



Improving Writing Skills Through Peer Assessment

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Research Report

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In the Ecuadorian context, English is considered a foreign language, and according to the curriculum provided by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education in 2014, the language is taught from the second grade in Educación General Básica (General Basic Education) until the end of the program in formal education for the students of third Bachillerato General Unificado (Unified General Baccalaureate; 2nd EGB to 3rd BGU). Despite its extended teaching program, the use of the language is limited most of the time to the classroom environment due to the reality of the national context, out of the school, or even worse, after the English class period, the language is not used extensively or not at all. Moreover, academic writing has been identified as one of the main issues in which students do not meet the standards set for this skill.

This presents a challenge for teachers who attempt to engage young learners in learning and dominating the language, despite the worldwide fact that English is the most used language for business (Neeley, T., 2012) and the most used language for learning and source of academic content (Ferreira, M. & MacDiarmid, C., 2019). Despite the improvement in the different methodologies and resources used in the classroom thanks to technology, students may feel insecure when being evaluated or may doubt their skills and not apply an effective self-assessment seeking continuous development, refraining them from going ahead in the practice of English.

Considering these antecedents, it is necessary to develop and apply strategies that facilitate the development of writing skills in English learners to prepare them for a globalized scenario out of the safety bubble provided by the school. There, the relevance of a strategy appealing to them, such as peer assessment, that evokes confidence, as well as it accomplishes an important role in the formative process.

Older generations may recall when the teacher asked to swap a test with a partner to correct mistakes, but this strategy also helps students to obtain information about their learning, by comparing their development with their peers. Letting the students check their peers' written task, not only develops confidence but also mitigates the work for the teacher, serving as a pre-check.

The purpose of this research is to determine the influence of a peer assessment technique, aiming to improve the students' skills for academic writing, such as essays, analysis, and thesis. This study aims to answer the following research questions: How could peer assessment affect the students' improvement of writing skills? What was the reception of the students to the peer assessment techniques?

Literature Review

Through extensive research, the opinions of several scholars and colleagues who believe in the benefits of peer assessment strategies have been included in the present research project. In this section, some of their ideas and contributions to the study of the influence of this strategy in the learning process will be cited.

Peer Assessment

Peer assessment in education is a process whereby students evaluate and provide feedback on the work or performance of their peers (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). This assessment method is often used as a formative or summative evaluation tool to assess various aspects of a student's academic performance, such as their knowledge, skills, contributions to group projects, or even their behavior in a collaborative learning environment. Peer assessment can take various forms, including written evaluations, verbal feedback, or the use of specific criteria or rubrics.

To begin with, it is necessary to understand the elements that affect learning, and how these elements can be supported. During the formative peer assessment, judgments

often include qualitative comments in addition to (or instead of) marks (Gielen et al., 2010). Peer assessment encompasses peers using one another as a resource by sharing ideas, evaluating the work of others, and providing feedback (Tangaraju et al., 2019). This is translated into a tool that will allow students to receive feedback without the pressure of being directly graded by the teacher, which will conclude in a mark or grade. One of the goals of using Peer Assessment in EFL classes is that it can guide learners to reflect more carefully on the same elements of their own written work (Hicks et al., 2016).

Some other authors refer to peer assessment as a tool that involves students in the quality of expected performance and then elaborating judgments about the quality of the performance (Boud, 1995). Buckingham (2015) claimed that the teachers' challenge is to encounter a way to encourage students to provide them the confidence to have a go and try using English. Hence, she added that motivated students are a pleasure to work with. Their willingness and eagerness to participate using the language guides, anteceded a spiral of successful activities which any teacher would like to develop in their lessons. In certain learning environments, students may be hesitant to engage with their classmates due to difficulty managing tasks or understanding the content. This can diminish their confidence and willingness to try new things, particularly in the context of writing compositions, as explored in this study. Besides, peers may tend to correct only surface errors, restricting opportunities to correct content (Choi, 2013).

