



**Influence of Peer- Assessment to Improve Writing Communication by Emails: An
Action Research Study**

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The purpose of this research stems from the fact that L2 students struggle in writing understandable messages by emails. Generally, the unique opportunity EFL learners have to write a message in the target language is when they are assigned a task by the teacher. Hence, they guide their work using a model or cue questions provided in class after an explanation that sometimes can be extensive or shortened without enough input.

As a result, pupils write confusing messages with disconnected ideas, and no organization or punctuation. And lacking of proper vocabulary and accurate sentence formation which translates into low grades and feelings of demotivation. In other cases, in order to deadlines with a writing assignment, they write it in Spanish and translate it using Google translator or any other similar tool.

Additionally, their work is not giving appropriate feedback by the teacher something that involves rewriting it with the corrections and the grade. Therefore, a superficial awareness and a poor reflection of the process and the result of the activity is what students obtain at the end.

The main purpose of this action research is to improve the writing skills in ten graders in an urban area high school in Ecuador in a virtual classroom. The intent is to help the participants become autonomous and self-confident writers and be able to communicate freely about the past aspects of their lives when writing e-mails, through the implementation of the peer-assessment approach. Likewise, they will navigate along this experience of assessing, and giving feedback on others' work by using a rubric designed for this purpose. Besides, they will become aware of their strengths and

weaknesses in learning and willing to accept suggestions that will contribute to improving their work.

Literature Review

Careful selection has been conducted among current research studies in the field of the application of peer assessment as a strategy of formative assessment in improving the writing abilities of learners of English as a Foreign Language to support this innovation. It includes theoretical concepts, definitions, benefits, challenges, and training process of the application of peer-assessment (independent variable), and the definition of the writing skill (dependent variable).

Peer-Assessment

Definition.

Peer assessment as a philosophy of active learning eases the development of reasoning and learning abilities in L2 students due to the interaction with the real practice that connects with Piaget's theory. Under this perspective, they are exposed to many occasions of gaining an understanding of new knowledge through the experience of assessing their peers (Craig & Kay, 2021; Ramasamy & Aziz, 2018).

De Brún et al. (2022) stated that peer assessment prioritizes learners' roles while they appraise and comment on their peers' work. Furthermore, peer review is considered a type of alternative assessment that caught the attention of L2 teachers and investigators (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Sambell et al., 2012, as cited in Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2020).

The tendency in education around the world seeks to form long-lasting and responsible learners in the endeavor of shaping their own learning while interacting with their co-peers (Meletiadou, 2021). Moreover, peer assessment also involves dialogues during the process about performance and standards; and the use of relevant

criteria to evaluate peers' work (Ebrahimi et al., 2021). As a result, this perspective assists the shift from abilities to performance (Segers & Dochy, 2001, as cited in De Brún et al., 2022). Likewise, Dewi et al. (2019) reported that peer-assessment supplies positive exchange among writers with different levels of oral and written communication through questions, answers, and instructions.

Benefits.

Many advantages arise from studies in the execution of peer-assessment fostering writing skills. For instance, Dewi et al. (2019) pointed out that students involve in peer-assessment activities in academic writing delight in the interaction and feel free to ask about what they do not know and find solutions to issues in writing academic articles. Salsabila (2020) reported that students enhance their writing by the suggestions from peers, they also learn to accept recommendations and feel confident and motivated to learn more when peers praised their work.

Learners gain more knowledge and develop competencies in gathering, acquiring, synthesizing, reading, and writing when they peer-assess and edit their partners' writing work (De Brún et al., 2022; Zafrin, 2018). Besides, Lozano (2021) highlighted that active learning instead of passive learning is remarked with peer-assessment practice. Thus, being assessors resulted in more advantages in their own writing than being assessed by a peer (De Brún et al., 2022; Double et al., 2020).

