Overcoming Writing Difficulties with Self-Assessment

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Research Report

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People are social beings that is why there is always the need to communicate and keep in contact with each other. When someone is learning a new language the output or productive skills are writing and speaking, and English is not the exception. One of the biggest challenges in the classroom has always been encouraging students to love writing activities. They usually feel overwhelmed or frustrated in the process. When it comes to writing essays; for instance, sometimes it could be a little bit difficult to give all the proper feedback and all the details they need since they are trying to use grammar rules, connectors, and strategies so they begin focusing on what they have learned, instead of developing their ideas freely. Therefore, self- assessment could be a powerful tool to help students to get over these challenges and gain the confidence needed.

Having taught students from different ages, children and teenagers**,** students find themselves in a tough position when writing an essay, an article, a review or another piece of writing. These writing pieces always have a communicative purpose: describe, transmit, answer or report something which could be difficult to express properly. According to Wise (2005), writing provides the ability to communicate messages clearly and concisely; hence, it is undeniable that students need to have the tools and methods to transmit a writing message or task because they need to accomplish the set goal and be sure that their writing piece is coherent, informative, grammatically correct, trustable, and organized. However, to reach the needed level, it is necessary not just to acquire the knowledge of the language but also to be confident enough to write and auto - identify the possible mistakes and improvements in the task, by applying one strategy to assist students which is self-assessment.

The purpose of this research is to identify the impact that self-assessment has in writing tasks and how much this methodology can assist students. It is desirable to point out

how self- assessment can help to improve some of the characteristics (grammar and coherence) of the writing tasks and aid learners to reach small goals by overcoming the challenges of writing and learning a new language. In order to do this, it is also necessary to point out the difficulties students face against the self-assessment process so that it is possible to find the required solutions and strategies.

Literature Review

Writing

Students can express their ideas with words through their writing and speaking skills. These are known as production skills since people can use them to communicate. Durga and Rao (2018) stated that "Writing is meant for conveying thoughts, ideas, and facts in easy and lucid language. Students have to learn the art of good writing which is essential in order to excel at both academic and professional levels" (p. 2).

Since it is one of the most important skills in English as a foreign language (EFL), it is necessary that students can produce diverse writing tasks in different genres which can show the different steps of discovering, assembling, producing, changing their ideas or expressions and revising them so in this way they can enjoy a type of academic success that it is relevant in their formation path (Ratminingsih et al., 2018). This is why writing is one of the skills which is assessed in the learning process of any new language.

Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) implied that "Writing is a difficult skill for both native and non-native speakers alike because it requires writers to maintain a balance of multiple issues in the process of writing such as content, organization, grammar, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics" (p. 31). All of these aspects are contemplated in the checklist

students used for self-assessment and the analysis done to the different tasks they did during this research.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is one of the most popular current methodologies that could be used at any moment during the learning process.   Research implies that self-evaluation helps students to build on a natural tendency to check out progress and recognize what needs to be learned. It can also lead to increased motivation, responsibility, and encourages reflection on one's own learning (Spiller, 2012).

This means that settling to apply self-assessment is a decision which will help students to improve their language skills and develop self-regulation. Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) said that "self-regulation and achievement are closely related: Students who set goals, make flexible plans to meet them, and monitor their progress tend to learn more and do better in school than students who do not" (p. 13). And it is precisely this advance that is to be expected from students with this research. According to Ross (2006), self-assessment "increases student engagement in assessment tasks" (p. 3) and keeps students interested in the topic they are studying. This approach will also help to promote a student centered classroom, and will encourage students into an active learning process by increasing learners' motivation (Salehi & Farhang, 2020).

Limitations of Self-Assessment

There are some limitations about self-assessment. Shriki and Lavy (2014) mentioned that personality characteristics are an important part in the self-assessment approach because someone with motivation who wants to overcome obstacles, could easily upgrade the results of any activity following the directions and recommendations. However, a person who perceives the self-assessment process as a competition, may not try to better the results

obtained but instead, this individual could try to avoid improvement or even to drop out of the learning process.

