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Enhancing ESL Learners' Writing: Electronic Peer Feedback on Variety of SentencesSaadiyah Darus^{*a}, Nadzrah Abu Bakar^b, Kemboja Ismail^c^{abc}School of Language Studies and Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Learners of English as Second Language lack the ability to write and use a variety of sentences in composing essays. This may be due to several factors: (a) lack of understanding of types of sentences, (b) low exposure to these types of sentences, and (c) lack of practice in using these sentences. The objective of the research is to enhance learners' writing by using electronic peer feedback on a variety of sentences. Forty first-year undergraduates were asked to post their essays online in iFolio, a Learning Management System platform of e-learning in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Their peers were required to comment on the essays using the same mode. These essays were then revised accordingly. The revised essays were posted again in iFolio. The two sets of essays were analysed according to types of sentences using Excel program. The results show that overall, the number of simple sentences decreases, while the number of compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences increases. An interview was carried out individually with seven students to determine in what way peer feedback in electronic medium improved their writing. The results show that by posting their essays online and getting feedback from their peers, the students can read their peers' comments over a period of time in a more conducive manner and understand it better. They can revise their essays instantly because it is convenient, fast, and easily accessible. Electronic peer feedback is one way of encouraging students to become better writers.

Keywords: essay writing, peer feedback, e-learning.

1. Introduction

Feedback is a key component in second language writing pedagogy and it forms a central part of instruction in process, product and genre approaches (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). It is viewed as crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning. Warschauer (1996a, 1996b), Sullivan and Pratt (1996), and Greenfield (2003) found that non-native speakers of English participated more actively when provided with the opportunity to share their writing through online discussions. While a study by Kern (1995) showed that students wrote a higher amount of simple compared to complex sentences in online discussions, Warschauer (1996) found the opposite. In the U.S. sentence patterns have been taught in freshman composition classes as early as 1954 (Rivenburgh, 1954). This include simple, compound, complex, number of loose and periodic, and whether sentences follow normal or inverted order.

In Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, types of sentences are taught in Written Communication course which is a compulsory course for first-year undergraduates who enrolled for a B.A. in English Language Studies at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics. The aims of the course are to equip students with the basic writing skills and to enhance their ability to write well. In this course, the students were taught basic writing skills such as how to create and organise ideas, how to build and support specific and suitable ideas, how to write effective essay introduction and conclusion as well as how to develop effective writing skills. Students also went through the process of identifying various writing modes and organisations and they were expected to produce essays in electronic form.

The objective of the study is to enhance English as Second Language (ESL) learners' writing by using electronic peer feedback on a variety of sentences. These research questions guide the study:

1. What is the percentage of simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and complex-compound sentences in the original essays (Essay 1)?

2. What is the percentage of simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and complex-compound sentences in the revised essays (Essay) 2?
3. In what way does peer feedback in electronic medium improved their writing?

2. Methodology

This study was carried out in Semester 2 Session 2012/2013 at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The participants of this study consisted of forty first-year undergraduates who were taking Written Communication course.

The students learnt about the process of academic writing, paragraph structure, unity and coherence, supporting details, and writing an essay from Week 1 until Week 5. In Week 6 they study types of sentences. As a Task in Week 6, the students were given the instructions in iFolio, as shown in Figure 1. iFolio is a Learning Management System platform of e-learning in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