Craig and Kay (2021) mentioned that "in a study, 74% of students perceived that they received a broad depth of insight from peer feedback and the process afforded them an ability to enhance their work through reflection" (p.1836) of different types of drafts with style, methods, and abilities that encourage them to learn from the accomplishments and failures of their partners' production (Meletiadou, 2021). Other criteria of the peer-review use in EFL classrooms constitute that even though teacher expertise is not

usually achieved, it is frequently delivered timely and extensively than the former (Topping, 1998, as cited in Lu and Law, 2012). Additionally, peer-assessment promotes students become the owner of their learning leaving behind traditional practices of repetition and memorization (Alzaid, 2017, as cited in Ramasamy, R. & Aziz, A. (2018).

Challenges or opposite points of view

Nevertheless, some challenges and contrary effects emerge from the implementation of the technique. Jalalifarahani & Azizi, (2012, as cited in Meletiadou, 2021) stated that among a sample of 126 members, peer response was not effective in improving neither high nor low participants in terms of grammar accuracy; however, the facilitator comments benefit on low achieving learners. Moreover, teachers and students must be well informed and trained in using the peer assessment method (Meletiadou, 2021; Misiejuk & Wasson, 2021).

Dewi et al. (2019) concluded in their study that the difficulties appeared when they do not know how to answer the questions proposed by their peers; however, it encouraged them to critically think and looked back on the material read previously. Salsabila, (2020) argued that some participants of the investigation felt anxious to be wrong in doing the task on Facebook and confused about how to accomplish the assignment. In another study, it is stated that not all participants perceive peer-assessment positively and argued that it may depend on its characteristics such as quality or detail (Alhassan et al., 2018, as cited in Double et al., 2020).

Training in the use of Peer-Assessment

Depending on the study type, some ways of training in the use of peer-assessment arise. For example, Dewi et al. (2022) declared that peer-assessment occurred in several meetings where students established questions about difficulties

in writing academic articles, and they found it agreeable to explore solutions with peers instead of with the instructor. Besides, Double, et al. (2020) cited that the more exposure to peer-assessment the better they perform. Hadzhikoleva et al. (2019) highlighted that the peer-evaluation process explanation is in charge of the researcher which includes place, time, ways of performance, and the technical aspects.

Writing

It is believed that the most difficult skill of language is writing, thus writers must be careful that each word and sentence should be presented logically (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Zafrin, 2018). Additionally, it is the ultimate ability developed regarding the natural order hypothesis (Ebrahimi et al. (2021). In addition, mechanical features of writing such as handwriting, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and format are mandatory to master by writers; nonetheless, it can turn arduous in doing in a foreign language like English (Khalim, 2020).

On the whole, this investigation aims to make students understood when communicating through e-mails and enhance their writing skills with the implementation of peer-evaluation as a method of formative assessment.

The following research questions were answered with this study.

- 1) What is the impact of peer-assessment on students' written production?
- 2) What were students' perspectives regarding peer-assessment in improving writing skills?

Innovation

The innovation was developed with the purpose to improve the writing skills of a tenth-grade class focused on peer-assessment strategy. It lasted four weeks and had two 80-minute virtual classes per week and one asynchronous task whose purpose was to practice the content of the week and write an email according to the topic as the final

outcome of the lesson. They connected to class through the Zoom platform; on Google Classroom they downloaded and uploaded tasks; and Google Slide permitted them to write the pre and post-tests. Additionally, other interactive educational digital tools such as Edpuzzle, Liveworksheets, Worldwall, YouTube, Nearpod, Baamboozle, Jamboard, and Mentimeter were also used to dynamize their learning.

To begin, the teacher designed a four-week plan (Appendix 1) under the principles of the backward design format approach implemented by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005). It focuses on student-centered activities and establishes a transfer goal to be reached at the end of the unit. The transfer goal was taken from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) writing specifications for level A2, and it led the whole teaching-learning procedure to get the desired outcome.

Several activities for acquisition, meaning-making, and transfer were designed in the context of their last weekend, last Christmas, last trip and their childhood memories. The material and the actions involved listening and reading tasks to support writing development. The teacher shared the worksheets created for this purpose through Google Classroom. Additionally, the instructor created a checklist (Appendix 3) to assess writing production in the aspects of grammar, vocabulary, email structure, and punctuation. This tool facilitated the process of the peer-assessment during the innovation.

