

Exploring EFL Learners' Strategies of How They Improve the Process of Their Writing Assignments

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Abstract

The authors of this study teach English in a Japanese university and give writing assignments for EFL learners as part of their assessment. Although EFL learners are given enough time to finish their writing assignments, they do not tend to ask teachers to give feedback on their writing drafts before they submit their final assessment copy. The aim of this study is to explore EFL learners' strategies of how they improve the process of their writing assignments before they submit their final writing production. In particular, this study examines how long learners spent on writing their final papers and whether they seek feedback from teachers on their writing drafts. This study used questionnaires about the process of students' assignment writing for the data collection. The total of 415 responses was collected from both 1st and 2nd year university students. The data is mainly analyzed quantitatively, however a qualitative approach is also adopted in order to analyze open-ended questions on our questionnaires. The results show that most students showed their writing drafts to others (including their teachers and classmates) before they submitted their final drafts. Interestingly, although nearly 70% of participants admitted that their teachers' feedback was the most reliable feedback, nearly 50% of participants actually showed their drafts to their friends instead of their teachers.

Keywords: Writing feedback, peer feedback, EFL,

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Introduction

Writing tasks are often given to university students as one of their assessments. The authors of this study adopt PBL (Project Based Learning) to their English classes. Under PBL, students decide their research topic in the beginning of the semester and they research their topics either individually or in a small group. At the end of the semester, they need to submit their final paper. In order to assist the process of writing the final paper, homework is given to students each week and therefore, if students consistently and conscientiously do their homework each week, they are able to write their final paper easily. However, some students tend to submit high quality final papers but others do not. The aim of this study is to explore EFL learners' strategies of how they improve the process of their writing assignments before they submit their final writing production. In order to collect the data, questionnaires were used and 13 questions were asked in total. Participants of this study were students of a private university in Japan and were majoring in sport and health science. The total of 415 responses was collected from both 1st and 2nd year university students. The data is mainly analyzed quantitatively and also qualitative approach is adopted, in order to analyze open-ended questions on our questionnaires.

Literature review

Receiving feedback on written drafts is one of the learners' strategies to improve the quality of their writing. There are two types of feedback in general. Feedback from teachers to students and feedback between students, which is often called peer feedback. Firstly, feedback from teachers to students is discussed and then peer feedback is discussed.

Feedback

Nicol (2009) for example, explains that as long as learners are motivated in improving their writing skills, learners value their teachers' feedback on their writing tasks. Teachers' comments particularly help explain gaps in understanding of how to write their essays and suggest ways of how to improve their writing tasks. Hattie and Timperley (2007) also explain feedback influences on learners' learning and their achievement. For example, learners may develop a skill such as error detection, which is the ability to find errors by themselves in their writing through teachers' feedback. Teachers can support learners to clarify their goals, enhancing their commitment and their efforts through teachers' feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2007) point out that feedback by the teacher is a key element for learners to build their confidence and the literacy resources to participate in target communities. The authors of this study try to give students feedback once they submit their homework. However, as Gibbs, Simpson, Gravestock, and Hills (2005) point out, it is difficult for teachers to give feedback individually in a big size class. In large classes, teachers' workload increases and each student's feedback tends to be simple. The authors of this study in fact taught nearly 10 classes, of which each class had about 25 students in one semester. In order to reduce the amount of teachers' workload, peer feedback can be used in class (Nicol, 2010).

Peer feedback

Before discussing peer feedback, it is important to make clear the terms “Peer feedback” and “Peer assessment”. Liu and Carless (2006, p280) explain the difference between these two terms. Peer feedback is a communication process used by learners in order to improve their understanding and learning, while peer assessment is to grade their performance using relevant criteria. This study focuses on examining peer feedback since the data of this study only involves peer feedback aspects.

