

## In-service EFL students' peer assessment for the enhancement of their writing skills

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**Abstract:** This study attempted to investigate the extent to which peer assessment activities contribute to enhance in-service EFL students' writing skills. Based on the constructivist theory, a case study design was implemented and both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were used to explore how 120 in-service students at Dilla University, Ethiopia, took part and responded to peer assessment activities to improve their writing competencies. Data was gathered through four tools, namely, questionnaire, focus group interviews, observation and document analysis. The findings suggest that peer assessment activity, though students' perceptions and past experience impact, can aid peers in developing their writing performance through interaction, sharing feedback and addressing the challenges they face in the process of writing.

**Keywords:** Writing, peer assessment, EFL, in-service students, perception

## Penilaian sejawat siswa EFL dalam layanan untuk peningkatan keterampilan menulis mereka

**Abstrak:** Studi ini mencoba untuk menyelidiki sejauh mana kegiatan penilaian sejawat berkontribusi untuk meningkatkan keterampilan menulis siswa EFL dalam layanan. Berdasarkan pada teori konstruktivis, desain studi kasus diimplementasikan dan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif dan kuantitatif digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana 120 mahasiswa in-service di Universitas Dilla, Ethiopia, mengambil bagian dan menanggapi kegiatan penilaian sejawat untuk meningkatkan kompetensi menulis mereka. Data dikumpulkan melalui empat alat yaitu, kuesioner, wawancara kelompok terfokus, observasi dan analisis dokumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kegiatan penilaian sejawat, meskipun persepsi siswa dan dampak pengalaman masa lalu, dapat membantu teman sebaya untuk mengembangkan kinerja menulis mereka melalui interaksi, berbagi umpan balik dan mengatasi tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam proses menulis.

**Kata Kunci:** Menulis, penilaian sejawat, EFL, siswa dalam jabatan, persepsi

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex mental production which requires cautious thought and concentration. It is thought to be more difficult for EFL students (Al Fadda, 2012). Despite the fact that it is challenging skill, while working on research, doing assignments, making and taking notes in particular and being in academic community in general, students need the proficiency of writing skill as it impacts their progress and achievement in the discipline the students are engaged in. Writing activity requires the knowledge of many aspects of the skill including grammar, spelling, diction, punctuation and organization. However, teachers find that students' writing usually in EFL context is weak and it's difficult for them to meet the requirements (Bacha, 2012). Thus, to enhance the students' writing skill, they call on support from peers, teachers and more knowledgeable others (MKO).

In view of in-service EFL students in Dilla University, Ethiopia, the issue of feedback on their writing activities is challenging. While taking distance courses, they work at their respective schools which are located at distant places from the university. So, they do not have the chance for regular contact and interaction with their instructors which in turn lessens the frequency of getting feedback. Besides, the students are busy engaged in teaching their students. In spite of this fact, in-service students take writing assignments in September to their work places and submit them when they are back to the university to take on-site courses in June. They usually do not get feedback on their writing activities; rather they only submit. Likewise, during the on-site courses, the opportunity they have to interact with their instructors lasts only two months which is very inadequate time to practice writing and get developmental feedback. So, the assessments they carry out appear to be summative and do not encourage the learners to work on writing activity progressively.

Currently, emphasis is given to student-centered learning or involving students in language learning activities to enhance their learning particularly in an EFL classes. To be precise, attention is given to students' contribution to their own learning. One of these ways could be peer assessment activities (Andrade, 2013). Ma (2021) asserted that within a constructivist framework, teaching/learning and assessment should be integrated. In fact, within the field of education there is a common understanding that teaching-learning process should be in agreement with assessment (Djaguna et al., 2021; Husain et al., 2021). This encourages students to take part in the assessment activity and which in turn causes to increase from a single teacher's assessment to peer assessment activities.

However, in traditional writing classrooms of Ethiopia, teachers are solely responsible to assess and give feedback. This approach is sensibly suitable for objective questions like multiple choices; however, in subjective assessment activity it becomes very tedious. Thus, to alleviate this problem and to help learners enhance their learning, involving them in the activity is important to develop their writing skills (Janisch et al., 2007).

On the whole, considering in-service students, less attention has been given to the assessment of their writing particularly to the provision of feedback. By taking writing courses, the in-service students' purpose is to enhance their skill. This, however, needs their active motivation, involvement in writing and assessing their progress. To do so, however, students' perceptions and past experiences on their own participation in writing assessment is also one of the challenges because they could feel that assessment activity is

of only teacher's activity. Besides, students join universities having various experiences, learning styles, and views about writing courses and assessment which may have its own impact on their writing skill development. In-service students, given an opportunity to support each other by sharing feedback through peer assessment activities, may develop their writing skills. Thus, the objective of the current study was to examine the effectiveness and extent to which peer assessment activities can enhance EFL student writing.