Regarding learners' role, they wrote as homework an e-mail message about a past public event they attended lately. They did it on a Google Slide file by using a link created and shared by the instructor. During virtual class, they were grouped in pairs and joined breakout rooms to ask and respond to each other emails displayed on a slide assigned for this purpose. They had 20 minutes to complete the task. These pieces of writing constituted the pre-test for this study. To get the post-test, they followed the

same procedure in writing the E-mails messages about the last topic. Then, they were taught how to peer-assess others' work and how to provide feedback.

Their routine in virtual class consisted of completing different interactive tasks to activate their prior knowledge such as brainstorming, open-ended questions, activities on Mentimeter, videos to introduce the topic or descriptions of the pictures related to the topic. To construct and reinforce new learnings and develop writing skills they did interactive work through digital tools such as Liveworksheets, Woodwall, Nearpod, Edpuzzle, and watch videos from YouTube. Additionally, this practice contributed to enhancing their audio and oral abilities. In an asynchronous environment, they reinforced the themes covered in class with more interactive digital exercises, and other tasks of analyzing examples and answering questions that helped them to write the weekly email. All these activities were displayed in a worksheet uploaded in advance on Google Classroom.

During the second weekly encounter by Zoom, they worked in pairs in breakout rooms to assess their emails. They downloaded a worksheet from Google Classroom where they pasted each other emails and assessed them following the checklists guidelines. After twenty minutes, they shared their comments and immediately fixed their emails on a section designed with this purpose in the previous worksheet. Finally, they uploaded their work on Google Classroom. It was the procedure they followed throughout the implementation weeks.

Research Methodology

This is an Action Research study with a quantitative and qualitative design and measurement instrument. Norton (2009) indicated that action research is a reflective procedure that identifies an educational issue. It methodically processes the issue through a series of steps to deal with and investigate the teaching-learning practice and

improve it. Pre-test and post-test were used as quantitative instruments, and for the researcher a graded rubric (Appendix 2). A survey was applied to know how the participants experienced the process of the innovation (Appendix 4).

Participants

The sample was thirty-nine students in a public high school located in an urban area of Loja Ecuador. They were ten graders with A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Their ages range from four to fifteen years old. Although the whole class participated in the implementation, only eighteen parents signed the consent. Female volunteers represented 83.33% and male volunteers meant 16.67%. All of them are mestizos and belong to different social levels.

Instruments

Pre-test and Post-test

In order to collect data and answer the quantitative research question: *What is the impact of peer-assessment in students' written production?* the following instruments were used. The pre-test and post-test emails. For the former, they wrote an Email message to a friend about last weekend, it was a class assignment, and in class they responded to one of the messages. In pairs, they joined randomly breakout rooms to complete the task. Similarly occurred for the post- test, but then they wrote about their last holiday. A rubric was used to grade the tests by the teachers.

Rubric

The researcher used a rubric to grade the pre and post-tests. "A rubric has three essential features: evaluative criteria, quality definitions and a scoring strategy" (Popham, 1997, as cited in Platteaux et al., 2018, p.214). It includes content, organization, and language focused on English level A2 of the CEFR, and each basis

had 5 bands to score the three descriptors. Being 5 the highest and 1 the lowest score, and 3 the middle grade. Bands 4 and 2 were assigned in the cases the performance shares features of the 3 and 5 bands, respectively. For the validity of the writing rubric, it was designed based on the Cambridge A2 level writing scales and it was vetted by an expert in the field at Universidad Casa Grande.

Data Analysis.

To answer research question one: *What is the impact of peer-assessment on students' written production?* Grades from pre and post-test were uploaded in an Excel document to facilitate the procedure. Descriptive statistics were run to analyze in detail the pre and post-test minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation. In addition, inference statistics allowed to calculate the *p-value*.

In answering the qualitative research question: *What were students' limitations on peer-assessment during the implementation?* The researcher's notes and students' perspectives gathered in a brief survey after the end of the study were organized into the categories of limitations, challenges, benefits, and improvements.

Ethical Considerations

According to Head (2020), matters of concern in regarding to the relationships among participants in Action Research constitute privacy, anonymity, consent, and power, and the applicants must exhibit control over these aspects to satisfy research view committees.