On the other hand, in his research, Ross (2006) implied that some educators said that with self-assessment, it is difficult to identify how much effort students are willing to spend on the task. They also added that it is more cost-effective because learners inflate their achievement. Finally, he also said that some instructors are concerned about parents who think that assessment is the full responsibility of the teachers.

How to Train Students to Self-Assess

Self -assessment is a process which allows students to monitor and evaluate themselves and at the same time they can find strategies to upgrade their performance (McMillan & Hearn, 2009). It is essential to recognize things that could be improved or corrected. However, there is not always a teacher or professional about a specific topic close enough to help or support this activity.

It is important for this purpose to provide students with tools such as a rubric or checklist in this case, and an approach which help them to develop their skills to the fullest. It could be considered that rubrics assist students in their self-assessment process by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses and helping them to make progress (Salehi & Farhang, 2020).

<div align="center">

Innovation

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The lesson plan was designed based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standard B1 and the goal was that students can learn vocabulary related to movies and stage production by creating well written sentences and accurate paragraphs, to include punctuation and the correct use of connectors. This was developed in 8 periods of 60 minutes. During this research, students were provided with

tools such as a checklist, examples, practices, and material that allowed them to take control of the tasks they work on. In the lessons, they will develop several activities with their teacher guide to improve their writing and self-assessment skills.

It started with an introductory activity where students should have identified their favorite movie. Thus, they could get related to the topic and felt comfortable with something they were already familiar with. After that, the teacher introduced to the class a checklist through an activity which consists of giving the kids a worksheet with a summary from a popular movie.   This was the way they were going to apply self-assessment in their work. The students would be able to recognize their highs and lows and mark them in the checklist given. The sooner they learnt how to use it the better they would solve the writing tasks. Then, they also had to read the summary and point out the mistakes according to the list given.

After doing this activity and getting familiar with the guidelines, the pretest was taken. Students wrote a short paragraph on their own, similar to the one they have read, which summarized a short film shown in the classroom and it would be submitted to the teacher by email.

Next, students would start to do several activities to get used to the topic, such as worksheets with readings, vocabulary activities, definitions, crosswords, word search and writing paragraphs with a determined number of words which would increment with each task. After this, they should have applied the checklist to identify their mistakes. Feedback was provided on each activity. These activities are described with details in the performance task of the innovation.

Research Methodology

Even though some problems could come across while writing, it is important to carry out this research with all the considerations.   Practices are an important part of this analysis and they have been implemented thinking of the students' benefits.

Research Questions:

- **RQ1**: How can self-assessment improve a writing task?

- **RQ2**: What difficulties students face while trying to self-assess a writing task?

Context and Participants

The research took place in a high school in Daule, Guayas, Ecuador. The students were between 16 - 18 years old, 7 men and 3 women, and their English level is B1 in 60% of them and A2 in 40%. This was evaluated by the results of a placement test students took at the end of the previous year.   That proficiency allowed them to write essays and other complex tasks in EFL. The participants of the study belonged to the 3rd baccalaureate (3rd BGU), they shared similar socio-economic backgrounds and they were 8 Ecuadorians, 1 Colombian, and 1 Brazilian. There were 10 students in total.

The test belongs to EF and this is the link to the placement test:

https://www.ef.com.ec/gocampaign/efset/ec/epis/unidad-educativa-duplos/?source=00500,efset_duplos

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were a pretest, a posttest, and a survey to evaluate qualitative parameters of this research. A rubric which was based on Cambridge parameters was used to assess the pretest and the posttest. The pretest basically consisted of writing a paragraph about a short-film presented to the students. The posttest, on the other hand, was about writing an essay made of 3 or 4 paragraphs which contained a review of a movie. Parameters such as grammar, mechanics, coherence, and organization were included in the rubric.