In addition, Wiggins (2012) stated that "feedback is information about our development in our efforts to achieve a goal" (p. 11). This is potentially the most pertinent element because when students provide feedback to their partners, they may also identify their own mistakes in the process, become advisors, and recognize their own mistakes.

Despite this, some studies indicate that learners think that Peer Assessment is aimless because peers are not regarded as experts, tend to provide positive feedback to friends, and teachers make the final decision anyway (Wu & Schunn, 2020, as cited in Meletiadou, 2021). Therefore, this study seeks to explore the ways in which Peer Assessment can affect students' academic writing skills and identify if there is an improvement after the practice.

Writing Skill Development

Writing development skills refers to the process of improving one's writing abilities through various techniques and practices. Writing is an essential skill that is required in many academic and professional settings, and developing strong writing skills can help students succeed in their studies and careers (Solomon, 2018). There are several stages of writing development that students go through as they learn to write including the beginner's stage of using writing to tell what one knows, the intermediate stage of transforming what one knows for the author's benefits, and the final stage of crafting what one knows for the reader's benefit.

Contradictory to what may be thought about the relevance of speaking over writing as a predominant production skill, this can be probably a misconception of the truth. Writing is well-known as an important skill to possess, every educational institution teaches it as part of their curriculum (Haward, 2022). Evidence of this is that most of the academic content found nowadays in academic papers, rather than videos or audio files.

Besides, formal writing places heavy cognitive demands on the writer. As teachers, it is important to help students become familiar with writing as a tool of learning and self-expression and provide opportunities for them to share experiences and develop autonomy. (Helwa & Abdel-Hamid, 2014).

Innovation

The research for this was conducted over a three-week period. In week one, the students were informed about the research and were instructed about all the guidelines, as well as a detailed explanation of the process, they were also asked to compose their first writing assignment essay which was the pretest that will serve as the first data for further comparison.

In week two, the students were explained how to identify mistakes and improvement opportunities with the use of a checklist, as well as a list of references to provide feedback. The students used the checklist to evaluate the compositions from their partners at the moment of reading their papers. This checklist consists of different criteria, based on a quantitative score, found in their textbook for the current year.

The objective is to introduce students to peer assessment and help them to understand how their essays are graded, and provide suggestions to edit and correct mistakes. They were instructed on proofreading and editing techniques. They were asked to swap their first productions with a partner to be evaluated by a peer. The students were taught about how to evaluate their partner's paper. With the use of the checklist, the students evaluated their partner's composition and identified mistakes, and opportunities to improve their own composition as they evaluated and provided comments on their partner's work. The students were also instructed to give positive and impartial feedback, explaining the relevance of this process. The list of references and suggestions for feedback aided in the process as they identified their own mistakes too.

During week three, the students had to apply what they learned in the process and submit a final draft of their previous writing assignment. This will serve as the second data source for the comparison and analysis of the effectiveness of the strategy.

To conclude, they incorporated the recommendations applied after receiving feedback from their partners, and was expected that they raise awareness due to the feedback they provided to peers.

Research Methodology

Action Research was the design of this study. According to Efron and Ravid (2019, p. 2) “Action research is usually defined as an inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students’ learning.” The same authors mentioned that these subjective insights provide practitioners with opportunities to explore systematically, multiple options for action. Hence, action research brings strong connections between theory and practice, blurring boundaries between them.

This study was conducted with the application of a pretest and a posttest to measure the impact of the peer assessment strategy, and the improvement of their academic writing skills. In the same way, a survey was administered to the participants to perceive their appreciation of the strategy and its effectiveness.

The aim of the study was to enable students to assess their own, and partners’ works to improve their writing skills. In this study, the following research questions were investigated:

1. How could peer assessment affect the students’ improvement of writing skills?
2. What was the reception of the students to the peer assessment techniques?

Context and Participants

The following research was developed in a private school located in Guayas Province, Daule Canton. The participants of this research were the students of second

baccalaureate (2BGU) who attend ten English classes per week, each lasting forty minutes.

