



Use of Peer Assessment to Improve Writing Skills in A2 Students

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Research Report

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Writing is one of the most important skills when learning English. “Writing helps students to express their ideas in written form and to achieve a high level of communication” (Harmer, 2004, as cited in Cabrera et al., 2014, p. 1). Nevertheless, this skill usually receives little attention from teachers and students. A particular situation that has occurred with my students is that they have no problem writing separated sentences. However, in regards to writing a paragraph, they usually do not know how to voice themselves and connect their ideas. Nunan (1999) mentioned that producing a coherent, fluent, and extended piece of writing is the most difficult activity to do in language learning, especially in a second or, in this case, a foreign language (as cited in Kareva & Spirovska, 2020).

One strategy that can be used to improve writing skills in a different and subtle way is peer assessment. This strategy is basically students assessing other students. “It has been demonstrated that by focusing on their peers’ work as well as on their own strengths and weaknesses, self-regulation, strategy learning and motivation are enhanced” (Ballantyne et al. 2002, as cited in Ramon-Casas et al., 2019, p. 2). This innovation aims to improve students’ writing skills through activities in which learners can peer assess each other.

Literature Review

Topping (2009) mentioned that peer assessment is an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners. In this way, peer assessment can establish an environment that could engage students and help them develop an internal sense of responsibility for their own learning (Yorke & Longden, 2004 as cited in Ndoeye, 2017, p. 1). Even though the implementation of this strategy requires time and taking challenges, many studies have demonstrated that peer assessment can have a positive influence in the students’ learning process (Ndoeye, 2017).

English lessons have changed their focus. While in the past the class used to be teacher-centered, these days, it is student-centered. This is the consequence of learning that activities that can engage students in the class and, at the same time, allow them to practice real life situations are essential to achieve a deeper level of learning. Peer assessment is an extension of the move from a teacher-centered to a student-centered mode of education, which emphasizes the active engagement of students in their learning, learner responsibility, metacognitive skills, and a dialogical, collaborative model of teaching and learning (Spiller, 2012, as cited in Wride, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, Strijbos and Sluijsmans (2010) stated that if peer learning and collaboration are going to be emphasized in a course or module, then assessment activities need to align with this and promote it (as cited in Wride, 2017). Despite an extensive diversity of assessments, peer assessment appears as the most effective way to boost the learners' writing skills (Quynh, 2021).

Previous studies

Fathi and Khodabakhsh (2019) developed a similar study to the one proposed in this innovation with Iranian English major students (the participants were adults between 20 and 25 years old). Also, pre and post-tests were used and a rubric was designed to peer assess. The findings of the study revealed that both self and peer-assessment contributed to improving the writing performance of the participants. However, doing peer assessment practices was more effective than doing self-assessment activities in improving writing performance of the participants.

Benefits and Challenges

The use of peer assessment can bring many benefits to students. Carless (2013) and Boud and Soler (2016) considered that the implementation of self and peer assessment can prepare students to be work-ready and life-long learners (as cited in Adachi et al., 2018). Also,

it is suggested that peer assessment provides opportunities for students to develop communication, critical thinking, collaboration/teamwork and self-management/awareness (Authors cited in Adachi et al., 2018). Another essential benefit that peer assessment can bring into the classroom is the social interaction and learning that comes with it. Vygotsky and Cole (1978) claimed that the mind develops through one's interaction with the world around him or her. Therefore, learning is not an individual activity. Liu et al. (2001) emphasized that peer interaction is fundamental to the improvement of students' learning, because it allows students to construct knowledge through social sharing and interaction (as cited in Bijami et al., 2013).

Despite all the benefits that peer assessments can bring to the classroom, the implementation of this strategy is a challenge. First of all, it is very important that teachers train students on how to peer assess and make them practice as much as they can. Topping (2009) stated that quality training will make a great deal of difference. In order to include peer assessment activities in the lesson plan, teachers need to reconsider how they instruct their students, the activities they are going to include, and the time that is going to be spent on those activities. According to Wride (2017) implementing peer assessment strategies also means wrestling with personal and professional change, from a lecturer-directed and controlled teaching style to student-negotiated and managed learning.

Another big challenge when implementing peer assessment is managing power relations and social factors. "Peer assessment can be partly determined by friendship bonds, enmity, or other power processes, the popularity of individuals, perception of criticism as socially uncomfortable, or even collusion to submit average scores, leading to lack of differentiation" (Topping, 2009, p. 6).

