage, their parents or tutors were informed by a letter approving their participation (See appendix F). As a consequence, ensuring that no harm is being done and that the content does not threat the participants.

According to Wiles (2013, p. 41), "participants need to be informed about how confidentiality and anonymity will be managed and what the implications of taking part will be in relation to these issues before consenting to participate." Students participating in the research were given a number to be identified. Also, the results from this research were secured data for evidence until the completion of the research project.

Results

The results obtained from the first question "What is the effect of peer-feedback in students' written production?" are shown in the table below:

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of pretest and posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	15	6.00	10.00	8.65	1.680504459
Posttest	15	4.50	10.00	8.85	1.531043839
Valid N (listwise)	15				

Table 1 demonstrated the difference in grades of pretest and posttest among the participants. According to the results, after the implementation of peer feedback, students had a little increase in regards to their writing skills after the innovation.

The second research question: "What observations were made when implementing peer feedback in students' written production?", the results were as follows:

In the observations done, students mentioned that practicing writing skills was not an activity they enjoyed the most. At the time of the innovation, students were preparing to take their final exams. Hence, some assignments were sent as homework to provide more time to render their written work. Besides, levels of uncertainty were noticeable among students relating to needing further guidance from an educator instead of their peers for comments or improving their work.

With all, the challenges that students faced the first weeks of the innovation project were overcome by the end. Students familiarized themselves with identifying structures and style from

sample texts, such as the advance structure of the passive using modal verbs, passive

construction with infinitive or gerund form, using impersonal construction to introduce ideas and

opinions in formal language. Since the creation of checklist for every written assignment was

done in effectively and in the proper manner, students became active participants in every lesson.

The use of technology became less challenging for them to use. They felt confident with their

writing abilities and their attitude towards writing in general improved.

Discussion

Findings in this study show consistency with the concepts presented in the literature

review. They will be discussed in the order of the research questions below:

RQ1: What is the effect of peer feedback in students' written production?

The quantitative results showed a positive outcome when applying peer feedback as a

way to improve writing skills. As stated by Topping (1998) and Shute (2008), communication

among students proved to increase the level of understanding in regards to writing criteria such

as grammatical structures, organization of ideas, punctuation, style and content.

Also, the use of technology proved to be an effective tool for students to take part in. As

previously claimed by The National Research Council (2000), when using technology in a

managed learning environment, the results are positive since students understand how to use the

tools. Even in the cases where students did not feel comfortable using the website Draft because

they had difficulties adding comments to their peers' work or could not find previous files, by

the end of the innovation the website proved to be an advantageous online tool.

RQ2: What observations were made when implementing peer feedback in students'

written production?

The qualitative results showed that students' attitudes were divided for the most part of the beginning of the innovation process. As observed, students' attitudes shifted towards a more positive attitude. Like Rollinson (2005) stated, peer feedback activity is time-consuming. Besides, the activities planned using the backward design need to meet students' proficiency level with L2. Since the role of students is to work primarily in collaboration with a classmate.

After observations and Zoom meeting sessions with the educator to check on the progress made, many comments alluded to feeling their peers unprepared to give effective feedback. Therefore, supporting the statement made by Jung et al. (2012) has the possibility to decrease in regards to the learning performance when online collaborative learning (OCL) is held.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research project was to respond if the implementation of peer feedback applying technological tools could improve students' writing skills. Given the difficulties of providing feedback to students in online classes, some students did not feel confident or interested in developing better renditions of written assignments.

The use of backwards design enforced students' performance. When implementing a mentor text and identifying its characteristics, it serves as a model for students to reinforce previous knowledge and gain knowledge on new topics in collaboration with their peers.

When analyzing students results of the pretest and posttest, it showed an increase in their grades corresponding to the quantitative question. These results corelate with the statements made by Topping (1998) and Shute (2008), on the potential to have positive results when allowing students to work together for a common purpose.

Students were observed and had individual sessions with the educator to gather information and evidence for the qualitative question to be answered. Some challenges presented at the beginning of the innovation process were reduced with constant practice.

Limitations

Some of the difficulties that were present during research had to do with how unfamiliar students were to the approach. When writing skills were practiced, students mentioned how they were not used to improving compositions even though they have the opportunity to do so as part of the education system. Likewise, students were not familiar with the proper approach to give feedback. Some students communicated their dissatisfaction with their peers' feedback at the beginning of the innovation process.

Another factor that created a limitation was the current state of the world. The pandemic was still an influential factor that affected a small percentage of the students. It was an adversity that had to be faced with more time for students to work properly on their assignments taking into account that their health was a priority.

Recommendations

If this research is to be replicated, it is recommended for students to be familiarized with what is expected of them. Students were paired at random, but it is advisable to pair them in a way that there is one student that can benefit from the other. It will assure that the activity can be carried out in a way that both parties can benefit. Scheduled meetings with students to check their progress and guarantee high academic performance. Class participation is essential for this type of research, hence the need to create an environment which allows students to feel safe to be active members in the learning process. Finally, due to technology being an important factor for this research, effective time management can increase students' performance and decrease levels of stress and anxiety. This can be achieved by creating a schedule of activities to be done.

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Appendix A

Lesson Plan and Backwards Design

Available upon request.

Appendix B

Mentor Text

Available upon request.

Appendix C

Pretest and Posttest of first assignment

Available upon request.

Appendix D
Peer feedback and checklist

Available upon request.

Appendix E

Peer feedback Rubric

Available upon request.

Does his/her email...	Yes	Sometimes	Not yet

Appendix F

Parent's authorization letter to conduct the action research

Available upon request.

Appendix G

Pretest and Posttest Grades

Available upon request.

Appendix H

Portfolio

Available upon request.