The participants consisted of 25 students of both genders (10 male and 15 female), between the ages of 16 to 17 years old at the moment of the research. Their English proficiency levels varied between B1 and B2 according to the results of a placement test of Pearson Test of English (PTE) Level 3 (B2) test, in accordance with the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The participants were all Ecuadorians and shared similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. These students have studied together in the same school for at least, the last 3 school years.

Instruments

The chosen instruments to collect data for this research were a pretest and a post-test, along with a survey to evaluate the perception of the technique. A rubric was implemented to evaluate the pretest and posttest, which was applied to the students. The pretest and posttest focused on student assessment and the development of the writing activity. In the pretest, the students wrote an essay about the impact of volunteer work on their resume before their first job, to obtain a first insight into their current awareness of the mechanics of English language conventions. In the post-test, students were asked to write again an essay with the same prompt, applying all the strategies they learned after receiving feedback from their peers.

The pretest and the posttest were used to answer RQ1: How could peer assessment affect the students' improvement of writing skills? By evaluating their compositions with a rubric with four criteria, the areas of greatest improvement were identified.

A survey in Google form with four questions was administered to the participants, to evaluate their perception and reception of the Peer-Assessment technique, and thus answer RQ2: What was the reception of the students to the peer assessment technique?

The survey was administered to the participants, using the 4, and 5-point Likert scale, and open-ended format for the opinion questions. It gave a perspective to the participants' reception of the technique, as well as a first-hand sample of the aspects they considered relevant for the improvement of their writing skills if it occurred.

Data Analysis

In an Excel spreadsheet, the results of the pretest and post-tests were tallied. The lowest, maximum, mean, and standard deviation from the pretest and post-test were obtained and analyzed using descriptive statistics. A paired *t*-test sample contrasted and linked the results of the two tests. To do this, the *t*-test was run in Excel with the Analytics Tools Pack.

To answer the RQ1, the data from the pre and post-test was firstly arranged in a chart by the total score, and then in a second chart by criteria. To answer the RQ2, the results from the survey were organized in a bar graph to identify their preferences.

Ethical Considerations

To make it possible to conduct this research, it is mandatory to follow the guidelines and principles of respect to privacy and integrity of the subjects of study. According to Fleming and Zegwaard (2018), the principles of ethical considerations are a set of resources that guide the plans, designs, and practices in an investigation or action research. Subsequently, this study was attached to these guidelines.

Furthermore, collaboration and participation need to be voluntary, and participants must be autonomous and free to withdraw at any time without any consequences (Banegas & Villacañas, 2015). Moreover, their personal information collected as part of the data will never be referred to, protecting their identities, which makes it not possible to track or identify any of them.

Results

This study analyzed the way in which Peer Assessment can assist students in improving their writing by providing them an opportunity to receive early feedback from peers. At the same time, they raised awareness of their mistakes when they proofread and suggested edits in their partners’ essays. A paired *t*-test was performed to evaluate whether the students could improve their work after a Peer Assessment intervention.

Table 1

Pretest and Posttest Descriptive and Inferential Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Devi.	p value
Pretest	25	5	10	8.13	1.58	0.000017
Posttest	25	7	10	9.3	0.88	

The results of the post-test evidenced that the technique had positive outcomes. An increase of 8.13 out of 10, to 9.3 out of 10 in the mean, shows that the group got better scores in the individual criteria after receiving friendly feedback from a student.

A more detailed analysis was obtained after evaluating the results of the comparison by criteria of the rubric in a second *t*-test. The results are presented in the next chart.