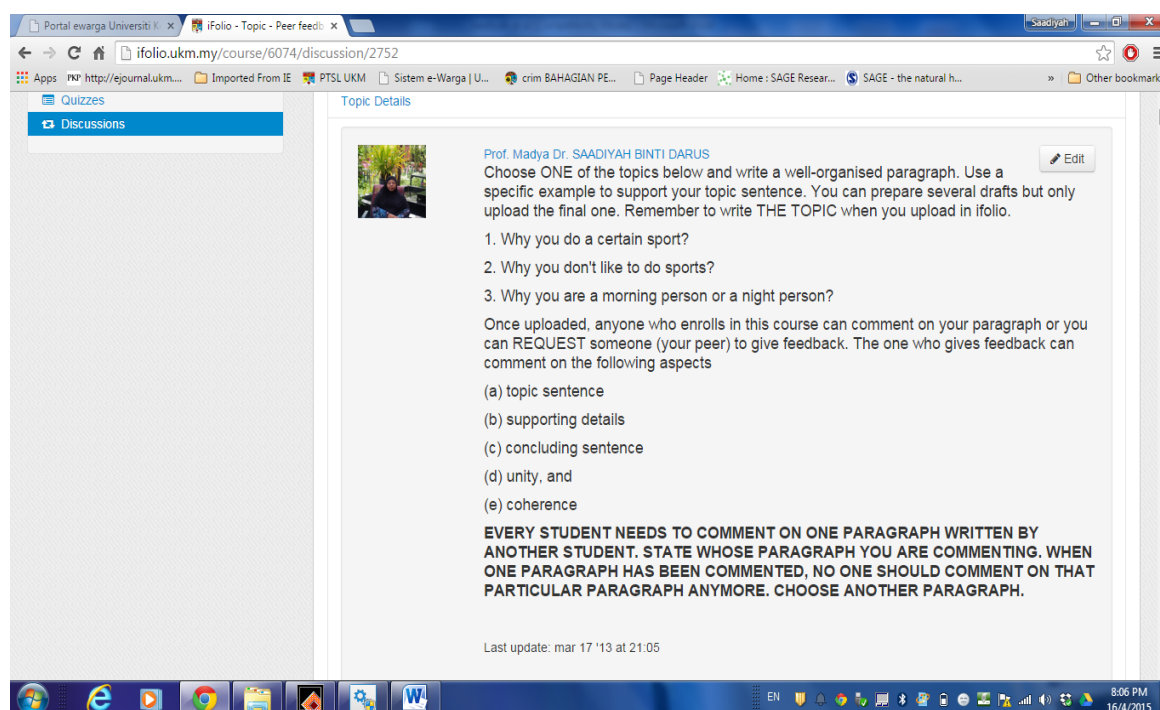


Figure 1: Interface of the given task in iFolio

The students were asked to post their final drafts (Essay 1) online in iFolio. Their peers were required to comment on Essay 1 using the same mode. These essays were then revised accordingly following the comments given by their peers. The revised essays (Essay 2) were posted again in iFolio. Altogether, these students wrote two essays using an electronic medium. The interface where one student commented on another student's Essay 1 is shown in Figure 2.

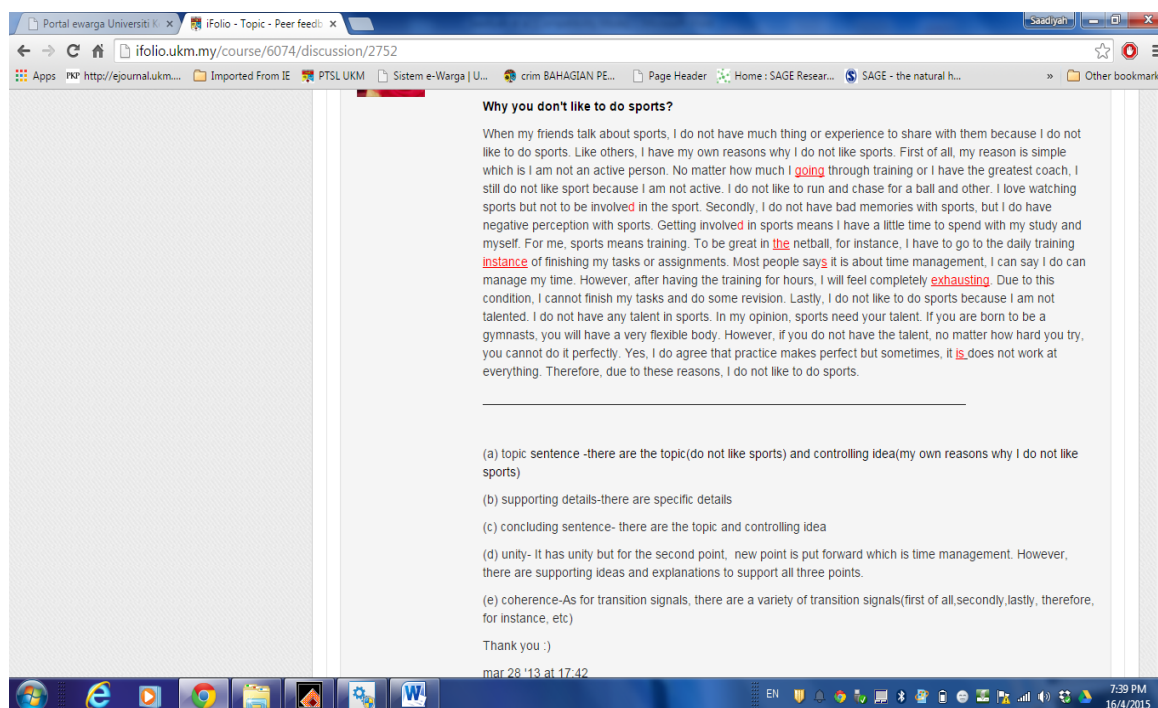


Figure 2: An interface where one student commented on another student's Essay 1.

