



**Influence of Peer - Assessment to Improve Students' Written Production**

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Research Report

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### **Influence of Peer - Assessment to Improve Students' Written Production**

One obstacle that keeps L2 students from achieving success is writing, which is an essential constituent of language. Learning how to communicate effectively when the other person is not right there in front of us, listening to our words, reading our body language and looking at our gestures and facial expressions is of paramount importance.

The fact that written language is a main form of communication is not the only reason to include writing as part of our EFL syllabus. There is an additional and very significant reason: writing helps our students learn. How? First, when students write, thoughts and knowledge become intertwined creating a unique meaning. Writing reinforces grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary. Second, they have a chance to be more adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have learned, to take risks. Third, as writers struggle with what to put down next or how to put their ideas down on paper, they discover new ways to express themselves. Thus, the constant use of brain, eyes and hand truly reinforces learning.

Unfortunately, as observed in the majority of students examined in this study, proficiency in writing proves to be their least developed skill, attributable to multiple factors such as interference from their native language, issues with sentence structure, and a constrained vocabulary, resulting in the generation of written work with ambiguous meanings. Additionally, teachers' corrections and feedback may focus too much on errors of grammar and spelling, instead of content, which leads to anxiety and frustration in writing.

Due to the information presented above, this research project has been designed to implement the peer-assessment approach in order to help foster students' autonomy, increase their motivation, promote collaborative learning and eventually improve their writing skills.

### **Literature Review**

In order to give this research the necessary support, evaluation of the literature was carried out taking into account current studies that emphasize the implementation of peer-assessment to improve skills. This review includes the definitions of the writing skill (dependent variable), and the definition of peer assessment (independent variable) as well as its benefits, and challenges for students to apply the approach.

#### **Writing Skills**

Composing text is an intricate cognitive endeavor where the author needs to exhibit mastery over factors concurrently (Rao & Durga, 2018). According to Jabar Al-Atabi (2020), the act of writing enhances other proficiencies. Preceding and during the composition process, individuals engaging in this activity must amass data or knowledge through observation, attentive listening, and interpersonal communication. Furthermore, this writer emphasized that textual creation serves as a pragmatic approach to solidifying and unifying diverse language elements like vocabulary, sentence structure, and operations. Learners encounter various challenges at distinct phases of their compositional journey. In broad terms, these problems can be classified into linguistic, psychological, cognitive and pedagogical categories (Haider, 2012). In the same vein, Rico (2014) noted that learners, who supposedly have mastered syntactic, lexical and grammatical command over text composition, experiment lack of confidence when their written work conveys an incoherent meaning of ideas, which makes communication difficult.

The fundamental objective of this activity among learners is to acquire the proficiency in utilizing text to convey, to convince, to educate, to acquire knowledge, to introspect, and to captivate an audience. The act of exchanging composed works, offering and obtaining prompt and precise assessments, is the driving force behind

encouraging learners to engage in this process (Hicks, 2019). ‘Teachers should establish a supportive environment in their classroom to foster a community of writers who are motivated to write well’ (Graham et al., 2012, p. 34).

### **Peer-Assessment**

#### **Definition.**

Tighe-Mooney et al. (2016) stated that, in simple terms, peer-assessment refers to students assessing their peers’ work and providing grades and/or feedback. Similarly, Mumpuni et al. (2022) noted that peer-assessment is an activity that provides opportunities for students to consider and determine the grades, value, product qualities, or performances of the other peer students.

Peer-assessment is a natural 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).

#### **Benefits.**

Within the vast realm of pedagogical possibilities, peer- assessment has proven to be an activity with profound educational benefits for learners such as increasing motivation towards learning and reducing anxiety (Huertas-Abril et al., 2021; Panadero & Alqassab, 2019).

Furthermore, peer assessment can be a critical source of feedback for student learning. Meaningful feedback makes the students be more responsible for their behavior while providing personal improvement and development (Fete et al., 2017, as cited in Mumpuni et al., 2022). Likewise, Li and Gao (2015) claimed that the value of peer assessment exists, in part, in its ability to engage students in the learning process and encourage self-assessment and reflection.