Table 2

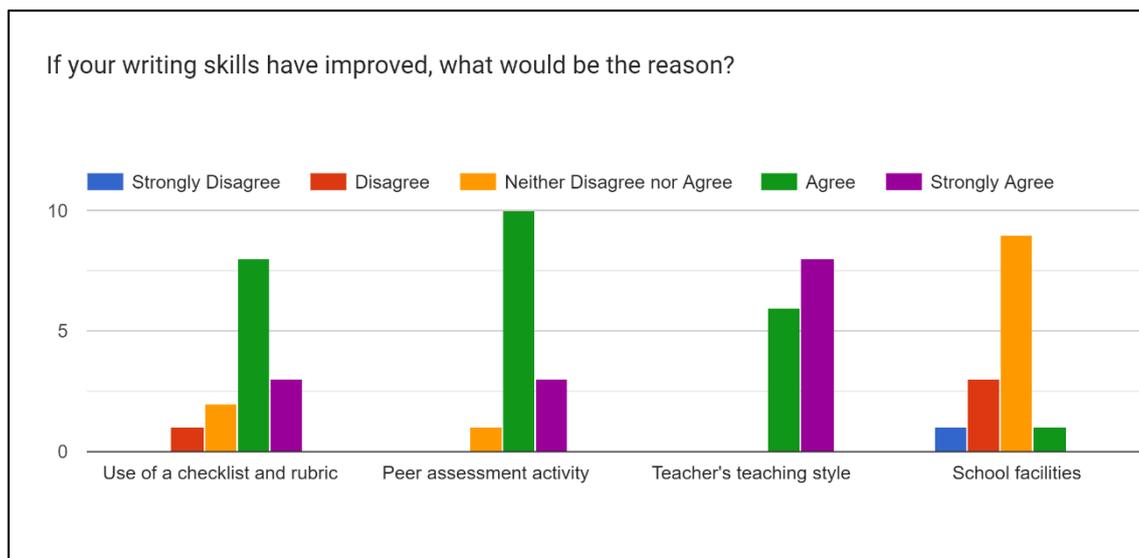
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics per construct

Criteria	N	Pretest				Posttest				p value
		MIN	MAX	M	SD	MIN	MAX	M	SD	
Focus	25	1	2	1.8	0.33	1.5	2	2	0.14	0.002453
Organization	25	1	2	1.7	0.37	1	2	1.9	0.27	0.004647
Evidence	25	1.5	4	3	0.84	2.3	4	3.5	0.54	0.000021
Conventions	25	1	2	1.7	0.33	1.5	2	1.9	0.17	0.002499

The study proved that the participants’ improvement spread to multiple aspects. They improved in the mechanics of the language, as well as the focus they had to maintain on the task and the general organization of their essays. The interpretation of the *p*-value recommended by Sun et al. (2010), suggests that the hypothesis that considers Peer Assessment can help in the process of improving the quality of the students’ writing works. Not only the student who receives feedback but also the peer who assesses improves due to the friendly assessment performed (Lee, 2015). Even though, a qualitative evaluation is required to validate the practical significance of this study. This is presented in the following chart that gathers the students’ reception and perception of the strategy.

Table 3

Students’ perception regarding the peer assessment strategy



The question shows that students also considered Peer Assessment as a significant factor in the improvement of their writing skills. This positive impact could be interpreted as the result of the tutor role students had to assume when providing feedback. Baker (2016) stated that a strategy can be that teachers assess surface levels, while students focus more on meaning-level issues. This outcome was also confirmed by Wang et al. (2017) who declared that students can engage in making reflections when they assume the role of tutors as they tutee.

Finally, the survey included an open-ended question about their perspective of the practice sessions to determine whether the sessions in which this project was conducted were enough or not to improve their writing skills. The perception of the students indicates that the technique had positive results, even though, they expressed that more practice would be more convenient to continue improving their writing skills. This finding helped to determine a limitation in this study. These were some of their answers:

“I think the last 8 practice session was a really good way to improve our writing skills because we could suggest reading and correcting a different paragraph with the use of other techniques, such as vocabulary, grammar, spelling, etc.” (Participant 4)

“I think it was enough for a little improvement, however, to see better results, more practice would be necessary.” (Participant 8)

Discussion

As a result of this research, Peer Assessment has been studied as a means of enhancing students' writing skills. The findings suggest that this process of peer assessment also involved an opportunity for self-correction and contributed significantly to the students' skills development. It is important to consider how students received and got engaged with the peer assessment techniques used in this study.