Every student was able to see the responses of their peers in the discussion section and this should provide more comprehensible input (i+1) (Tricomi, 1986) on different types of sentences.

After that, researchers analysed the two sets of essays (Essay 1 and 2) according to types of sentences using Excel program. The percentage of simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and complex-compound sentences for each student's essay was calculated for Essay 1 and Essay 2. The results for analysis of essays produce answers to Research Question 1 and 2.

Seven (18%) students were selected randomly for interview based on their agreement to participate since the interviews were recorded. The students were S2, S8, S9, S11, S17, S30 and S38. Responses from these interviews were analysed qualitatively. The results give rise to the answers for Research Question 3 i.e. In what way does peer feedback in electronic medium improved their writing?

3. Results and discussion

Out of 40 students altogether which were designated as S1 until S40, 17 (43%) students chose the first topic (Why you do a certain sport?), 7 (17.5%) students chose the second topic (Why you don't like to do sports?) and 16 (40%) students chose the third topic (Why you are a morning person or a night person?).

Results from Analysis Of Essays

The percentage of simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and complex-compound sentences in Essay 1 is shown in Table 1. It answers research question 1.

Table 1
Sentences in the Original Essay (E1)

Types of sentences	No.	Percentage
Simple	186	32.6
Compound	38	6.7
Complex	269	47.0
Compound-complex	78	13.7
Total	571	100

Table 2 shows the percentage of simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and complex-compound sentences in Essay 2. This answers research question 2.

Table 2
Sentences in Revised Essay (E2)

Types of sentences	No.	Percentage
Simple	175	29.8
Compound	45	7.7
Complex	278	47.3
Compound-complex	89	15.2
Total	587	100

Table 3
Comparison of Number of Sentences in Original Essay (E1) and Revised Essay (E2)

Types of sentences	Original essay (E1)	Revised essay (E2)	Overall
Simple sentences	186	175	Decrease
Compound sentences	38	45	Increase
Complex sentences	269	278	Increase
Compound-complex	78	89	Increase
Total no. of sentences	571	587	Increase

The results show that overall, the number of simple sentences decreases, while the number of compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences increases.

Increased Number of Sentences

In general, the total numbers of sentences increased from 571 in original essays (Essay 1) to 587 in revised essays (Essay 2). The types of sentences that have increased are compound sentences, complex sentences and compound-complex sentences. The number of simple sentences has decreased. Although there is no drastic changes in terms of numbers but the changes as shown in Table 3 indicate that students are able to improve their writing if they are given some assistance.

From the 40 essays, 11 essays showed an increased number of sentences. In general, the most increased sentences are the complex sentences, whereas the number of simple sentences is reduced. From the data, it indicates that the highest number of sentences increased is from S24 (8 new sentences), followed by S28 and S31 with 7 new sentences each as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Essays that Show the Highest Number of Increased Sentences

Student	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)
	No. of simple	No. of simple	No. of compound	No. of compound	No. of complex	No. of complex	No. of compound-complex	No. of compound-complex	Total No. of sentences	Total No. of sentences
S24	4	6	0	0	8	11	0	3	12	20
S28	5	0	2	4	3	8	1	6	11	18
S31	7	7	0	2	7	8	0	4	14	21

When analysed closely these additional sentences are the move from the simple sentences to complex sentences, and to compound-complex sentences. For example:

Simple sentences		→	Complex sentences	
S1	S4E1: Bowling is one of the most popular sports in the world.		S4E2: majority of people know <i>that fact that bowling is one of the most popular sports in the world</i>	
S2	S7E1: Then I do not possess the adequate mingling and communication skills especially in sports.		S7E2: The other reason <i>why I do not enjoy sports as much as others</i> is that I do not possess the adequate mingling and communication skills especially in sports.	
Compound sentences		→	Compound-complex sentences	
S2	S11E1: All in all, it is not like I do not put much effort in playing sports; it is that I am really unlucky and awkward in sports and paying them in a team with other people.		S11E2: All in all, it is not like I do not put much effort in playing sports; it is that I am really unlucky and awkward in sports <i>when playing them in a team with other people</i> .	