In both activities students were able to evaluate themselves using the checklist given. The pretest and posttest helped to answer **RQ1** How can self-assessment improve a writing task? Through the rubric that was applied.

At the end of the research, students answer a survey which was created in Google forms. Through this survey it was possible to identify the difficulties and opinions of students about the research and their improvement in writing skills. This survey helped to answer **RQ2** What difficulties students face while trying to self-assess a writing task?

The survey was done in Spanish to assure the comprehension of the questions. Students must identify the difficulties of the writing tasks and also the sections they understood better. There was also a section to expose any additional difficulty or section students would like to improve.

Data Analysis

The data from the pre and posttest was analyzed by getting the mean, minimum, maximum, mode and standard deviation. The results were set and applied to the automatic formulas given by the same application. To evaluate the results of this innovation the p value will be used. Dahiru (2008) implied that the "P value as an index measuring the strength of evidence against the null hypothesis" (p. 21). This will help us to analyze the hypothesis of this research which is the use of self-assessment to overcome the writing difficulties.

Descriptive statistics are necessary in any data analysis to verify the information as well as to identify trends and the behavior that can exist towards the activity (Maravelakis, 2019). The results of this study answer RQ1 are shown in different tables presented and organized by different parameters.

On the other hand, all the difficulties identified in the different activities will be evidenced with every practice and a survey done by the students at the end of the research.

This survey was created and executed in their native language. The results of the survey are

presented in charts and a summary of data.

Ethical Considerations

As an action research paper, this has to follow some ethical considerations in order to

get valid results. Some aspects that are part of this work are collaboration, confidentiality,

and anonymity.

Collaboration is essential because it makes it possible to have real information. Also,

in their research, Banegas and Villacañas (2015) said that "Both collaboration and

participation need to be voluntary and participants must be autonomous and free to withdraw

at any time without any consequences" (p. 4). Since the participants were teenagers who

attended high-school, it was necessary that the institute authorized the research and

consequently parents and students expressed their willingness to participate in it.

It was also proper to inform everyone involved what the study is about, the goals,

schedule, and some details of it. Along with this information, the anonymity, and

confidentiality of the data collected is part of this research work. The information will be

protected and anonymous as part of confidentiality because it respects the personal

information and data such as names, surnames, addresses, and telephone numbers, among

others (Banegas & Villacañas, 2015).

Following specific ethical considerations provides the participants with a sense of

security and gives the study the required seriousness before, during, and after the data

collection. Videos, pictures, data, and results are shared with the people involved in this

study. Students participated in this study voluntarily and with the authorization of their

parents or guardians and the institute where they are in.

Results

Based on this research, it is possible to verify if self-assessment is an appropriate tool to improve writing skills. Students were able to identify their mistakes and weaknesses by themselves with the help of the checklist. They also receive immediate feedback given by their teacher. At the end, they were able to write their texts by including all the recommendations given and highlighted in the checklist.

Table 1

Pretest and Posttest General Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	*p* value
Pretest	10	5.00	8.50	6.00	1.13	**0.00**
Post test	10	6.00	10.00	8.55	1.21	

Note: N=Sample, Std. Deviation= Standard Deviation, p value=Significance

Table 1 shows the differences between the minimum and maximum of the pretest and posttest. Results show that there is an increment in the posttest in both cases (minimum and maximum). Also, it is possible to analyze the result of the *p* value which is 0.05 which gives as a result a positive consequence of the innovation. The grades of the students improve positively due to the benefits of self-assessment and this answers RQ1 How can self-assessment improve a writing task?