When learners provide feedback and assess each other's work, they take active participation and go deeper into their learning process, which translates into higher academic performance (Wride, 2017). In addition, it has been observed that learners gain domain-specific skills (van Zundert et al., 2010). According to Ndoye (2017), peer assessment has several benefits for student learning. These benefits include the development of critical thinking skills, the ability to provide and receive feedback, increased engagement and motivation, and improved communication skills.

Teachers also benefit from peer-assessment since its application can reduce the marking load on academic staff, and allow them to devote more time to other aspects of teaching and learning. Moreover, peer-assessment can free up time to enable educators to manage the peer assessment process itself more effectively (Gupta et al., 2019; Wride, 2017).

Studies also show that reviewing peers' work can be just as beneficial (if not more) than receiving peer feedback. Commenting on peers' writing can help students better understand the assignment, reflect on their own errors, and develop ideas for improving their own drafts (Cho & MacArthur, 2011; Crossman & Kite, 2012).

### **Setbacks of Peer-Assessment**

Educators and scholars have pointed out a number of important issues that can detract from (or even doom) peer reviews. Reviewers may be reluctant to judge their peers' writing, especially if they perceive themselves as weak writers or novices in their disciplines (Cho & MacArthur, 2011; Nilson, 2003). Likewise, writers may reject or ignore the feedback they receive from their peer reviewers (Wichmann et al., 2018).

Some scholars agree on the fact that students' distrust and shortage of confidence due to their inexperience may hinder positive results when implementing peer-assessment (e.g., Adachi et al., 2018, as cited in Huertas-Abril et al., 2021). In this

sense, some learners may value experts' evaluation more highly than that made by their peers (Seifert & Feliks, 2018). In the same vein, Patton (2012, as cited in Tighe-Mooney et al., 2016) stated that some students prefer facilitators to take responsibility for assessment as they do not consider that their peers have the necessary 'expertise' required to grade their work.

Furthermore, some learners and teachers involved in peer-assessment claim that it is more time-consuming and demanding than more traditional ways of evaluation (Ng, 2016). Peer-assessments without incentive for the assessors (i.e., the students) result in incomplete, vague, or unstructured feedback. Learners tend to have a laborious workload, and peer-assessments without incentives are seen as an additional task, with little to no reward (Al-Hammoud & Pasalkar, 2022).

Due to the students' low writing performance, this research project aimed to implement the peer-assessment approach in order to improve students' writing skills. Therefore, the following research questions were presented:

1. To what extent can peer-assessment activities improve students' written production?
2. What opinions do students have regarding peer assessment to improve written production?

### **Innovation**

This research project was designed to implement the peer-assessment approach to help improve students' writing skills. The project was designed according to the syllabus for five weeks with a duration of six hours per week.

First, the teacher took the role of both a facilitator and a coach. The teacher showed students the importance, and benefits of peer assessment, and trained them to carry it out by using a checklist (See Appendix 1). Teacher and students went over each

item in the checklist to clarify doubts so that they felt comfortable with using it. Then, the teacher shared a paragraph example, which contained several mistakes and asked students to assess it based on the checklist criteria.

First, they did it alone. Then, they did it with a partner and finally we did it together as a class to gather valuable feedback. Thus, they took an active role from the very beginning by analyzing, evaluating, and assessing their peers' work so it could be improved. Students took a pretest, three practice activities, on lessons two, three and five, and the posttest (Summative Assessment Task or Post Assessment).

The unit as a whole, along with its results, were created following the standards outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptors scales. Specifically, the overall written production component of the unit was developed to provide information at a B1 level. "Can produce straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within their field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence" (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020, p.66). See Appendix 2 to check the innovation of the lesson plan unit.

### **Research Methodology**

This is an action research study, which uses measurement instruments to gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data in order to answer the research questions. Action Research is a process of systematic formal investigation that allows people, teachers in our case, to find answers to real problems (Ferrance, 2000, as cited in Hine & Lavery, 2014). Within education, it helps understand and improve the quality of actions on instruction, gain insight, develop reflective practice and yield positive changes in the school environments (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Pre-test and post-test were used as quantitative instruments as well as a graded rubric. In addition, participants filled out surveys in order to share their opinions

towards the peer-assessment approach. This section describes the context and participants, ethical considerations, data collection instruments and analysis.