Even though relations among students can be complicated, relations between teachers and students can also be tough. Academics might feel uneasy about handing over this power: similarly, students might not be willing to turn an already established hierarchy on its head

(Authors cited in Adachi et al., 2018). A situation that can derive from this is students believing that their peers are not capable enough to assess them. Hammer et al. (2015) and Kulkarni et al. (2015) explained that the idea of students being inaccurate and unreliable is deeply pervasive, and it builds on the assumption that students are novices not only in the subject matter but also in academia in general (as cited in Adachi et al., 2018).

Implementing Peer Assessment

According to Wride (2017), successful peer assessment requires both effective implementation and management. It should be a purposeful and systematic approach integrated into the module design that supports student learning and skill development. As it was mentioned before, peer assessment is directly related to students centered lessons. Hence, teachers must communicate to their students what is expected from them, provide training, examples, and practice. It is essential to monitor students' performance, give feedback, and coach where needed. In addition, it is a good idea to provide guidelines, checklists, or other written or pictorial reminders of the process to be followed (Topping, 2009). Yao and Cao (2012) believes that most of the potential problems of peer review can be alleviated by properly establishing effective procedures and adequate training.

Innovation

The purpose of the innovation was to use peer assessment to improve the writing skills of students. The lesson plan designed to implement this innovation lasted 2 weeks (10 hours). Each week had 3 synchronous and 2 asynchronous hours. The technological tools used to support the learning were: padlet, PowerPoint, Kahoot, and live worksheets.

In general, the lessons provided opportunities to work in groups, pairs, and individually to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary that they learnt each day. In the following description

only are mentioned the practices that involved the innovation. Additionally, each lesson started with a hook activity to catch the participants' attention.

During the first lesson of implementation, students learnt phrases and vocabulary related to likes, dislikes, and interests. Students were asked to write a short description of hobbies and things they do in their free time (these descriptions were used to peer assess in the next activity). Also, the innovation was presented and explained through GRR (Gradual Release of Responsibility). At the first stage, students listened to explanations of what is a checklist and how it is used. Moreover, they observed how the teacher used the checklist to assess. During the second stage, students were divided into groups and together used the checklist to assess the descriptions they did before. At the third stage, students repeated the activity, but this time in pairs. Finally, during the fourth stage students used the checklist to assess on their own. Furthermore, in this class students learnt how to write a letter and the parts of it. At the end of the class, students worked on the pretest. Later, they peer assessed it for homework.

In the second lesson, students learnt how to use the present perfect simple tense, connectors, and vocabulary related to educational background. Also, students practiced writing a letter to a family member telling them what they did during the day. After that, they exchanged the letters and individually peer assessed them with the checklist. For homework, participants wrote another letter in which they asked the president of a club to become a member of it.

In the third lesson, students peer assessed the last letters they wrote for homework. Also, they learnt how to use the present perfect continuous and vocabulary related to their educational background. Participants were asked to write a letter to a magazine. In this one they had to describe habits they picked up during the Covid pandemic and that they still keep doing them. After that, students exchanged the letters and assessed them individually. For

homework, students were asked to write a letter to the teacher describing any problem they had with grammar, vocabulary, or any skill.

In the fourth lesson, students peer assessed the letters they wrote for homework. Also, they reviewed some vocabulary from previous lessons and worked on the post-test performance. The lesson plan provided five opportunities to write letters and practice peer assessment.

Research Methodology

The type of research used in this study was action research. Sagor (2000) defined it as a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action (as cited in Sagor & Williams, 2016). Furthermore, Bradbury (2015) mentioned that action research brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (as cited in Mertler, 2019). Indeed, all these aspects were carried out in this study.

Research questions

- 1) To what extent does the use of letter writing and peer assessment improve writing?
- 2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using peer assessment to improve writing skills?

Participants

The participants of this study are six volunteer students, 1 woman, and 5 men. Their ages range between 23 and 27 years old. All of them are from the highlands in Ecuador (Tungurahua and Cotopaxi). While 2 of them are still studying in college, the other 4 students are currently working. The socio-economic background is medium class. Spanish is the mother

language of all of them, but they have studied English at some point at college. The students were selected according to their English proficiency level. The required level was A2. Therefore, a proficiency test was taken to check that the students had a similar level of knowledge. The two participants who study at college might have an advantage over the other participants because they have been using the language more frequently than the others.