The *t*-test demonstrated a significant improvement in the tailed data. The semantic analysis performed by the students on their partners' written works demonstrated that the instructions were understood and transmitted to their peers in the feedback they provided. On the other hand, Choi (2013) mentioned that students using peer assessment tend to focus on correcting surface-level errors, such as grammatical and spelling mistakes, instead of deep-level issues such as content. Nevertheless, these results could also suggest that students who are willing to participate in the peer assessment strategy can learn more easily from their peers due to friendly feedback (Lee, 2015), in companion with clear grading parameters established in a checklist or rubric.

The findings indicate that the students had a positive reception to the Peer Assessment process. This was also found in the results of other researchers (Baker,

2016; Wang et al., 2017). The students were willing to review and provide feedback on their peers' work. The study suggests that students received peer assessment as a valuable and constructive method for improving their writing skills. Students also managed to the quality of the evidence they used in their works (Table 2), being "Evidence and Elaboration" the criteria that showed the highest improvement, increasing the mean by 0.51 (out of 4). This could be due to the additional sources that they found on their peers' works, and that eventually they added to their own composition. These results are similar to those obtained by Meletiadou (2021), who mentioned that other studies have demonstrated that improvement significantly appears in one of the aspects, but not in all of them. Additionally, the study mentioned above demonstrated that Peer Assessment can considerably improve the quality of academic compositions from a first draft to the final draft.

For the purposes of this research, Peer Assessment has been studied as a means of enhancing students' writing skills. Other relevant outcomes in this process involved opportunities for self-correction that contributed to the student's skills development. There is also evidence that the students had a positive reception to the Peer Assessment process, were willing to review and provide, and perceived peer feedback as a valuable and constructive method for improving their writing skills. All of this proves the validity of Peer Assessment to be used as a tool, in the training of students so they can improve their writing skills.

Conclusions

The research demonstrates that the peer assessment technique has a positive influence on the development of the students' writing skills. In addition to this, the reception of the technique by the students was mostly positive, indicating they are more open to receiving formative feedback with an approach in the development rather than

direct grading from the teacher. It is necessary to consider that even when the number of students was low, some of them did not agree with the feedback provided by their peers, especially when these comments were not justified, which demonstrates that is also necessary to monitor the activity through all the process to avoid a lack of accuracy of comments. With these results, we can conclude that the strategy had positive consequences and an optimistic reception.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. These limitations included challenges related to discipline control during peer assessment sessions, and potential issues with students' understanding of instructions, for example, students who struggled in Peer Assessment due to their inexperience in this activity and took more time to grade the essays of their peers. Another limitation was some disruptions caused by additional activities that occasionally postponed peer assessment sessions.

Last but not least, the students also expressed that it would be convenient to have more sessions like these to continue improving their writing skills, which indicates that the number of sessions could be extended for better results. These limitations could be considered when interpreting the results and when implementing peer assessment strategies in future educational settings.

Recommendations

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that peer assessment is an effective method for improving students writing skills. The positive reception of this technique by participants, coupled with significant improvements in their writing, highlights the potential of peer assessment as a valuable tool in the educational context. This technique is recommended for teachers with large groups of students who find it difficult to assess

long pieces of writing and would find it helpful to receive the results of a detailed peer assessment before assigning a final summative score.

However, it is essential to address and mitigate the identified limitations to maximize the benefits in future educational practices. Reminding the rules of the classroom and analyzing in advance the periods that will be used for the classes, can contribute to a better organization. It is also important to consider additional school events programmed with anticipation.

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Appendix 1

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Checklist and Peer Feedback Form

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Grades

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Results of the Qualitative Survey

Appendix 6

E-portfolio

Available upon request.