In social constructivist theory as viewed by Vygotsky, (1978), students learn through interaction. In this theory, Vygotsky clarified knowledge is socially and culturally constructed and learning is a social process. In the course of learning, he believes, language is a vital instrument to interact, to communicate, to share and acquire knowledge (Eggen et al., 2012). Without social interaction and without using a language of a given culture, Vygotsky assures, a child cannot develop his knowledge (Eggen et al., 2012). He adds, interaction of a child both in formal and informal communication with more advanced individuals/more knowledgeable others (MKO) is important to promote development and learning. Contradicting Piaget's view of cognitive constructivism, Vygotsky states that individuals cannot interact alone and make meaning but social learning does.

The two theoreticians in common do not focus on teaching but they encourage learning and active involvement of the learners in language learning activities. Piaget believes in that a child learns if he is ready to and processes new information based on the already existing one and Vygotsky also comes to an agreement with his notion because he also believes that a student learns better when he actively interacts with more capable individuals (Eggen et al., 2012). However, Vygotsky pays attention to social interaction (Mcleod, 2022) and argues this impacts cognitive development of an individual whereas Piaget theorizes that independent exploration and constructing knowledge based on the existing one promotes cognitive development (Mcleod, 2022). Contending Piaget's concept, Vygotsky introduced his later work named "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). It is the student's ability to perform a task with the help of others like teachers and peers and what the student can do without (Eggen et al., 2012).

Constructivist theory in general promotes the use of active learning and encourages every student to play a part in the language learning activity. That is to say, it theorizes knowledge is not provided only by the teacher to learners on the stage; rather it is acquired by learners' active engagement in activities using their prior experiences as a basis for new knowledge. In such classes, learners are the makers of meaning (Vargas-Hernández & Vargas-González, 2022; Xu, 2022) and they discover themselves instead of waiting the teacher to provide readymade knowledge. Thus, the teachers' role is facilitating learners of diverse backgrounds so as to help them utilize their effort and work cooperatively (Soltura, 2022).

Falchikov (2005) defines peer assessment activity as the process whereby students go through writing and give feedback and/or rate the peers' work. This activity entails prior discussion or agreement over rubric/criteria. Falchikov, (2007) states the rubric supports the peer assessor to provide either feedback or grades (or both) to the written work. So, aided by the rubric, peers can contribute to the development of the writing skill, and students get an opportunity to work with their peers all the way through the writing process. Falchikov (2005) further noted that peers are key features of learning in the

institution, workplace and in professional practice. In fact, at the present time, learning with and from peers is the common mode of everyday learning.

Putting emphasis on the importance of peer assessment (Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010) stated that there are considerable indications that the activity benefits learning in many ways. van Zundert et al. (2010) found that peer assessment activity aids students to formatively assess the performance of other students. On one hand, it could involve them giving feedback of a qualitative nature, on the other, it might involve them in grading. Students often undertake peer assessment in conjunction with self-assessment. They reflect on their own work, and enrich this reflection by receiving feedback from their peers' assessment work. Peer assessment permits the writers to get feedback from various individuals on their writing. It may also assist both the writer and assessor to develop and create more precise awareness on their writing (Sadeghi & Baneh, 2012). Peers, working collaboratively, can ease the process of writing and improve the final product. Besides, it helps peers to develop ideas and build confidence. Because writing is a process, peer assessment aids students to learn through interaction with others and critically reading other's written work. It also encourages a greater sense of ownership in learning and developing critical thinking, and boosting critical reasoning. Unlike the feedback from the teacher, students receiving feedback from their peers can get confidence to question whether the provided feedback is right or not and then decide whether any changes should be made. Furthermore, through the activity, peers can exercise taking responsibility of their own learning (Sadeghi & Baneh, 2012). In the process of writing, peer assessment followed by feedback might be taken as stages in the writing process that can be used as fundamental components of fostering language through interaction in an L2 writing classes (Hansen & Liu, 2005).

Being a formative assessment method and as a part of the learning process, peer assessment enables students to be more involved in assessing and providing feedback. There is ample evidence of the benefits of providing students with opportunities to give feedback to, and receive it from their fellow-students (Li et al., 2020; Perera et al., 2010). Peer feedback can help students to develop that all-important appreciation of what counts as high-quality work in the discipline or subject area (William, 2011), while at the same time enabling them to take an active role in the management of their own learning (Stančić, 2021). Peer feedback can be sometimes quicker and more accessible than tutor-provided feedback (Harrison et al., 2015). Peer assessment helps raise their linguistic awareness and encourage them to become critical readers (Azarnoosh, 2013; Chien et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2020).