Table 2

Pretest and Posttest Rubric Criteria Statistics

| Criteria	N	PRESTEST				POSTTEST				*p value*
		MIN	MAX	M	SD	MIN	MAX	M	SD	
Vocabulary	10	0.5	2.00	1.00	0.71	2.00	2	2.00	0.00	**0.00**
Cohesion/Connectors	10	0.25	2.00	0.83	0.50	0.50	2	1.40	0.46	**0.01**
Mechanics/Punctuation	10	0.50	2.00	1.55	0.55	1.00	2	1.70	0.35	0.14
Grammar	10	0.50	2.00	1.60	0.52	1.00	2	1.70	0.35	0.23
Organization	10	0.25	2.00	1.03	0.53	0.50	2	1.70	0.54	**0.00**

Note: N=Sample, MIN= Minimum, MAX= Maximum, M= Mean, S.D.= Standard Deviation, p value=Significance

Recognizing mistakes on structures, spelling, and coherence might have been the most challenging thing to do. Analyzing the results obtained by the rubric criteria statistics in table 2, it is possible to see an increment in the minimum value in all the criteria between the pretest and posttest which, together with the *p* value, have positive outcomes except for the. The parameters about punctuation and grammar did not get the expected results because the p value is bigger than 0.05.

To identify how students felt about their improvement and what they considered the most difficult to do, it was necessary to do a survey. This survey answered **RQ2** What difficulties students face while trying to self-assess a writing task? The outcomes were also positive and most of the results matched with the statistical analysis of the criteria previously done.

Figure 1

*Difficulties of self-assessment*
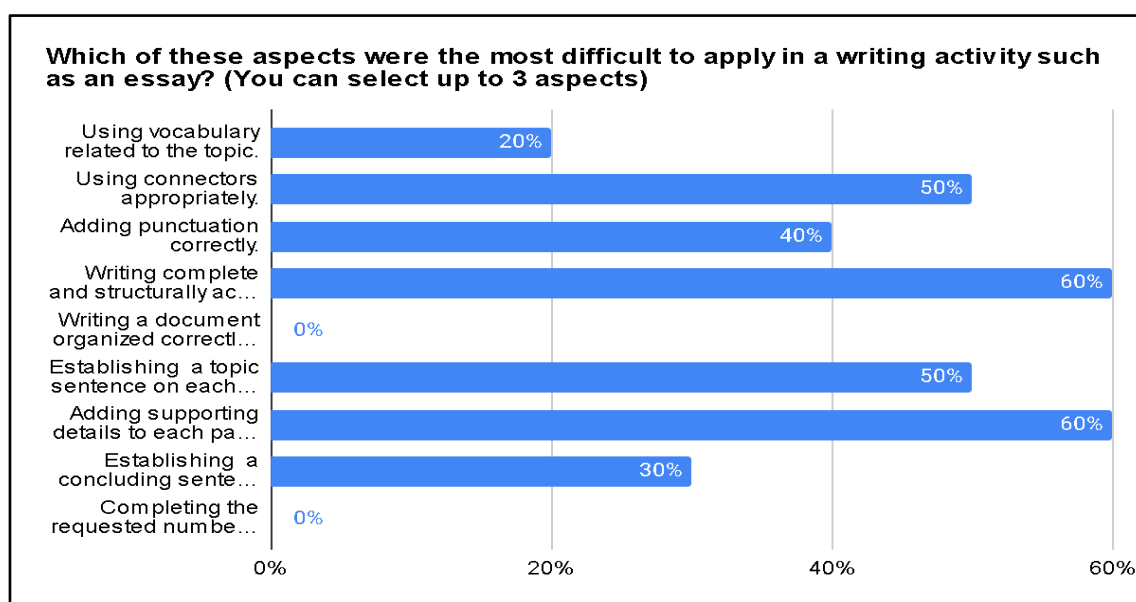
Most of the students considered that writing accurately, considering grammar and contextual details, is the most difficult thing to contemplate while writing (60%). Furthermore, punctuation and connectors are other aspects which worry students. Other results of this particular question are represented in figure 1.