In certain cases, although no movement to a different sentence level is observed, there is an increased number of sentences in the same sentence level. For example S5; in E1 there are only 2 simple sentences but the number of sentences increased in E2 to 5 sentences. This occurred due to either the sentences moved from the higher level to a lower level, or the sentence is moved to two sentences to form different sentence level. For example: complex sentence to simple sentence, and compound-complex sentence to simple sentence and complex sentence.

	Complex sentence →	Simple sentence	
S5	S1E1: I am the right person because I love doing things in tranquillity	S1E2: I am a night person for several reasons.	
	Compound-complex sentence →	Simple sentence →	Complex sentence
S4	S4E1: I am a night person because the wee hours of the morning are free of distractions and I can use these times to study and finish my assignments.	S4E2: I can use these times to study and finish my assignment.	S4E1: I am a night person because the wee hours of the morning are free of distractions.

When sentences are moved from higher level of sentence structure to a lower level, for example S4E1 to S4N2 and S4E1, the ideas are being simplified. The intention is to make the essay clearer and easy to understand. This movement implies that students are able to control and monitor their writing ability.

Decreased Number of Sentences

11 essays were found to be decreased in the number of sentences from E1 to E2. The essay of S18 shows the highest number of decrease in sentence number i.e. from 33 sentences to 19 sentences. This essay has a drastic reduction in the number of simple sentences (16 to 8) and complex sentences (12 to 6). This occurred because many sentences were omitted in E2 as shown in Table 5

Table 5
Examples of Essays with Decreased Number of Sentences

Stu- dent	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1	E2
	No. of simple	No. of simple	No. of compound	No. of compound	No. of complex	No. of complex	No. of compound- complex	No. of compound- complex	N Ss	N Ss
S 18	16	8	2	1	12	6	3	4	33	19
S 21	17	15	1	1	8	6	1	2	27	24

For example, simple sentences from S1, S2, S3, S8, S9, S11 and S24 were omitted and were not replaced with other sentences.

The ideas from these sentences were omitted totally. For example,

Simple sentences

S18 S1E1: I bet not all of you know about me.

S18 S2E1: On the outside, I am just a plain ordinary kampong boy with 24-hours tired faced.

Complex sentences

S18 S4E1: That lazy boy, I bet he's awake all night playing games, not doing his assignment and stuff.

S18 S31E1: There was this one time when I have to chase a group of peragut on foot because my bike broke down the earlier morning.

The data also indicated that the reduced number of sentences is due to the movement of combining two ideas and two levels of sentences to form one higher level of sentence. For example, simple sentence (S18 S14E1) and compound-complex sentence (S18 S15E1) to one complex sentence in E2.

Simple sentence + Compound-complex sentence → Compound-complex sentence

S18 S14E1 One day, my family and I went to a campfire in Taman Negara, Pahang

S15E1: During our sleep over there I don't know how in the world suddenly I got separated from them.

E2: Once, my family and I went to a campfire and during our sleep over there I don't know how in the world suddenly, I got separated from them at midnight.

No Change in Number of Sentences

22 essays were found with no changes in the number of sentences. The data indicated that the movement of sentences in these essays are not active. Although there are essays that show some movement but there are no changes in the number of sentences from E1 to E2. Examples of the data are shown in the Table 6.

Table 6
Examples of Essays With No Changes in The Number Of Sentences

Student	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1 (original essay)	E2 (revised essay)	E1	E2
	No. of simple	No. of simple	No. of compound	No. of compound	No. of complex	No. of complex	No. of compound- complex	No. of compound- complex	No. Ss	No. Ss
S14	5	6	0	0	11	10	0	0	16	16
S16	3	3	0	0	11	11	1	1	15	15
S19	1	1	0	0	10	10	2	2	13	13
S26	4	4	1	2	9	8	3	3	17	17

S27	6	6	2	2	7	7	2	2	17	17
S33	6	6	2	2	6	6	6	6	20	20
S35	2	2	1	1	10	10	4	4	17	17
S37	8	7	2	2	7	8	1	1	18	18

Almost all essays that have no changes in the number of sentences also do not display any movement in level of sentence for example S16 and S27. Based on the essays, it shows that there is no indication of any initiative on the students' part to improve on their writing. The revised essays (E2) were submitted exactly similar to the original essays (E1), although sufficient time was given to increase the quality of the essay.