Instruments

The instruments were designed to collect information to answer two research questions: 1) To what extent does the use of letter writing and peer assessment improve writing? and 2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using peer assessment to improve writing skills? In this study, the independent variable is peer assessment while the dependent variable is writing. The written letter is going to be used as a tool.

To answer the first question, pre and post-performance tasks were used. In the pre-performance task students had to write a short letter describing themselves (their name, age, where they study or work, and what they like to do in their free time) to a classmate. For the post performance task, students had to write a scholarship application letter to a university committee. The motivation behind this last task was to put the students into an authentic situation in which they have to reflect on themselves and be capable of writing organized and coherent paragraphs. In order to grade these pre and post performance tasks, a rubric was used. The writing rubric was adapted from the Cambridge writing assessment subscale for B1 preliminary for schools. The criteria used was content, organization, and language.

To answer the second question about the advantages and disadvantages of using peer assessment, the perspective of students was needed. For this reason, learning logs were used. At the end of each week, participants were asked to complete three questions in a learning log. It means that each student completed two learning logs.

Data Analysis

All the collected data was uploaded and managed in the program Excel. The pre and post test grades were used to answer the quantitative question of the research. Therefore, the data was processed in Excel, considering the following descriptive statistics: minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation. On the other hand, the data obtained from the learning logs was used to answer the qualitative question of the research. This data was classified using the color coding technique to have a better understanding of the responses. Additionally, some students' quotes were included to support the interpretations made by the author. Afterwards, graphics were made in Excel to summarize the information.

Ethical Considerations

When planning a study, the rights of the participants must be protected at all times. They must be well informed of the nature of the study and that they are not placed in risky situations (Ravid, 2015). According to Mauthner et al., (2012), refusing to adopt an ethical stance in research can lead to two results; peers doubting the value of the research and letting down participants and readers of the findings (As cited in Brooks et al., 2014). For this reason, ethical considerations were included in the research. Participants provided their consent to cooperate in the study and they were told they could withdraw at any time. Also, participants preferred to keep their names and grades of tests in anonymity.

Results

To answer the first research question: To what extent does the use of letter writing and peer assessment improve writing? basic descriptive and inferential statistics of mean, standard deviation and p value was determined.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Writing Pre-test and Post-test

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	<i>p</i> value < 0.05
Pretest	6	5.33	6.67	6.22	0.54	0.000
Posttest	6	6.67	8.67	8.11	0.89	

Note: N= Sample. Min=Minimum. Max=Maximum. M= Mean. SD= Standard Deviation

Table 1 shows the values obtained from the pre and post tests. There is an increase of 1.87 in the mean of the posttest in relation to the pretest. However, the standard deviation shows that the data were more dispersed in the posttest. The *p* value with an alpha of 5% is less than 0.05 which means that there is a significant difference before and after the intervention. Therefore, the use of peer assessment made a significant difference in the writing skills of the participants.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Criteria of Pre-test and Post-test

	PRE TEST					POST TEST			
	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Content	6	5	5	5	0	4	5	4.83	0.41
Organization	6	2	3	2.5	0.5	2	4	3.67	0.82

Language	6	1	2	1.8	0.4	3	4	3.67	0.52
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Note: N= Sample. Min=Minimum. Max=Maximum. M= Mean. SD= Standard Deviation

Table 2 shows that there is improvement in the means of organization and language. In the former one, the mean increases 1.17 while in language it increases 1.87. According to these results, students had a better improvement in the language parameter than in the organization one. Even though students struggle to connect ideas, they usually know the meaning of words like “and, but and because” since they are really common and basic. Also, the participants were adults who knew how to write paragraphs in Spanish. On the other hand, most of the participants do not often use the English language so at the beginning of the intervention they constantly had grammar and verb forms mistakes. After applying the intervention students got better at remembering grammar. This could be the reason why there is a bigger improvement in language than in organization.

For content, all students got the complete score in the pre test. But, for the posttest, the mean decreased 0.17. This could have happened because the information asked in the pre test was simple and concise, while the information in the posttest was longer and more complicated to address. For this reason, the pre and post test must be as similar as possible. Also, the standard deviation increases in the posttest for the three parameters. In general, the results show that there is a significant difference after applying the strategy of peer assessment in the writing skills of participants.