An essential part of Action Research process is the informed consent form that participants should complete. In some cases, when they are asked to complete a survey, their consent is also implied, and it is necessary to attach the information about the conduct of the study to the survey form. An important characteristic of consent is that it is voluntary, and the participants can abandon the study at any time (Connelly 2014).

The research compromise is to guarantee responsible strategies to collect data countering to a professional code of conduct ensuring safety to all participants.

Results

To explore the first research question: *What is the impact of peer-assessment on students' written production?* The pretest and post-test constituted the emails that they wrote as homework assignments and the responses to these emails that they wrote in class. These pieces of writing were analyzed and graded through a rubric adapted from the Cambridge A2 level in written production. This evidence permitted to assess their outcomes and visualize their enhancement after the innovation. Comparing the mean of the pre-test and the post-test gathered from emails as homework indicated an increase in the final score. The minimum and the maximum scores were improved as well. The standard deviation was not closely clustered around the mean of the tests. The *p-value* with an alpha of 5% was 0.02 which meant the implementation of peer evaluation in the development of writing skills was statistically significant. Table 1 contains this information.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Writing Pre-test and Post-test – Homework Emails

	PRE-TEST					POST-TEST				<i>P value < 0.05</i>
	N	MI N	MAX	M	SD	MIN	MAX	M	SD	
Total	18	1	13	8.22	3.58	3	15	10.39	3.73	0.02

Note: N= Sample. MIN= minimum. MAX= maximum. M= Mean. SD= Standard Deviation. MD=Mean difference. *p-value*

Regarding the data collected from the responses that the participants wrote in class to their classmates' e-mails messages, these were the findings: the average of the pre-test and the post-test showed improvement. Likewise, the minimum and the maximum grades for the tests evidenced a positive difference. The standard deviation marks were not closely clustered around the mean of the tests. The p-value was statistically significant as well. Table 2 demonstrates the information.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Writing Pre-test and Post-test – Response to an Email in Class

	PRE-TEST					POST-TEST				
	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD	MIN	MAX	M	SD	<i>p-value</i> < 0.05
Total	18	1	13	7.33	2.99	3	15	8.94	3.57	0.02

Note: N= Sample. MIN= minimum. MAX= maximum. M= Mean. SD= Standard Deviation. MD=Mean difference. *p-value*

In answering the qualitative research question: *What were students' perspectives regarding peer-assessment in improving writing skills?* Participants' opinions from a four-question survey was analyzed.

Some students mentioned that the mutual review of their written work caught their attention from the innovation as well as the structure of an email and the use of a Google Slide template to write a response to a friend's email message caused a similar effect.

“To review my classmates' work” (S. 6)

“Work in pairs evaluating our pieces of writing” (S.2)

“The new things that I learned such as the structure of an email” (S.9)

“Write the emails all together at the same time on Google Slides” (S.3)

“The letter to a friend caught my attention because that's how I got to know the parts of the letter” (S.13)

Regarding how peer assessment helped them improve their writing skills, some students stated that identifying their peers' mistakes using the checklist helped them to correct their mistakes and avoid them in their own writing. Besides, another factor of enhancement was their peers' feedback and the immediate correctness of their emails.

“I became aware of my peers' mistakes so I wouldn't make them” (S.11)

“My classmates' recommendations helped me fix my email using the correct structure, vocabulary, and past tense of the verbs” (S.9)

On the other hand, they were asked about the actions they performed to improve their writing skills during the study. Some participants pointed out they interact with peers by actively exchanging questions and answers about the tasks which let them feel comfortable while learning.

“Working with my classmates, I exchanged ideas and doubts freely and I could understand better” (S.8)

Related to the last inquiry, what issues they faced during the investigation, they considered some words were difficult to understand and write an email using the past tense of the verbs as well.

“I found some words challenging” (S.8)

“It was difficult to write the email with the verbs in past tense” (S.1)

Altogether, after the innovation, the participants' writing skills showed improvement. They were aware of theirs and others' mistakes and were able to go over their drafts to edit them considering their own learning and their peers' feedback.