### **Context and participants**

According to Efron and Ravid (2013), “The participants of the research study are the people who affect or are affected by the issue under investigation” (p. 61). This action research was carried out in a private English institute in Guayaquil, Ecuador. This is a 5-week intensive online course; classes take place from Monday to Thursday, 1.5 hours per day, 6 hours per week. The implementation was applied on the penultimate week.

The class was given through zoom. Students had to comply with homework done in their workbooks, online practice in LMS (learning management system) and reading practice on Highlights platform. The population consisted of a sample of ten adult students, whose ages ranged from 17 to 34 years old, belonging to a B1+ level (independent user) according to the Common European Framework (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020). Participant's English language proficiency data was obtained through an institutional placement test and confirmation of their prior achievements in language proficiency. The majority of the sample consisted of females, accounting for 75%, while males constituted the minority, making up 30% of the sample. It is important to note that the researcher did not intentionally choose this sample; rather, it was determined based on institutional requirements, making it a convenience sample.

### **Instruments**

The instruments selected to collect data were a pre and post-test, which were graded by using a rubric developed by the researcher, and a pre and post-survey. In order to answer the first research question: *To what extent can peer-assessment activities improve students' written production?* Pre and post-tests were applied and



evaluated. Students had to write about a certain given topic. Then, they had to respond to each other's work in a random and anonymous way. The rubric to grade their compositions, which was designed based on the Cambridge B1 English Writing Assessment Scale (See Appendix 3), contained four criteria, each descriptor was scored over 5 points; being five the highest and one the lowest score, as described below:

- Vocabulary / spelling: good use of vocabulary learned in class.
- Grammar /punctuation: good use of grammar and punctuation they should know according to the level.
- Organization: information is logically organized with clear introduction, body, and conclusion
- Content: All content is relevant to the task. Target reader is fully informed.

For the second question: *What opinions do students have regarding peer assessment to improve written production?* Pre and post-surveys were carried out to gather learners' opinion regarding peer-assessment and how it can foster their writing skills. Cohen et al. (2017) pointed out that "surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared" (p.334).

### **Data Analysis**

The data obtained from the pre-test and post-test were tabulated in an excel spreadsheet. Descriptive statistics were run to obtain and analyze in detail the pre and post-test minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation. It was important to compare and correlate the scores from both tests. In order to do so, a paired-sample *t*-test was conducted using the Analytics Tools Pack in Excel.

To answer the qualitative question: What opinions do students have regarding peer assessment to improve written production? The data obtained from the pre and post-surveys were tabulated in excel and entered in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to obtain the frequencies so that the results could be compared.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research project will take into account several ethical considerations to make sure that participation in the study is voluntary, informed, and safe for research subjects.

According to Bryman and Bell (2007), research participants should not be subjected to harm in any ways whatsoever. In addition, respect for the dignity of research participants should be prioritized. Before starting any data collection with students, a consent letter, which explained in detail the research proposal, was submitted to the academic department of the institution in order for this to determine whether the research goals and research design were ethically acceptable and followed the institution's code of conduct (See Appendix 4). Once approval was granted, the following ethical issue was to obtain participants' informed consent; for this, they were briefed on the objective, benefits, risks, and funding behind the study before they agreed or declined to join. Then, participants' voluntary participation was requested; that is, all research subjects were free to choose to participate without any pressure or coercion. Banegas and Villacañas de Castro (2015) asserted that "both collaboration and participation need to be voluntary and participants must be autonomous and free to withdraw at any time without any consequences. It is important to discuss co-option and coercion so as to avoid or minimize their presence" (p. 60). Finally, anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed along this research study.

## Results

To address the first question: *To what extent can peer-assessment activities improve students' written production?*, The pre and post-tests, which were applied, evaluated, and analyzed, allowed the researcher to assess learners' outcomes. All students underwent assessment using a rubric for both their pre-test and post-test performance.