Figure 2

Benefits of self-assessment
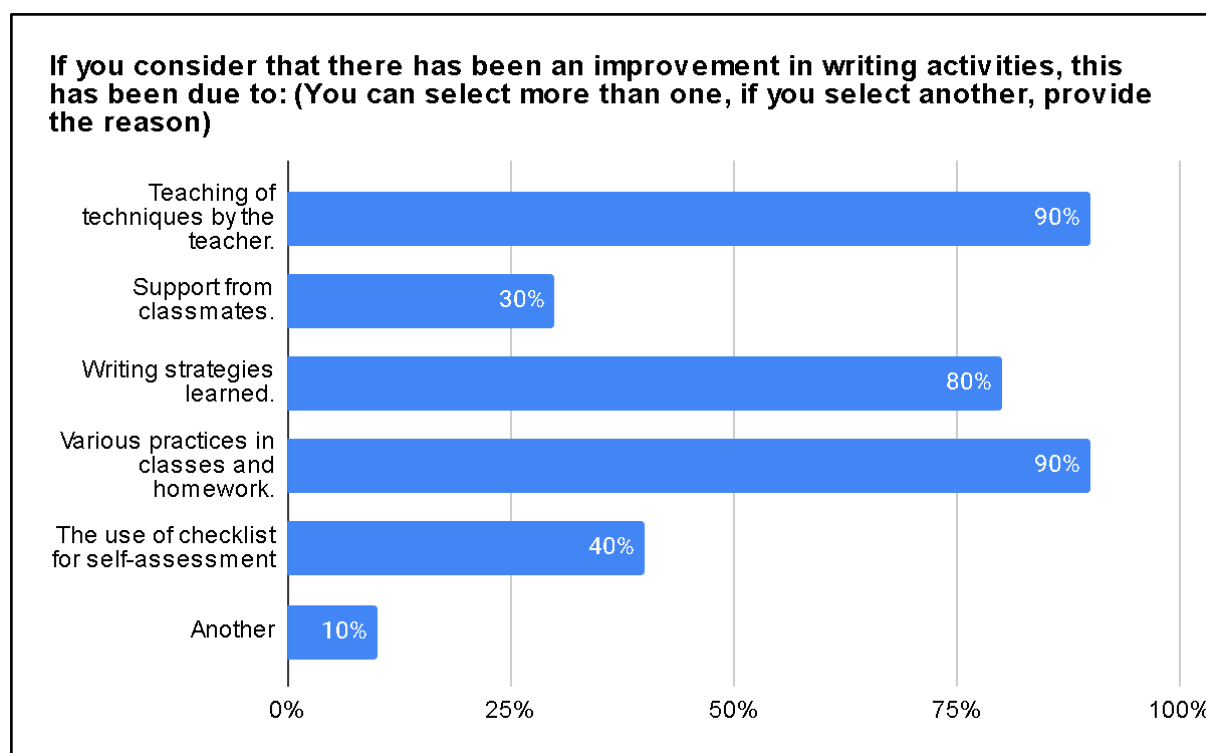
Moreover, according to figure 2, 40% of the students considered the checklist helped them to improve their writing skills and 90% think that the teachings and practices with self-assessment help them in this process. This also supports the results and expectations of this research, since it is the teacher who has explained the self-assessment process and has implemented several practices in the classroom.

Discussion

As it has been mentioned before, writing paragraphs or essays have always represented a challenging activity to students. The fact that they have to describe their ideas in a correct, formal way in another language could become a stressful process. However, the participants in this research have learnt to implement several strategies to make them capable of identifying their common mistakes and assess themselves at the same time. By identifying the criteria which needs to be evaluated in the sentences they write, they engage themselves in the process and their will to do it better increases because of the involvement in assessment (Salehi & Farhang, 2020). It was mentioned the importance of improving students' performance with self-assessment as McMillan & Hearn (2009) implied in their research and this is proven in the results presented in this paper.