Concerning the weaknesses of peer assessment, Wanner and Palmer (2018) noted the propensity of biasness based on their relationships and providing similar mark for all. However, they suggested such problems can be avoided by (1) Making the purpose of assessments very clear to students, i.e. why they are being involved in peer assessment, and how it will benefit their learning. (2) Ensuring that peer assessment activities are supported by detailed and explicit criteria and standards in the form of a rubric. If you involve students in the process of developing the criteria, they will gain a much clearer understanding of how the assessment is carried out, and an increased sense of ownership. (3) Combining peer assessment with self-assessment or co-assessment.

## METHOD

In this research, a case study was found to be relevant as it focused on a particular context, that is, 120 in-service EFL students of Dilla University in Ethiopia. In case studies, instead of using controlled environment, researchers probe into events that happen in a natural setting. This strengthens the definition a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yazan, 2015). As such studies let use of multiple data collection methods, in the current study, questionnaire, focus group interviews, document analysis and observation were used and this in turn led the researcher to adopt a mixed research approach in order to address the research aim.

In-service students registered for taking writing courses and learning in two contexts: on-site and distance were the researcher's interest area and students who were registered for this particular course are thought to be the right source of data enabling the researcher to answer his research questions. Of the 334 EFL in-service students registered at the institution, 120 participants were purposively selected. The 120 students were chosen because they registered for both basic and advanced writing course.

The study focused on in-service students because they are both adult students and professional teachers who have the knowhow on the basics of teaching and learning. So, they could have the experience of assessing their students' writing in the schools where they teach, and their written activities could have been assessed by their instructors in their university times. These students also take courses in two contexts: on-site and distance. In the case of distance courses, they are expected to develop autonomous learning checking their own progress and helping each other through peer assessment and peer feedback. Therefore, they are considered to be the appropriate subjects, according to the researcher's belief, to share better experiences and perceptions on how peer assessment activities may or may not help foster students' writing and feedback.

Questionnaire was used to collect data from the sample before and after the intervention. With these students, the researcher spent two months giving training and practicing on peer assessment activities of their essays. While the students were practicing the assessment activities, the researcher also collected data by using the already prepared observation checklist. The researcher selected ten participants by using a simple random sampling technique for focus group interviews. This technique can be applied through drawing a lot or allocating each member a unique number and using random number generators. Thus, of the 120 participants who participated in responding to the questionnaire, only ten students who were volunteer to take part in the focus group interviews were involved.

After the students responded to the pre-intervention questionnaire, the researcher and the students agreed on the criteria before writing the essays. It was thought to be important both to guide them to write the essay and to assess the essays written. Then they wrote essays checking whether all aspects listed in the criteria were included. The focus of the criteria includes i/ Thesis statement ii/ organization iii/ supporting detail and development and iv/ diction/grammar. The essays were collected and redistributed randomly to the students so as to be assessed by peers. As the essays were already coded by the writers, peers didn't know whose essay they were assessing. This contributed to make fair assessment and enabled each assessor to perform the task on his own effort. In addition to marking, peers gave comments on the separate sheet. After finishing the activity,

that is, giving comments and marking, the teacher called the codes written by the writer and paired both the peer assessor and writer. Then they discussed on the strong and weak aspects of the essay and negotiated on what should be amended.

## RESULTS

### Peer assessment (pre-intervention questionnaire)

As illustrated in the Table 1, comparing the contexts (on-site and distance courses), the majority of participants, that is, 61.7% did not use peer assessment activities in the classroom as teachers whereas 58.3% of the participants were engaged in peer assessment activities at university as students. As to the contribution of criteria in peer assessment, 55.8% of the participants confirmed that they used criteria to assess their peers' work, 68.3% believed criteria helped them improve feedback and 85.8% were confident that criteria aided them to assess in a fair and responsible way.

Table1. Participants' experiences and perceptions of peer assessment activities

No	Participants' experience of peer assessment	Percentage	
		Yes	No
1	As a school teacher, do you use peer assessment activities in the classroom?	38.3	61.7
2	As a university student, do you engage in peer assessment activities?	58.3	41.7
3	Do you use criteria for peer assessment activities?	55.8	44.2
4	Does peer assessment improve feedback?	68.3	31.7
5	Do you assess peers in a fair and responsible manner?	85.8	14.2

Data obtained from the open-ended questions indicate that participants believed peer assessment was comfortable because they worked with peers. They reflected that they not only got feedback on their writing but also interacted and worked with, which in turn enabled them to work collectively and cooperatively to enhance their writing skill. Besides, since each student had different experience, they shared their experiences and developed their knowledge of writing. However, there were some participants who found peer assessment as difficult activity because of a) their language use, that is, some of the expressions and vocabulary used by a few peers were difficult to understand for others b) some students' calligraphy was illegible, and c) the time consumption. Participants while attempting to examine profoundly and trying to give feedback, they spent longer time reading the essays word by word, line by line and giving feedback based on the agreed criteria.