In the pre-test, the students received an average score of 16.89 on the rubric, with the criteria related to vocabulary and organization scoring the lowest (See Appendix 5). In contrast, the post-test yielded an average score of 19.22. There was a 2.33 mean difference, suggesting an increase in post-test scores. Notably, in the post-test, the criteria for grammar and content received the highest scores, ranging from 4 to 5 (See Appendix 6).

Additionally, there was a correlation between students' peer-assessment scores and their pre-test and post-test scores. The standard deviation indicated that there is consistency in the results, suggesting that the data is tightly clustered around the mean. Through the t-test, the p-value was 0.00, which indicated a statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores. This, in turn, suggested solid evidence regarding improvement in learners' writing skills due to the intervention.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test overall results.*

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	p value
Pretest	10	15.00	19.00	16.89	1.27	
Posttest	10	18.00	20.00	19.22	0.67	0.00
Valid N (listwise)	10					

To answer the second research question: *What opinions do students have regarding peer assessment to improve written production?* Students were anonymously surveyed. In the pre-survey, they were required to respond to ten questions using a 4-

point Likert scale rating the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with these statements (See Appendix 7). These questions covered various aspects, including the students' understanding of the writing process, their awareness and application of the writing process, their self-perception as writers, and their views on the writing process stages such as planning, writing, and revising written work (questions one to eight). Additionally, the surveys inquired about students' experiences and perspectives regarding peer assessment in writing (questions nine and ten).

Most students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statements. For instance, in questions 1, 2, 6, 8 and 10, 50 % of students strongly agreed and the other 50% agreed. In questions 4, 5, 7 and 9, 16.7 % of students strongly agree and 83.3% agreed. In both question 2: "I know how I do my writing," and question 3: "When you write for academic reasons, getting input from your classmates is a part of the writing," 16.7% disagreed. In the post-survey, learners provided their feedback, views and opinions regarding the peer-assessment done in class. It intended to examine whether the peer-assessment was beneficial to them or not and in which ways (See Appendix 8).

When they were asked to explain how peer-assessment in this course affected their attitudes towards feedback, one student said, "I think it affected my attitudes in a positive way since when I know my mistakes I get better at writing." When asked to indicate whether the peer-assessment helped them better learn the content of this course and in what ways, another student stated, "I consider that peer assessment makes me learn in an easier way some topics and practice more the things I need to correct." To the statement: the peer- assessment allowed me to develop skills to evaluate my own work, one student agreed by providing the following explanation, " I agree because every time we make a writing our partner corrects some mistakes that we have made. That evaluation allows us to improve our skills." In addition, most students indicated

that, while peer assessing, they do not matter whether they were allowed to choose their partner or the instructor assigned them since the final goal was to help each other.

Finally, when they were asked what they did not like (disadvantages or difficulties) about peer assessment in this class, one student mentioned, "I think some disadvantages are that sometimes our classmates don't understand some topics and therefore they can't help or contribute to the feedback." The results obtained after tabulating the pre and post-survey data allowed the researcher to evidence how students showed a more positive opinion towards using peer-assessment as a valuable tool to learn collaboratively and eventually enhance their writing skills.

### **Discussion**

The quantitative question: To what extent can peer-assessment activities improve students' written production? Aimed to test the impact of peer-assessment activities on students' written production. The positive results aligned with previous findings. For instance, Huertas-Abril et al. (2021); Panadero and Alqassab (2019) indicated that peer-assessment activities could increase students' motivation towards learning and reduce anxiety levels. Similarly, Wride (2017) reported that students could achieve higher academic performance when they provide feedback and assess each other's work, since they are taking active participation into their learning process.

Having students review their peer's work helped them to understand the structure of written language, notice common errors in grammar, spelling and the like so that they will not make mistakes when working on their own writing assignments. Cho and MacArthur (2011); Crossman and Kite (2012) mentioned that commenting on peers' writing can help students better understand the assignment, reflect on their own errors, and develop ideas for improving their own drafts.

One main concern stated by the participants is the fact that peer-assessment activities are time consuming. This issue has been identified in previous research. Al-Hammoud and Pasalkar (2022) asserted that learners tend to have a laborious workload, and peer-assessments without incentives are seen as an additional task, with little to no reward.