To answer the second research question: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using peer assessment to improve writing skills? students answered questions about their experience with peer assessment. Then, these responses were classified according to the color

coding method. In this way, the advantages and disadvantages were interpreted based on what the students said. Five out of six students answered the questions in the learning logs.

Figure 1

Distribution of responses

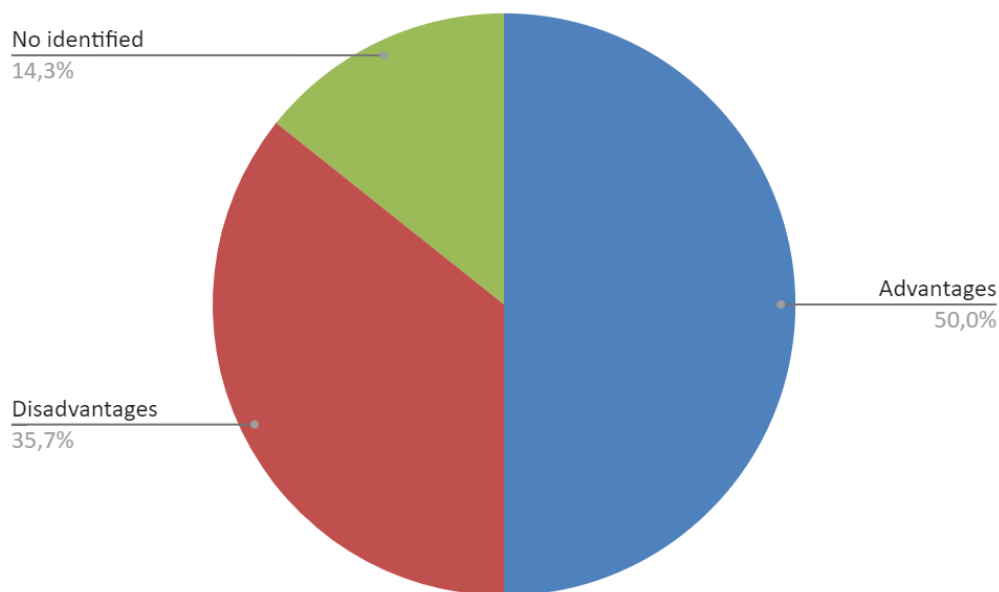


Figure 1 shows the three categories that responses were classified into. Because the responses were individual and unique for every student, it was necessary to analyze each one and classify them. Half of the responses (14) were considered as advantages while 35.7% (10 responses) belonged to the disadvantages. The remaining 14.3% (4 responses) was sorted out as not identified because some answers did not fit in any category.