Peer feedback often works well in order to improve students’ performance. Rollinson (2005), for instance, explains that peer feedback among learners is often delivered informally while teachers’ feedback is often given to students in formal circumstance. Also under such circumstance, learners who received peer feedback can easily reject feedback comments from their peers and learners can make their own decisions whether they keep their own texts or not. Miao, Badger and Zhen (2006) found that teachers’ feedback were more highly valued than peer feedback from their EFL students. However, EFL students admitted the importance of peer feedback which made an improvement in their writing and which encouraged their motivation to learn independently (Miao et al., 2006).

Academic support center

Accessing an academic support center is useful for EFL learners to improve their writing draft. Although there are not many universities which have an academic support in Japan, for example, Tokyo University of the Arts has an academic learning support which is called “a global support center” (http://www.geidai.ac.jp/department/center/global_support_center) and provides some programs to their students. Support staff state they do not proof read or edit students’ writing products for their students. Instead, they try to give their students some linguistic and grammatical suggestions on their writing products in order to improve the quality of writing products. Hokkaido University also has an academic learning support which is called “Eigo Writing Clinic” (http://asc.high.hokudai.ac.jp/office/resource/ec/ec_ewc.php). Their students submit their writing products and native speakers of English check and make comments on students’ writing. Support staff check not only grammar & structures of students’ English, but they also check whether students’ English is naturally written or not. As well as Tokyo University of the Arts global learning center, the learning support center of Hokkaido University does not offer a proof reading or editing service to their students. It tries to teach their students how they can independently improve their writing.

Methodology

English classes

All participants were learning English through a project/problem-solving based learning (PBL) method. Under the PBL, participants needed to set up their project topic in the beginning of the semester and research their project throughout the semester in English. Writing a final paper was one of participants’ assessments. In

this study, all first year students did their project individually but all second year students conducted one project in a small group (3 or 4 people each group). The aims of classes between the first year students and the second year students were different. The table below shows the details of each class.

P2 (1 st year students' class)	P4 (2 nd year student's class)
✓ Individual project work	✓ A small group project work
✓ Focus on basic research skills	✓ Focus on academic research skills
✓ Weekly homework	✓ Weekly homework
✓ Two presentations	✓ Two presentations
✓ Writing assessment (20%)	✓ Writing assessment (25%)

Data collection

In order to collect data, questionnaires were used. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed to the participants in one of the authors' classes and the participants wrote their answers on the papers. All questions were asked in Japanese to participants in this study since participants' English level varied. Once the data was collected, all answers were translated into English by the authors of this study. The data was collected in 2014. The total of 415 participants answered questionnaires but there was no answer to some questions by some participants. Therefore, depending on a question, the total numbers of answers are shown differently. For the first year students, there were 124 male and 92 female participants. For the second year students, 129 male and 70 female students participated in this study.