In the open-ended part of the questionnaire, they also reflected some benefits of peer assessment activities. The prominent one was receiving augmented feedback on their writing. This, sharing of feedback, contributed to improve their essay writing in particular and writing skill in general. Secondly, working with peers, having almost equal level of understanding, was found to be comforting to share feedback on their writing. Comments and feedback during the peer assessment followed by reflections helped them learn a lot regarding the skill. Peer assessment was beneficial both for the writers of the essays and for the assessors because knowing the performance of the peer was found to be motivating in

that it enabled both parties to see their knowledge gaps which in turn initiated them to work harder.

In addition to the advantages, participants in the reflection part pointed out some challenges within the peer assessment activities. These include, because peers were almost in the similar level of competence, they faced some common problems which both the assessors and the assessees couldn't solve. So, in such instances, they needed a third party to help them negotiate. The second challenge was biased. When the assessors were aware of assessing friends' essays, they showed propensity to give higher marks. Thirdly, sometimes by wrongly understanding some vocabulary, expressions and ideas, peers gave wrong feedback and this caused some disagreements between them. Such problems could be stemmed from lack of adequate knowledge on the structure, vocabulary selection, coherence, conjunction, punctuation and organization of ideas. Fourthly, lack of students' trust in peers' knowledge to assess their essays, particularly when the poor achievers assessed the high achievers' essays, there were disagreement between the assessors and the assessees.

### **Peer assessment (focus group discussion)**

Participants of the focus group discussion (FGD) stated that they had experience of peer assessments. Some have experience of peer assessment but in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia) essay writing and some have experience of peer assessing in Afan Oromo language (one of the widely spoken languages in Ethiopia). But some completely do not have any experience of peer assessment. Zeleke is one of those interviewees who do not have any.

Unlike Zeleke's experience, there were some students like Netsanet who had, though in other languages. Her experience of peer assessment was gained during their diploma education, and she believes that she benefited from peer assessment and feedback given by the peers. She feels that this type of assessment is collaborative work of students. She narrated her experience as:

I had some experience of peer assessment in college while I was attending my diploma education. My Amharic teacher used to give us writing activities like Amharic essays and used to tell us to assess each other's work. The purpose was only for giving feedback on the peer's essay not for grading. It was really very interesting and we used to enjoy acting as teachers while we assess our peers' essays. We had to have our say on our peer's writing at least we had to identify one or two strong and/or weak sides of the essay. I strongly believe that peer assessment is very essential activity in that it enables students to share knowledge on the given topic, and I am sure that two or three students can have more understanding on a given topic than one. So, the combination of the self as well as the peer assessment followed by feedback can produce better essay or writing than a single student can write. (Netsanet, 5 Jul, 2015).

Netsanet was among the ten focus group interviewees who strongly believe that the involvement of students in writing assessment particularly peer assessment helps them foster their feedback and writing. Being able to assess their own and their peers writing task, they develop their autonomous learning. They can also minimize their reliance on the

teacher. All the participants who said that they do have some experience stated that their involvement in the assessment was not for grading purpose but for learning.

As a formative activity, peer assessment focuses on learning. So, the activity motivates not for competition but for cooperation. On the subject of this concept, despite his lack of prior experience Zeleke reflected as:

I think peer assessment triggers cooperative atmosphere among the students rather than competitive spirit. It is because while students assess their peers, they can examine to what extent their peers are writing impressively and they compare with their own essays while giving feedback and reflecting on. Then they seek help from the peers if they think that peers are performing better and they can scaffold on the point their peers are not working well. This spirit makes them begin to think differently so as to work like the peers do (5 Jul, 2015).

Shemsu, one of the interviewees, believes that peer assessment can also strengthen individual work because during the peer assessment each peer reflects on his own writing for he or she has already assessed his or her own essay in advance. So, peers are important as they tell us our weaknesses and what kind of amendment our writings need. Among many significances of peer assessment is that we may not notice our mistakes or weaknesses. But by receiving feedback from peers, one can get a wider range of constructive comments to develop the skill. It is because peers have different levels of competence; they can help find where the writers mistakes are and this enables them to amend their weaknesses.

### **Peer assessment activity (Essays)**

The peer assessment activity was based on the essays written and coded by the participants. Then the essays were collected and redistributed randomly by the teacher to peer assessors to be worked on. Looking into these peer assessed essays, the researcher found large numbers of comments given by the peers on the separate sheets. They commented based on each point of the agreed criteria both by appreciating the strong aspects and suggesting improvements on the weak points. Their comments began with the *thesis statement* whether it controls all the ideas in the entire part of the essay. For example, writing on essays entitled 'The happiest day of my life', and on 'The saddest day of my life,' the thesis statements they wrote and peers revised include the represented ones in Figure1 below

Thesis statement was really important part of an essay which points out what main idea is to be discussed in the body parts. But it was found to be a common challenge of the students. First, instead of writing this controlling idea, some students directly began with a detail part of the essay. In this case, it could be difficult to envisage the common point of all details in the given essay.