Although it is not very obvious, but sentence movements are also seen in this category. The examples are as shown below:

A move in the same sentence level. One essay shows that there is a move in the essay, however the move is in the same sentence level and it is not a move to a more advance sentence level. In addition, new information or ideas are added to the sentence to produce a longer and more constructive sentence. For example:

Complex sentence → **Complex sentence**

S19 S13E1: In conclusion, there are several reasons as to why I like night time; reasons that make me a night person.
S13E2: In conclusion, there are several reasons as to why I like night time, which are its tranquillity, its natural values, its comfortability, and its darkness; reasons that make me a night person.

A move to different sentence level. Although the number of sentences in E2 does not increase from E1, there are movement in the level of sentences. Some examples are as follows:

Complex sentence → **Compound sentence**

S26 S5E1: I just focused on the next sparring techniques that I need to do to win it.
S5E2: I just focused on the next sparring techniques I need to do to win it.

Simple sentence → **Complex sentence**

S37 S18E1: In short, being a morning person helps to increase my productivity
S18E1: In short, I chose to be a morning person because I can see the positive effects on my life.

Complex sentence → **Simple sentence** → **Complex sentence**

S14 S14E1 While sweating, an organ in the body release the hormone endorphine which induced the feeling of happiness and reduce stress.
S14E2: Examples of effects of endorphins are the feeling of happiness and reducing stress.
S13E2 The hormone endorphine is produced whenever a person is playing any kind of sport.

Results from Interviews

The interviews with seven students were conducted in order to answer Research Question 3 which is: In what way does peer feedback in electronic medium improved their writing?

The transcripts of each student are shown below.

S2: I think because it's fast, it gives you first-hand information and maybe can let you see what others are commenting, and you don't actually have to waste time meeting them face to face, so electronic commenting like this is really beneficial because eventually we want fast answers and fast results and we want to make things correct faster and we want to do it in instant. So basically, electronic commenting like this I think it's really good because students can learn faster and know what they're making mistake about and they can fix it basically on the spot or instantly.

S8: In improving my writing, I think after we published our paragraph and then by using iFolio, people can read it, can comment it and give their opinion on it. So actually, it helps me as the writer to improve more in my writing.

S9: Well, first of all, it's very convenient because she can review my paragraph from her room and I can read her review from my room so that's convenient. And I think convenience is the number one aspect because it helps me as student because if we need to see personally, then one of us might not have the time. Like maybe she's free but I'm not. Maybe I'm free but she's not. So that's about it I think.

S11: I think discussion is really helpful. All the discussion that has been posted in iFolio has been really helpful. But then the peer commenting that has been conducted – I think that wasn't really helpful because not many students are giving their proper or honest comments. Apart from that, other discussion that has been posted like 'The Type of Sentences', 'Final Paragraphs' to review our paragraphs back, that has been really helpful for me to know in detail what really are the type of sentences. As before, I wasn't that good in differentiating that kind of sentences.

S17: Emm... It's quite helpful in a way that we can see, not only our comments, but others comments as well. So we learn not only from our mistakes, but others. It's kind of like a reminder overall.

S30: I think it's very helpful because for example, for this task, we need to write a paragraph in that iFolio, so we upload our paragraph and then our friends will comment it. And our lecturer will upload any files or any task that they want to give to us, and it's very helpful for me rather than just give it manually so that we can always click it open, then we can close it.

S38: I think it is. It does bring benefits not only to me but to all of my friends because it's convenient for us. We don't have to go and meet them, you know it's like wasting our time to go and meet them. We can just sit in front of our laptops, switch on the Internet and then we can just start writing and then they can just comment it in few minutes after we finished writing our paragraph. So it's quite fast rather than you have to wait for the bus or go to your friend's room, and comment on your paragraph or essay. I think this is more convenient for students to learn this way.

The results show that by getting online feedback from their peers, the students find it very beneficial as it can improve their writing. They can read their peers' comments over a period of time in a more conducive manner and understand it better. They can revise their essays instantly because it is convenient, fast, and easily accessible.

Conclusion

Electronic peer feedback is one way of encouraging students to become better writers.—Previously for Written Communication course, students did most of the exercises on types of sentences in the textbook. By using the electronic medium, they were more exposed to variety of sentences and received more comprehensible input (i+1) from their peers. As expected, we observed enhanced ability and usage of variety of sentences in their writing. ESL learners' ability to use a variety of sentences in their writing is important as it reflects their writing maturity. Using many and only simple sentences may not be appropriate for academic writing because it is more suitable for childrens' books. ESL learners need to learn how to 'pitch' their academic writing so that it is appropriate for a specific audience.

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