Figure 2

Advantages of using peer assessment to improve writing skills

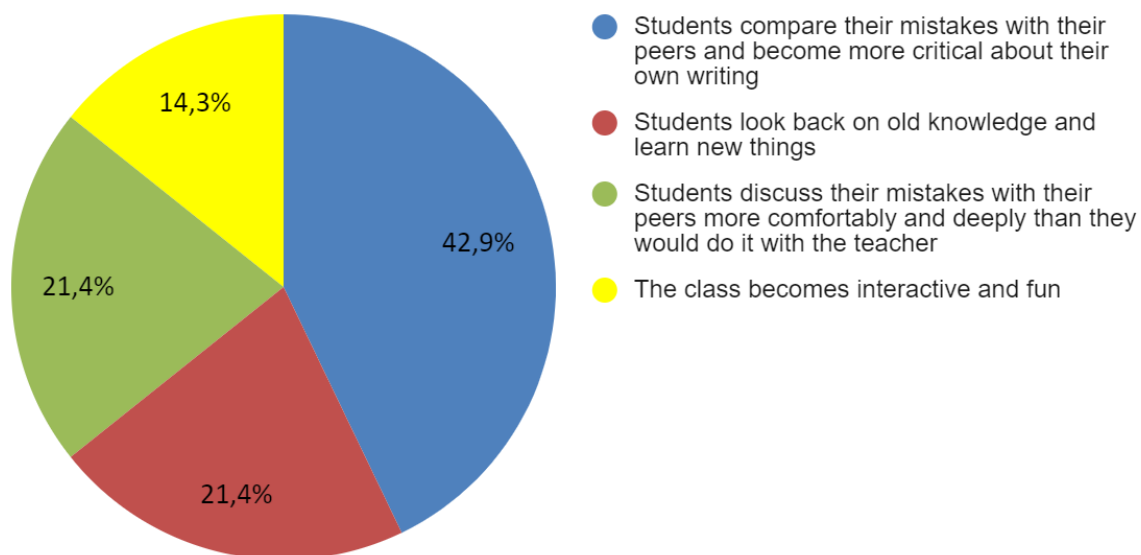


Figure 2 shows four advantages of using peer assessment, based on the responses of students in learning logs. When students were asked if they think that peer assessment helped them to be more critical about their own writing, four out of five students answered affirmatively. One student said “Yes, I can compare my mistakes with my peers and learn”. Another student explained that while peer assessing, he could have a better understanding of what he had to do in each activity. In addition, students expressed that they like to observe what things they did wrong. These responses suggest that while students are peer assessing, they compare their mistakes with their peers and become more critical about their own writing. According to the learning logs, students clearly recognized this advantage. This is why it was considered the most important one (42.9%).

Secondly, students stated that peer assessment helps them to look back on old knowledge and learn new things too. One participant said that while peer assessing, he could remember topics and vocabulary that is essential in the English language learning. When students were asked if they would like to keep on using the strategy, answers like “Yes, because these kinds of activities help us in different aspects” and “Yes, because I can learn more” were collected. This advantage got 21.4% of the answers.

The last two advantages are related to the class being student-centered instead of teacher-centered. Participants seem to prefer discussing their mistakes with their peers instead of their teacher. One student wrote that what he liked about peer assessment is that he could ask their peers instead of the teacher. Another student said that he would like to keep using the strategy because in that way he can have different points of view. Therefore, students discussing their mistakes more comfortably and deeply was another advantage with 21.4% of the answers. The last thing students considered important was that while peer assessing, the class became more interactive and fun (14.3%). Two participants explained that the interaction among students and the class not getting boring were the things that they liked the most about peer assessment.

Figure 3

Disadvantages of using peer assessment to improve writing skills

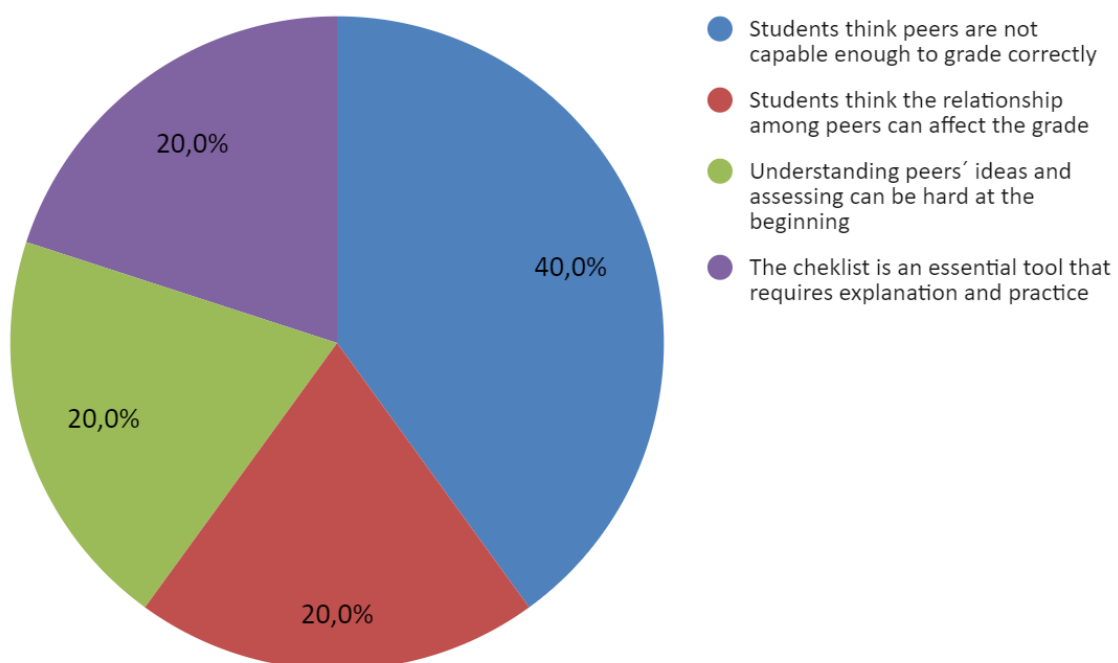


Figure 3 shows four disadvantages of using peer assessment, based on the responses of students in learning logs. Some answers suggested that students do not trust their peers enough

to grade them. “The grade may not be 100% real”, “Some peers do not grade well” and “Students do not have the adequate level to grade” are some of the comments that students wrote. Therefore, this perception of peers not being capable enough to grade seems to be the biggest disadvantage (40%) and main concern for students.