Second, the *organization* of the ideas was another criteria aspect emphasized by the peer assessors. This helped them to talk on coherence of the ideas, cohesive devices and concluding parts of the essay. Organization helped them discuss on linking ideas together and how the introduction, supporting detailing and conclusion parts were developed. In the essays, some lacked the conclusion part which is very important to sum up what has been discussed in the introductory and in the body section of the essay.



**Thesis statement 1**

What a bad thing happened in my life was the day on which earthquake happened when I was studying in the library.

**Revised by peer assessor 1**

The worst thing in my life was the day on which earthquake happened while I was studying in the library.

**Thesis statement 2**

I don't forget throughout my life the time which I lost my mother's necklace because of many reasons.

**Revised by peer assessor 2**

I'll never forget the time I lost my mother's necklace throughout my life because of many reasons.

**Thesis statement 3**

In the past time, one of my pleasant and enjoyable day was graduated day.

**Revised by peer assessor 3**

One of the most pleasant and enjoyable times of my past was my graduation day.

Fig 1. Thesis statements in students' essays revised by peers

Third, the peer assessors tried to show if the essay writers' use of words was appropriate. This could be based on the meaning the words or expressions convey. For example, in E16 (essay sixteen), the word 'forgettable' is used as "Among my sad days, the first and forgettable one was....." The word was revised by the peers to be 'unforgettable'. The other is, "Those days were *remainders* of the amazing time we spent together." Here the word "remainder" was intended to be said "reminder" and it was also revised by the peers.

Fourth, peer assessors did give ample amendments on the structure or grammar. Peer assessment encourages deep rather than surface learning (Topping, 2021). They were able to identify mistakes on spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentential level problems like sentence fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, dangling constructions, faulty parallelism, shift in view (tense, person, number and voice), misplaced modifiers were identified by the peer assessors. Among the spelling mistakes amended by peers include: *perhabs* perhaps, *heared* heard, *bueatiful* beautiful, *desember* December, *entrancy* entrance, *remainder* reminder, *merriage* marriage, *preying* praying, *hapilly* happily, *chesed* chased, *assigment* assignment, *thise* this, *forgate* forget, *phantastic* fantastic, *imidiata* immediate, *kept* kept, and *fenomena* phenomena. Words like remainder and preying though their spellings are correct, in the context they used, they were not. Failure to use appropriate verb

forms in a sentence, for example, she *was died /died* two years ago. Because I *was passed /passed* the exam, I felt so happy. I *was get /got* tension.

The details of feedback and comments provided by the peers differed based on their performance levels. In addition, the assessors gave focus on the issues like tenses, subject-verb-disagreement, illegible calligraphy, repetition of the same word, organization and coherence. Moreover, some others focused on concepts, diction and logical reasoning which need a bit profound understanding of the essays.

Fifth, peer assessment enabled students to receive immediate feedback on their essays. The *access, immediacy* and *frequency* in which we get peers matters a lot to get feedback and learn. In other words, students have more time with peers compared to teachers as they get peers in the class and out of class as well. During the training, the writers got feedback from peers more immediately and frequently. This was because each student in the class was assessing other's essay at the same time and during the feedback both the writer and peer assessor sat together to share feedback on the essays. Were it in conventional class, a single teacher would assess the whole class students' essays taking long hours and days to assess and give feedback. But, in order to get the needed feedback and to share knowledge on essay writing skills, the students should be aware of the purpose and the importance of the assessment so that the parties are able to carry out the assessment activity in concord and friendly atmosphere.

Sixth, peers were able to give constructive feedback on the essays suggesting the way the essays were supposed to be written. The purpose of the assessment, whether it was for formative or summative, was also found to be important during the peer assessment. So, instead of merely providing scores, peers showed how to improve the essay motivating the writers and amending the mistakes. Besides, when peers were giving scores, they explained why the writer has got a certain mark. To meet this purpose, criteria were very essential in aiding the assessors to describe the writers based on the particulars given in the criteria. Making the essay papers anonymous, using codes instead of names found to be important. This gave the assessors comfort to assess and helped them to be fair as they didn't know whose paper they were assessing.

Peer assessment was not also free of challenges. Although lots of comments and feedback were given in line with the agreed criteria, and thorough discussion was made regarding the strong aspects to be encouraged and weaknesses to be revised, there were also challenges on peer assessed essays.