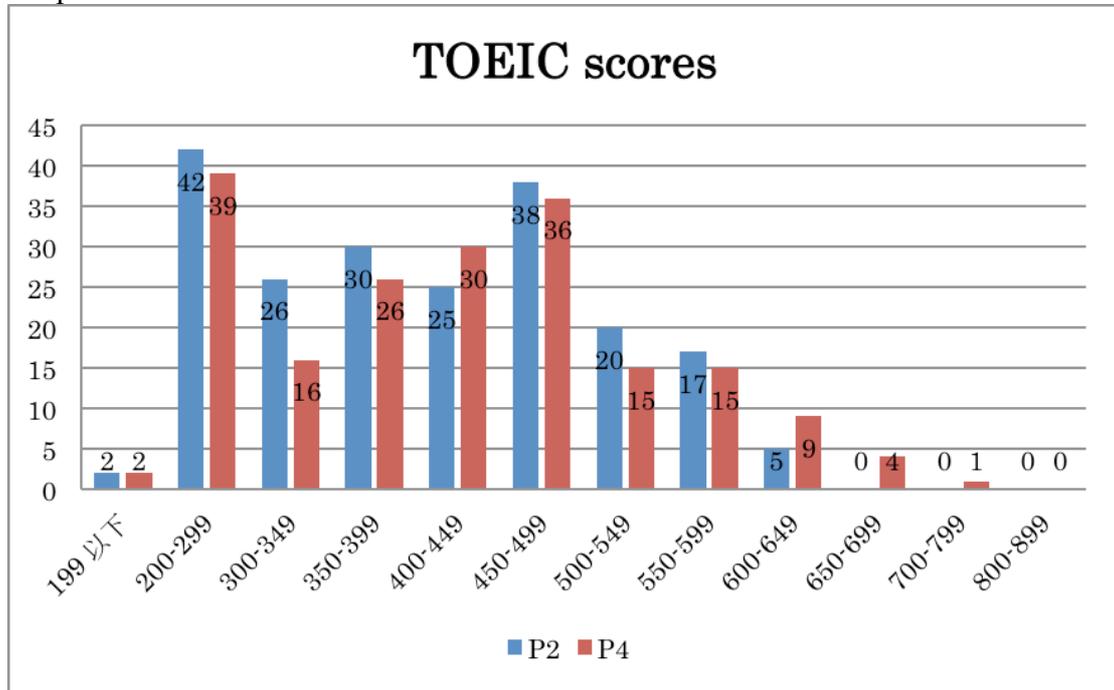
Participants

The participants in this study were both first and second year students in the private university in Japan. They were majoring in sport and health science but studied English as one of their compulsory subjects.

Results

Results of Q2

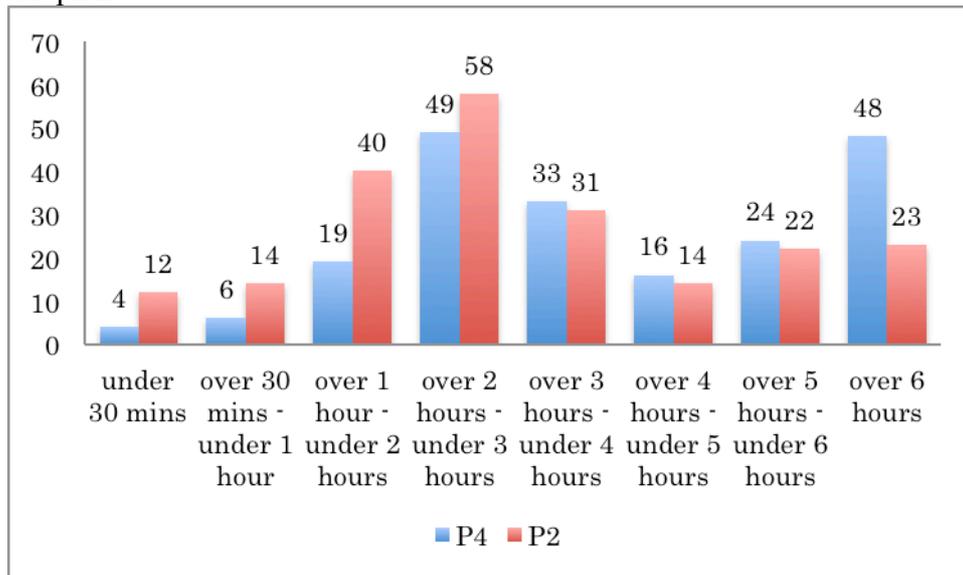
Graph 1



Results of Q2 show that the average TOEIC score of P2 is 401 and of P4 is 415. The second year students' TOEIC score is slightly higher than the first year students.

Results of Q4: How long did you spend on your final paper?