For the first research question the analysis has been done contemplating all the criteria and the total grade obtained by the students in the pretest and posttest. The p value is a probability which demonstrates the no effect or no difference of something in a study (Dahiru., 2008). After grading the activities done by the students and applying the recommended formulas, the p value of the research was 0.00. This value demonstrates that the results are significant against the hypothesis that in this case it would be the use of self-assessment to overcome the writing difficulties. As it was said before, the strength of the evidence shown in the results is enough to demonstrate the technique is valid. Moreover, it is possible to apply self-assessment and be able to successfully overcome most of the difficulties identified in this paper.

Analyzing the data obtained from the different criteria of the rubric, it was found that the p value was also significant in vocabulary, connection/connectors and organization. In the parameters mechanics/punctuation, and grammar the study showed there was no difference with the strategies applied in this research because the p value obtained was bigger

than 0.05. Thus, it would be desirable to investigate other techniques to be used with the

mentioned guidelines.

For the second research question the results reflected by the survey are clear to

identify the difficulties when it comes to writing essays or reviews. Nuruzzaman et al. (2018)

mentioned the different aspects to contemplate when writing and how students face

difficulties towards writing aspects. For instance, in the survey participants identified in

question number 4 that the most difficult parts of writing were structures, mechanics, adding

supporting details and the use of connectors.

It was also possible to know the student's opinion about the technique applied, the

teachings, feedback given by the teacher in the different practices and other aspects that need

to be reviewed. In question number 7, students were asked about what they considered that

needed improvement and the answers were around grammar, vocabulary, and organization

and it is precisely this what Spiller(2012) pointed out when he said that self-assessment helps

students to identify their weaknesses and work on them with responsibility and motivation.

Conclusion

Students welcomed the proposal of self-assessment and feedback in the different

practices. A positive attitude towards this study was shown during the whole process.

Moreover, the participants were enthusiastic with the technique and with the different tasks

done to gain the understanding of the different aspects like punctuation, grammar,

vocabulary, and organization.

One of the main purposes was to identify how self-assessment improves writing tasks

and according to the results their knowledge increased thanks to the methodology taught. On

the other hand, the writing skills have become better and this is not only proved by the results

of the research and the survey but also by the self-confidence shown by the students at the end of the study.

Another aspect was about the difficulties which were pointed out by the students in the survey such as grammar (writing full sentences correctly and adding them in the details of the body paragraph) and organization. Punctuation and mechanics did not obtain the expected results in the statistical analysis therefore it is recommended to look forward to applying different techniques to improve these areas and that these complement the checklist.

Finally, feedback is also valuable and important so that students can learn to identify their mistakes and self-assessment could be difficult to some students. That is why the number of lessons is important and helps in the process in order to reach the desired results.

Limitations

Despite the good results, there were some limitations in this study. At the beginning it was difficult to obtain the permission of the students' parents that allowed them to participate in this research. It was necessary to call parents to a meeting so that they could sign the authorization.

Some activities from the school were done at the same time of this innovation and there was a considerable delay in the execution of several practices or activities. It was also an issue that the English level of the students was not the same as it was indicated in the description of this paper. Some of the participants faced more difficulties throughout the development of the practices. However, all the students were supported attending to their particular needs during this research.

Recommendations

Firstly, the implementation of self-assessment is something that motivates students to improve their work as long as they receive adequate instruction on the parameters and different topics. Hence, it is something that could be applied from early years in high school education, starting with a few parameters in the checklist and incrementing them with time so that the students do not feel overwhelmed by this strategy.

Secondly, constant practices of the different criterion with individual feedback shown in this study should be also included in the teacher's planning. Since this study was done in a classroom with ten students it was very practical and likely to be implemented; however, this could be difficult in a big classroom.

Finally, students with different English levels could feel frustrated or disappointed when they do not see the expected results immediately or if they take a longer time in doing the different activities and processes. This is why, it would be desirable to level up these students in joint work with the school.

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Appendix 1

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Checklist

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Grades and p value

Available upon request.

Appendix 6
Survey

Available upon request.

Appendix 7

Survey Answers

Available upon request.

Appendix 8

E-portfolio

Available upon request.