Since students knew each other (who is high achiever and who is low), there were instances in which high achievers did not accept the feedback and marks provided by the low achievers unless the arguments were convincing. The researcher also came across a wrong feedback provided by a peer and it was one of the causes to give a lesser mark by the assessor than otherwise. It was based on the statement "He used to work hard so as to be a brilliant student." The feedback given by the peer was on the adverb "hard" saying it has to be substituted by the word "hardly". Actually, the writer of the essay was correct but the peer assessor was not. Similar problems also happened during the pilot study. They were not able to amend mistakes like "*costy price*" and "*long man*". Actually their intention in the context was to say *costly price* and *tall man*.

Similarly, some peer assessors simply underlined words and expressions which they were not sure of without suggesting any options to amend. There were also cases in which

the assessor and assessee argued but assisted by the teacher. This is undeniable that high achievers were good at giving feedback than low achievers because they easily understood the criteria points and their comments and feedback including the marks were supported by evidence from the criteria. The presence of teacher during the assessment particularly for summative purpose was also very important as he mediated the arguments among the two parties and provided the correct feedback when the assessors and assessee failed to revise the weaknesses couldn't reach an agreement on the issue of argument.

Secondly, in some instances the essays were without feedback on them. When student is tasked with the responsibility of assessing peers, sometimes they are apprehensive about their capability to assess their peers and the responsibility associated with such assessment (Patchan et al., 2018), leading to anxiety, stress, and discomfort. Due to different reasons peers fail to provide feedback on the essays. One of the reasons was that some peers performed better than others and their language like vocabulary and expressions were difficult for some others. Besides, in other cases, when the flow of ideas were distorted and when peers trying to comment based on the criteria, due to the vagueness and lack of controlling idea, they couldn't provide appropriate feedback. Some essays had problems of organization- ideas were not written in a coherent way and there was repetition of expressions throughout the essays. The essays contained problems of spelling, conjunction, relative clauses, paragraphing, and conclusion. There were many problems in a single sentence like "... there is 7 days in week; This day are...; the day which are planning...." Here we can see problems of number, agreement, spelling and demonstrative pronoun. In the third case the idea itself is confusing. So, such problems made the peer assessors find it difficult.

The third significant problem arose when peer assessment didn't contribute to the summative assessment. In the absence of grading, students tended to avoid serious engagement with the activity. Besides, even if it was marked by the peers, recipients suspected that the peer feedback was not objective. It was observed that there was mismatch between the feedback and the marks provided. But discussing on the criteria for assessment, and making the papers coded helped to avoid subjectivity. Establishing ownership of peer assessment through criteria was very important to minimize subjectivity. Ownership of the criteria, as it has the power to reduce bias, through co-creating, agreeing and applying to each other's essay, enabled the peers to use more objectively than merely working to a checklist of someone else's (for example, their teacher's) criteria. Another remedy was to require assessors to justify their marking. This was found to be effective in all cases except collusive marking, though it is difficult to see why it should not have an effect here, too. Making the responsibility for determining the final mark was shared by teachers and students and suggested as a means of reducing friendship marking.

Peer assessment activity also raised issues of loyalty. Some peers were observed giving marks without adequate evidence from assessment criteria, that is, they produced ratings based on uniformity. Although the presence of the writer and peer assessor, and the interaction between the two parties enabled them to alleviate the weaknesses of the essays, the problem of providing inflated scores was not significantly solved.

The researcher, during the practice, observed that peer assessors preferred the papers to be anonymous or coded so that they could assess freely and in a comfortable way without knowing whose paper it was. This helped them to try to avoid bias. Therefore, the

researcher made the participants to write their cell phone numbers or their own codes, so that their peers couldn't identify whose essay they were assessing. There were differences when students wrote their names on the essays and when they used codes specially in awarding scores. In both cases their comments were almost similar but scores differed. Despite the ample negative comments on the essays, the marks were higher than the writing deserved. This could be the reason why students preferred receiving comments rather than scores by their peers during the peer assessment. They were more genuine in providing comment and feedback than awarding scores.

Panadero and Brown (2017); Seifert and Feliks (2019) supports peer assessment can be anonymous so that friendship factors are less likely to distort the results. Students like anonymity. That is, they didn't need to be aware of the writer of the essay. Students engaged in writing task anonymously exchange work for feedback on a few occasions during the drafting process. Along with making the essays anonymous, criteria enabled them to have common understanding on the purpose of the assessment. Otherwise, it was difficult for the assessor on what basis he/she gave scores or feedback. Since criteria were agreed in the class, they helped the learners make informed decisions about their next steps in the learning process and minimize the dependence on the teacher. They did not have to wait for him to tell them what to do next and how well they were doing. Even though the teacher remains the more knowledgeable and experienced person in the classroom, because the goal was for learners to increase their knowledge and level of competence through giving and receiving feedback on their essays, involving them in the assessment activity was thought to be relevant.