Graph 2

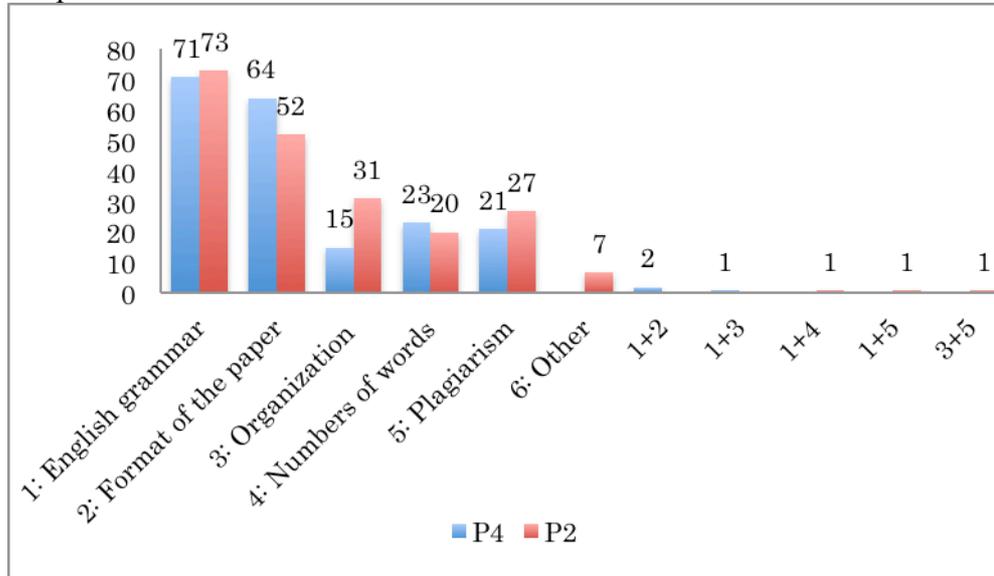


25% (N=49) of P4 students spent between 2 and 3 hours on making their final paper. Surprisingly, 27% (N=48) of P4 spent over 6 hours on making their final paper. As for P2 students, 27% (N=58) of P2 students spent between 2 and 3 hours on their final

paper. 19% (N=40) of P2 students spent between 1 and 2 hours on their final paper. While 25% (N=49) of P4 students spent over 6 hours, only 11 % (N=23) of P2 students spent over 6 hours on their final paper.

Results of Q5: What was the most difficult part for you when you wrote your final paper?

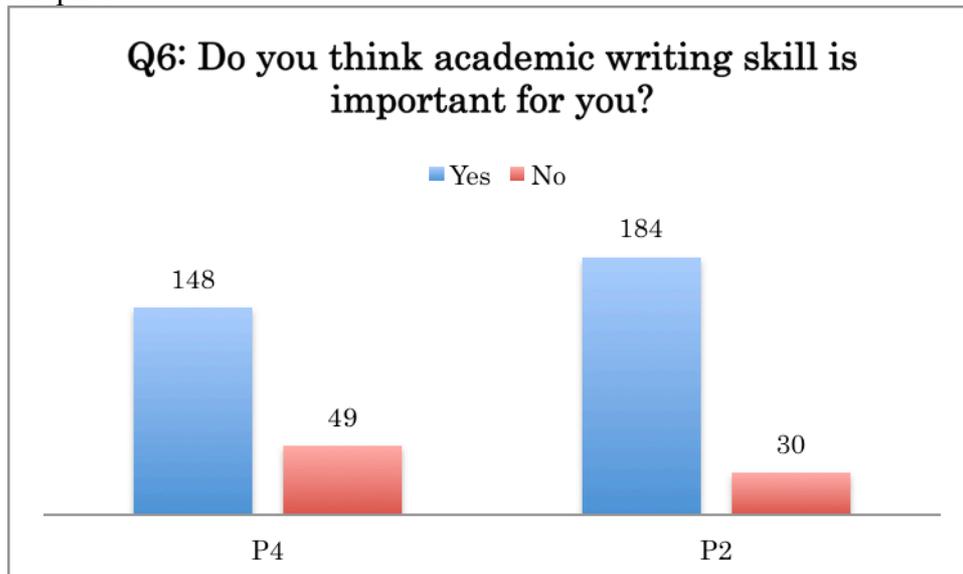
Graph 3



The most popular answers of both P4 and P2 students are English grammar (36%: n=71) and Format of the paper (32%: n=73).