For the second research question: *What opinions do students have regarding peer assessment to improve written production?* Most students showed a positive attitude towards using peer-assessment in order to improve their writing skills. Nonetheless, a few of them expressed their discomfort of having to assess their peers by saying they did not feel prepared enough or that they lacked the required knowledge to do so. Some authors have observed this pattern. For instance, Cho and MacArthur (2011) and Nilson (2003) stated that reviewers might hesitate to assess their colleagues' writing, particularly if they view themselves as inexperienced writers or novices in their respective fields. In addition, a couple of learners mentioned that they did not fully trusted their peer reviews for the same reasons. Wichmann et al. (2018) explained that writers might reject or ignore the feedback they receive from their peer reviewers.

### **Conclusions**

Given the fact that peer-assessment is a student-centered activity. It was a powerful tool to increase learners' enthusiasm and participation in classroom activities, which motivated their learning. The peer assessment activity within the module proved to be one of the most effective teaching and learning endeavors. Success, in this context, was defined by the high level of student participation in the activity, the favorable feedback received from students, and the noticeable enhancement of various skills that resulted from the exercise. In addition, as learning is built on the concept of problem-based learning, student cognitive awareness was fostered. Students were aware of their

strong and weak points in writing and, through peer-assessment, learned to improve this skill. During the implementation, students found value in assessing their peers' work and even learned from doing so. In the end, they claimed that critically analyzing their peers' work helped deepen their understanding of the content taught in class.

In peer assessment of writing, students had more chances to get and/or provide feedback than they had when confined to reviewing only their own writing. Furthermore, students not only learned how to write their own reports, but also learned more from evaluating each other's writing, which supplied more ideas about how to modify their own writing. Students benefited from playing the role of assessor for their peers, and gained feedback about their strengths and weaknesses from their peers in such activities.

### **Limitations**

It is a well-known fact that class-time period is a constraint when implementing meaningful communicative activities such as peer-assessment, which is time consuming. The researcher had a lesson plan to cover and, in order to fulfill it and work on the implementation as well, students had to work on independent tasks at home. They felt that these extra assignments were not necessary or unfair. It was vital that the researcher explained in detail all the benefits that peer-assessment has so that learners did not feel reluctant to take part in the intervention.

The level of proficiency in the language was essentially important to peer assessment. Since this was a group of students belonging to a B1+ level (independent user), most students were proficient in the language, knowledge and skills to be capable to act as peer reviewers. Unfortunately, such availability cannot be granted in every typical classroom. Without having a proficiency level that is greater than the

‘intermediate’ level in the language, students would not be equipped to provide feedback that may help bridge the gaps of knowledge of their peers.

### **Recommendations**

Some learners can feel nervous and uncomfortable about getting feedback from peers instead of a teacher. This is especially common among teens and in teacher-centered or accuracy-focused contexts. Talk to learners about the benefits of peer assessment so they understand that it will help them develop their writing skills and that they will have other opportunities to get feedback from the teacher.

Encourage learners to start with the ‘big picture’ before focusing on specific things to change or correct. Learners often notice mistakes immediately and forget that the general purpose of writing is to communicate! Invite them to think about content and organization first, and to offer praise before criticism.

Training plays a pivotal role in ensuring the success of peer-assessment, particularly when it comes to evaluating writing skills. Providing instruction to students in the art of peer assessment has several positive effects. It enhances both the quality and quantity of interactions and feedback among peers during the assessment process, resulting in improved revisions and, subsequently, higher quality writing. Furthermore, such training fosters more favorable attitudes towards peer assessment and enables peers to adopt more constructive positions during group or pair discussions related to peer-assessment.



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**Appendix 1**

**Checklist used by students to peer assess**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 2**

**Lesson plan**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 3**

**Writing Rubric for B1**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 4**

**Institutional consent letter**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 5**

**Pre-test scores**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 6**

**Post-test scores**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 7**

**Link to the Pre-survey**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 8**

**Link to the Post-survey**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 9**

**Link to the Portfolio**

Available upon request.