### **Observation**

As observed during the intervention, peer assessment enabled the writer and the assessor to work *cooperatively*. After the peer assessment activity was carried out, both the peer assessor and the writer of the essay worked together to revise the essay. The assessors were observed explaining how they assessed based on the criteria agreed. They appreciated the strong aspects and suggested what kind of improvements the essays required. This indicated that there was cooperative atmosphere between the assessors and the writers of the essays. Undertaking peer assessment activity in conjunction with self-assessment activity was believed to be important for the students because through feedback they provide beforehand information on their writing that is, what kind of vocabulary, conjunctions, thesis statement and reasoning to use. This enabled the writers to reflect on their own writing, and enriched the reflection by exchanging feedback leading to the improvement of the essay.

### **Peer assessment (post-intervention questionnaire)**

Table 2 below is about students' peer assessment activities in relation to providing feedback. 56 (48.3 %) of the participants responded that they strongly agree with asking peers to assess their essays in order to get written feedback, and nearly half of the participants, that is, 59 (49.2%) were interested in getting feedback from many peers, but about one-fourth of them, that is, 33 (27.5%) of them disagreed that they do not look for many to get feedback.

As it is also shown, participants preferred to ask peers for feedback only when they face challenges and couldn't improve anymore. This idea was agreed by 34(28.3%) and strongly agreed by 16 (13.3%) of them but, 56 (46.7%) of the participants disagreed. On the question, whether peers are ashamed of their weaknesses to show to their peers, 48 (40%) strongly disagreed, and 38 (31.7%) disagreed saying that they gained confidence to show and share ideas with peers despite the quality of their writing. Besides, 59 (49.2%) and 51 (42.5%) of the participants strongly agreed, and agreed respectively that they were comfortable in asking for feedback from intimate friends. On the whole, the majority of the participants, that is, 95 (79.2%) strongly agreed, and 23 (19.2%) agreed that involving peers in assessment was found to be essential to enhance their writing skills.

As to the teachers' assessment, 76 (63.3%) of the participants strongly disagreed and 42 (35%) of them just disagreed that only teachers shouldn't assess students essays when the purpose is for learning. Concerning the student assessment, almost half of the participants felt that they can assess responsibly and fairly but 41 (34.2%) of them opposed that students can't assess their peers effectively and this implicitly indicates that the presence of the teacher is crucial. Of the total participants, 66 (55%) of them opposed the idea on preference of peers to instructors to assess and give them feedback on their essays. On the contrary, 55 (45.8%) of the participants strongly supported and 47 (39.2%) of them agreed that they preferred teachers to students to assess and give them feedback on their essays.

As opposed to those agreed to seek feedback from peers, some participants in the pre-intervention questionnaire, reflected that they did not give their assignments to peers before submitting to the teacher. This particularly happened when the peer assessment was for summative or grading purpose. But when it was for feedback purpose and only for learning, students were open to share ideas and get feedback. In addition, participants, when they were not confident about the peers' competence, they didn't show their essays to be assessed by peers. Similarly, equal proportion of participants sought written feedback from those whom they thought were more competent writers. This idea in turn informs that the participants were willing to give and/or receive feedback from peers based on their academic performances.

The reason behind those participants who were interested in getting feedback from many peers could be because they thought the more the number of assessors, the more accurate and refined the writing would be. In fact, the essence of cooperative learning is to support each other. That is to say, by scaffolding one another and giving and receiving feedback on their essays, they can avoid some weaknesses in the writing and produce better text.

With regard to the participants' reflection on whether students should take part in peer assessment, they showed interest in the involvement of the peers in assessment. Because peers, according to the participants, can discuss on feedback and help each other by sharing their experience on the writing skill, and they found working with peers was really enjoyable. The participants also communicated freely and in a relaxed way while they were reflecting on their writing. They also worked collaboratively and cooperatively giving feedback to their writings and this in turn helped them to develop learner interdependence by lessening their dependence on the teacher.

Table 2. Participants' perception on peer assessments in relation to feedback

No	Statement	Percentage			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I ask my peers to assess my essays and give me written feedback.	2.5	2.5	46.7	48.3
2	I look for several people to assess and give me written feedback for my papers	10	27.5	49.2	13.3
3	I ask for written feedback only when I come to a point where I can't improve my paper any further	11.7	46.7	28.3	13.3
4	I don't want to expose myself to my peers by asking them to give me written feedback if I am not confident about my essay	40	31.7	18.3	10
5	I feel comfortable asking for written feedback from my intimate friends.	1.7	6.7	42.5	49.2
6	I feel comfortable asking for written feedbacks from peers that I think are competent writers.	3.3	11.7	41.7	43.3
7	When asking for written feedback from peers, I tell them what aspects of the paper I want them to look at.	8.3	27.5	45	18.3
8	Involving students in assessment is very important because it enhances their writing skills	-	1.7	19.2	79.2
9	Only teachers should assess students' essays, not other students	63.3	35	1.7	-
10	Students can effectively assess their peers' written work.	3.3	34.2	52.5	10
11	I prefer that my peers assess my essays and give me feedback than my instructor	18.3	55	13.3	13.3
12	I prefer that my instructor assesses my essay and gives me feedback than to my peers	6.7	8.7	39.2	45.8
13	Assessment criteria/rubrics helped me to assess my essay accurately.	-	1.7	50	48.3
14	Assessment criteria/rubrics helped me to assess my peers essays accurately	-	6.7	55	38.3