Discussion

The quantitative research question tested the impact of peer-assessment on students' written production. Hence, the extensive results carried out show that this method helped the participants improve writing abilities. These positive findings displayed some similarities with previous studies like De Brún et al. (2022) and Zafrin (2018) in their innovations. These research studies were centered on the analysis of learners gaining more knowledge and developing competencies in gathering, acquiring, synthesizing, reading, and writing when they peer-assess and edit their partners' writing work.

In this study, learners interacted and used relevant criteria through a checklist to assess their peers' work. Ebrahimi et al. (2021) indicated that peer assessment also involves dialogues during the process about performance and standards; and the use of relevant criteria to evaluate peers' work. Besides, they were able to transfer the acquired writing skills to produce an email to communicate in a real context. Peer-assessment approach bridges transfer into practice (Segers & Dochy, 2001, as cited in De Brún et al., 2022).

In this innovation, the suggestions and positive comments were accepted and canalized by the students to develop their writing skills. Salsabila (2020) reported that students enhance their writing by the suggestions from peers. They also learn to accept recommendations and feel confident and motivated to learn more when peers praised their work.

Another vital consideration in this study was the training in using peer assessment. The general aspects were taught during the first week and it was reinforced along the process of the innovation. Double, (2020) cited that the more exposure to peer-assessment the better they perform.

The unstable bandwidth that some students faced, determined a lack of understanding in using peer -assessment during the first week of the implementation; however, it was overcome with a second explanation on the part of the teacher, and as they get self-confidence while practicing it. Hadzhikoleva et al. (2019) highlighted that the peer-evaluation process explanation is overseen by the researcher which includes place, time, performance styles, and technical aspects.

Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the impact of the peer-assessment on EFL students writing skills production. The findings have drawn emerged conclusions and answers to the research questions.

The peer-assessment strategy implemented in a standard English class became a useful tool for the formative process and a rich source of information for the researcher about the students' writing production. Besides, it assisted learners in developing problem-solving abilities and self-reflection when they realized their strengths and weaknesses in writing.

The peer-assessment gave fresh and motivated nuances to the teaching- learning routines fostering active participation of the students in collaborative work while they assessed and learned from their peers' pieces of writing. This practice allowed them to be autonomous learners as well.

The strategy widened the participants' perspectives. They became aware of the fact it is possible to learn from their peers and not only their teachers. They started appreciating and trusting peer's feedback to enhance their writing skills.

During the implementation, participants found plenty of opportunities to peer-evaluate several pieces of writing about familiar topics in their lives. They wrote electronic messages as homework and responded friends' emails in class. They used all

patterns of grammar, vocabulary, and email structures when writing. Comparing the results of pre and post-test, the effectiveness of peer-assessment as an active learning strategy in improving writing skills was clear. Levels of understanding and interest increased, determining students' engagement in writing.

Limitations

The major limitation in the development of this study was the unstable Internet connection of some of the participants. It prevented them from following the instructions and explanations, and as a result they had problems completing and submitting their tasks on time. This issue affected their performance in improving their writing skills.

Another limitation, this one found at the beginning of the study, was the lack of expertise using Google slides collaboratively. It represented some interference while they were writing their emails for the pretest, leading to issues such as deleting other learners' texts accidentally, and not being able to use the tools to write a text on the slides. They overcame this inconvenient as they became familiar with it.

Using the checklist to evaluate writing and giving feedback were also other limitations at the beginning of the research. They were unwilling to give any opinion about their classmates' writing. They also overcame it with practice and interaction with peers.

Recommendations

One recommendation for other researchers would be to make sure all participants have access to the tools and resources required for the study before starting an innovation, and they need to understand clearly the procedures to avoid anxiety or any other discomfort.

Since the number of participants was limited (18), interpreting the data involves caution. The results required to be tested with larger groups and longer time exposure. Implementing this study would highly contribute to get advantage of the benefits of the peer-assessment approach in enhancing writing skills at any level of EFL learning.

The researcher hopes the findings and the entire process of this study may be a reference for future implementations.

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Appendix 1

Lesson plan.

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

WRITING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR THE INNOVATION PROJECT

LEVEL A2 KEY

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

CHECKLIST TO WRITE AN EMAIL

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Questionnaire

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Link Portfolio

Available upon request.