The following three disadvantages appear to be equally important for students (20% for each one). In addition to the students' perception of peers not being capable enough to grade, participants also think that such grades could be influenced by the relationship people have among them. One student wrote “Peers identify and correct mistakes whenever the link allows it”. This answer suggests that students only care to correct mistakes when they have a good relationship with that person. It seems that this situation can affect both sides of evaluation (evaluate and being evaluated). When students were asked what aspects, they did not like about peer assessment, one student answered “If you know the person whose task you are assessing you can feel influenced by that connection”.

Another concern identified in the learning logs was that understanding peers' ideas can be hard. Students expressed “When you are grading you are on the other side and you have another vision” and “Sometimes understanding my peers' ideas was complicated”. These answers were given by students who were using the strategy for the first time. However, this situation can get better with practice and time. Indeed, the correct use of this strategy requires constant training.

When students were asked if they thought the checklist was easy to use, all students answered affirmatively. Additionally, one student said “Yes, because it was well explained” and another wrote “At the beginning it was hard”. Indeed, a checklist is a tool that can be very useful but requires time to explain and practice. It is very common that teachers do not have enough class time to cover all the contents they need to teach, then, using a tool that is going to take a lot of extra time in their classes can be difficult to manage.

Discussion

In regards to the first research question: To what extent does the use of letter writing and peer assessment improve writing? The results revealed that participants improved their writing skills. This finding has been demonstrated by other authors (Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2019; Quynh, 2021; Yao & Cao, 2012). The three parameters used to assess the writing tasks were: Content, organization and language. For organization and language, in the post test, there was an increase of 1.17 and 1.87, respectively. This indicates that participants improved their writing in these sections. Furthermore, the highest improvement was shown in the parameter language, which included grammar and vocabulary. Similarly, Quynh (2021) considered task fulfillment, organization, grammar and vocabulary as parameters to assess the writing performance. He found out that the peer assessment approach helped the students to improve in all of them.

In contrast with most of the investigations, this study was carried out with only six adult participants and was developed in a short period of time (10 hours). Still, the results were positive and participants could improve their writing performances. Maybe one of the reasons why the intervention worked with few people and in such a short period of time is because students could have immediate feedback from their peers and teacher. It was recognized that after finishing the peer assessment students were interested in knowing how well they did. The more students wait for feedback the faster they lose interest in the feedback of their tasks.

Topping (2009) explained that because there are more students than teachers in most classrooms, feedback from peers can be more immediate and individualized than can teacher feedback. Because the number of participants was small, students could easily join their peers and talk about the tasks they peer assessed.

The standard deviation was more dispersed in the posttest than the pre test. This could have happened because at the beginning all students had similar writing skills but after applying the strategy, their improvement was different for each individual.

For the second research question: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using peer assessment to improve writing skills? The responses to questions in learning logs were analyzed and interpreted. The results show that half of the students' comments (50%) are related to advantages. The other half is divided into disadvantages (35.7%) and no identified answers (14.3%; See figure 1).

The advantages found in this study express that through peer assessment, students can become more critical about their own writing, remember prior knowledge but also expand it, interact with peers and talk about mistakes more comfortably with them than with the teacher. When comparing these advantages with the results obtained by Fathi and Khodabakhsh (2019) they are very similar. After the peer assessment intervention, participants improved their writing skills. Fathi and Khodabakhsh (2019) sustained those results by saying that students get more involved in identifying the errors of their peers and, at the same time, they become more familiar with the checklist. All this leads to raising participants' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. These benefits have been demonstrated in other studies too. Yao and Cao (2012) and Bijami (2013) agree that students learn from their audience responses and that peer assessment helps them to develop critical thinking, learner autonomy and social interaction.

The social interaction students get seems to be a factor that contributes to peer assessment, as many authors have mentioned (Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2019; Ndoye, 2017). In this study, participants expressed that it was easier to talk about mistakes and feedback with peers than with the teacher. Similarly, the participants of Ndoye's study: Peer/Self Assessment

and Students Learning, expressed that engaging in informal discussions with their peers seem to positively affect the learning environment (Ndoye, 2017).