However, there were participants who reflected assessing peers' essay was difficult activity. Their reasons include: a) being in the same level of competence, their peers' essays look that they were written impressively requiring no amendments b) it took them longer time to comment and give feedback c) they found that peers' essays were unclear to understand.

The participants also reflected on the relevance of criteria in relation to assessing their peers' writing. They found the criteria important in that it helped the assessors on what aspects of writing they had to focus on while assessing the peers' writing. In addition, the participants believed, given awareness on how students can assess their own and peers' writing based on the criteria, they transcend the practice to the independent context even where the teacher is not available.

## DISCUSSION

In both pre-, and post phases participants similarly reflected that they were interested in peer assessment activities. It was because the interaction between peers (assessor and assessee), they found it comfortable and peers were used as sources of increased feedback contributing to the enhancement of the quality of their essay writing in particular and writing skills in general. Similarly, during the intervention, peers tried to give feedback on all aspects of essay (thesis statement, supporting detail, organization and grammar). To do so, criteria contributed a lot and were used as evidence for peers to explain both the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Besides, it also created transparency and objectivity of the assessment between the assessor and the assessee informing the specification what makes a given essay good.

However, what didn't work well was that some students were not good at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the essays written. Some were also biased in giving scores which doesn't fit the feedback they provided. In addition, on the part of the writers, some were not willing to accept the feedback. But the problems were alleviated by making the assessors to explain or reflect on the purpose of the assessment, the reason they gave a certain mark (whether it was inflated or very low), based on the criteria set in advance. They negotiated whether the mark given was based on the agreed criteria. In addition, using codes instead of names gave freedom for the assessors to give feedback and scores without knowing whose essay they were assessing and this in turn helped them alleviate problems of biasness.

Researches carried out in school settings have shown contradictions regarding assessment for learning and for grading purposes. Frequent assessments for giving marks discourage the students' preparation for life-long learning (Harlen, 2012). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that such assessments encourage students to focus on passing the test rather than learning. They also averred that feedback or comment alone increased students' subsequent interest in learning when compared with two other controlled situations, one where only marks were given and the other where students were given feedback and marks. He argued that students paid less attention to the comments when given marks, and consequently did not try to use the comments to make improvements.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of the study indicated that peer assessment activity helped participants improve their essay writing through sharing feedback on the written work implying that learning is viewed as a social process rather than a biologically determined insight. Unlike the competitive atmosphere of assessment in the conventional classes, peer assessment activity gave students opportunity to learn cooperatively by genuinely supporting each other and sharing their experience.

Peer assessment activities were also of importance for their immediate feedback. After peer assessing, every participant had a neighbor to interact with. This happened immediately after writing the essays. Besides, peers were not afraid of peers as compared to their teachers. So, they interacted and shared ideas comfortably. They either did accept the feedback given by the peers or they amenably questioned during the interaction without any nervousness.

With the knowledge that they would be assessed by their peers, the writers or participants worked harder and this in turn encouraged deep rather than surface learning. In addition, the discussion between learners and more capable peers during the interaction played an important role in their writing skill development. Peer assessment gave the opportunities for both parties, that is, for the assessor and assessee to interact on the essay writing assessment activity.

In spite of its advantage, there were challenges with peer assessment activities that participants faced while they were taking part. These include disagreements between the assessors and assessees. When the writers of the essays considered that the assessors were not providing correct and constructive feedback, they were reluctant to interact and in some cases even they rejected their feedback. Besides, some peer assessors were focusing only on the weaknesses of the essay instead of appreciating the strong aspects of the essays. The other challenge was particularly when the peer assessment was for grading purpose; they awarded biased scores or inflated marks for neighbors and friends. However, during the practice time, the problem was alleviated and discouraged by masking the essays that is, by using codes and by asking the assessors to justify the mark awarded using the rubric or written feedback. Using codes gave the assessors comfort and freedom to assess and to avoid biased scores.

In general, despite the loyalty problems in relation to grading, the participants were interested in the peer assessment activities especially in the comments and feedback as it helped them to make effort and contribute to their writing skills improvement.

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