While discussing the advantages, it was observed that they can be numerous depending on the situation in which peer assessment is executed. On the contrary, the disadvantages appear to be the same in almost every intervention. In this study, the common disadvantage reported by the participants was that students do not trust their peers, they think that peers are not capable enough to grade correctly. Bijami (2013) and Yao and Cao (2012) explained that students tend to prefer Teacher's feedback rather than Peer's feedback because they think that a better writer or a native speaker is qualified to judge or comment on their writing work. This situation can be a consequence of the teacher centered classrooms in which students have been educated. Brindley and Scoffield (1998) explained that students have been the passive receivers of criticism on their work by their teachers. But self and peer assessment can reverse this relationship, thereby empowering students to be active assessors and emerging experts (as cited in Adachi et al, 2018). In this way, it is reasonable that at the beginning it is going to be challenging for the teacher to implement this strategy and for students to trust their peers' grading. Winstone et al, (2017) stated that receiving the feedback from peers, reflecting on it and using it to improve future work takes a lot of Students' efficacy, empathy and trust (as cited in Adachi et al, 2018).

Additionally, it is assumed that this concern of peers not grading well or being unfair would come from children. However, this intervention was carried out with only adult participants and still students manifested this idea. It suggests that these participants were not used to applying peer assessment in their classrooms or if they did, the intervention did not last enough time to be aware of their benefits. Naghdipour (2016) and Quynh (2021) encourage educators and teachers to consider the importance of alternative assessment and take it more seriously, especially in teacher-centered classes (as cited in Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2019). In

Ecuador, there is little participation of students on assessment and little compromise with it so starting to implement approaches like this could bring good results to improve writing skills of students.

Another important disadvantage is that peer assessment is a technique that requires time, it can not be mastered in little time. Wride (2017) mentioned that to get maximum benefit from peer learning, it should be introduced, promoted, planned and managed effectively. Students agreed that the checklist was a useful tool but they realized that it takes time to understand and use it correctly. Therefore, peer assessment can require too much time and compromise to be implemented in a classroom. Falchikov (2001) explained that there could be no saving of time for teachers in the short to medium term because establishing good quality peer assessment requires time for organization, training and monitoring.

Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to investigate if the use of peer assessment can improve the writing skills of students. The data collected after applying the intervention confirmed that all students did better in the post test than in the pre test. Especially in the organization and language criteria, students showed a noticeable improvement.

According to the learning logs answered by students, participants perceived that peer assessment can bring more advantages than disadvantages to their learning. The main advantages that they expressed were that peer assessment can help them to be more critical about their own work, remember past knowledge as well as get new one, interact with peers and talk about mistakes more comfortably with them than with the teacher. However, students also manifested their fears and beliefs against peer assessment. The most frequent comments

related to disadvantages were that students do not trust their peers enough to grade them and that the relationship between peers can affect the grade they get. Also, participants expressed that understanding their peers' ideas and learning how to use the checklist can be hard. When comparing these results with previous studies it was observed that these are the most common disadvantages when implementing peer assessment in a classroom.

It was confirmed that the use of peer assessment can bring good results to improve writing skills of students. However, it is important to notice that even though the intervention had a positive outcome, successful implementation of this strategy takes a lot of time, hard work and compromise. Many inconveniences can appear along the way in different situations. This is why almost every author agrees that implementing peer assessment requires a lot of time and practice.

Limitations and Recommendations

The number of students that participated in this intervention was very small (6) and it does not represent common classrooms in which activities can take more time because of the presence of more students. Also, peer assessment is a process that once it is implemented, students and teachers should apply it regularly. Therefore, this type of intervention should be tested for longer periods of time and with a bigger number of students.

The pre and post test performances are critical for measuring the effectiveness of the intervention. Therefore, they must be as similar as possible. Since the information asked in the pre test was too easy compared to the post test, it was not possible to observe an improvement in the content criteria of post test performance. For this reason, it is important to dedicate time to design these activities and make them as close as possible.

Most of the class activities were planned to be developed using technological tools like padlet, live worksheets, kahoots and powerpoint. However, in some cases it was not possible

to use them because of connection problems and accidents that occurred. Hence, it is necessary to have a back up plan in case technology tools can not be used.

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Appendix 1.

Design Process Worksheet

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Writing Rubric for A2

Available upon request

Appendix 3

Checklist used by students to peer assess

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Transcript of learning logs

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Link to the Portfolio

Available upon request.