Results of Q6

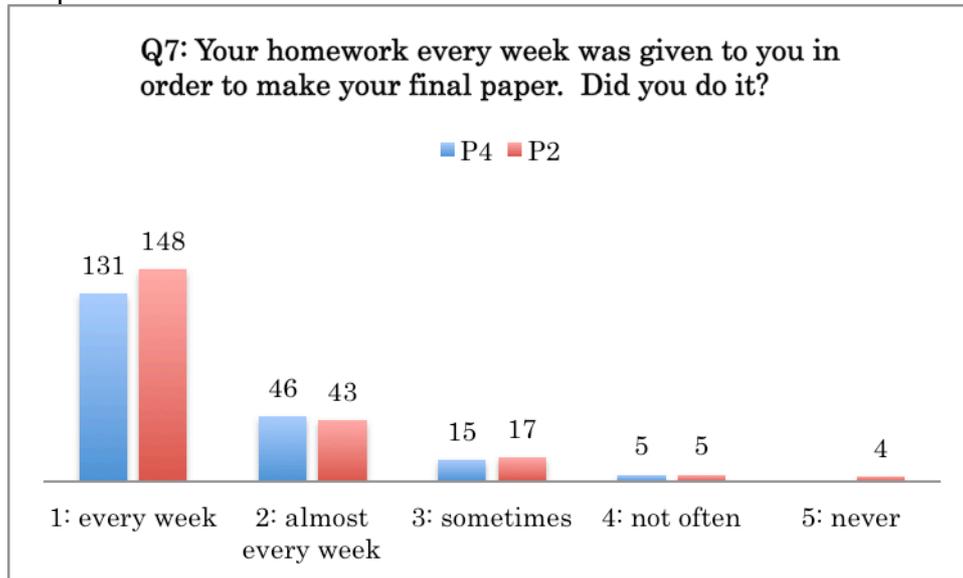
Graph 4



While 75% (n=148) of P4 students and 84% of P2 (n=184) students answered that academic writing skill was important for them, 25% (n=49) of P4 and 14% (n=30) of P2 students did not think academic writing skill was important for them.

Results of Q7

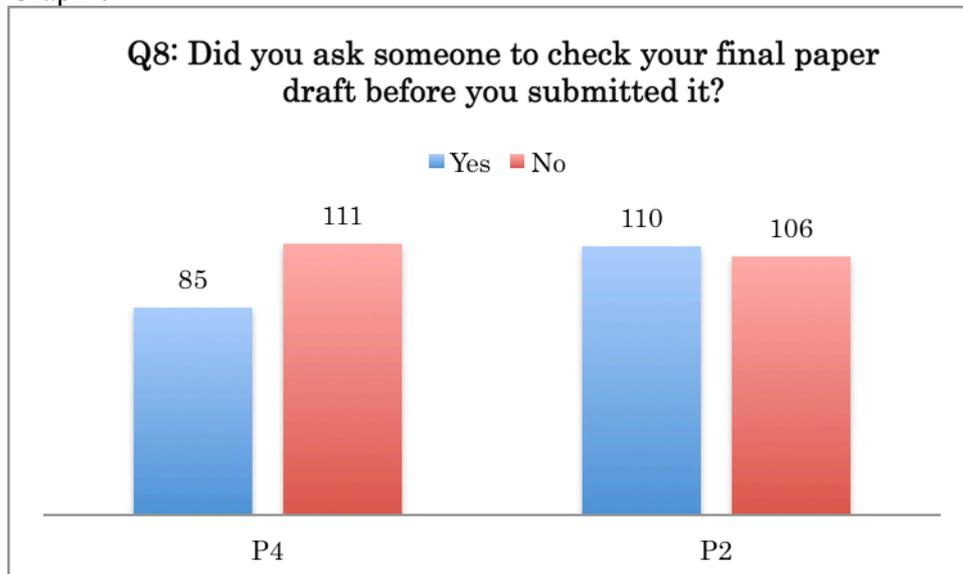
Graph 5



Results of Q7 show the frequency of homework per week. The majority of both P4 and P2 students did their homework seriously. 66% (n=131) of P4 students answered that they did their homework every week and 23% (n=46) of P4 students did their homework almost every week. 68% (n=148) of P2 students did their homework every week and 20% (n=43) of P2 students did their homework almost every week.

Results of Q8

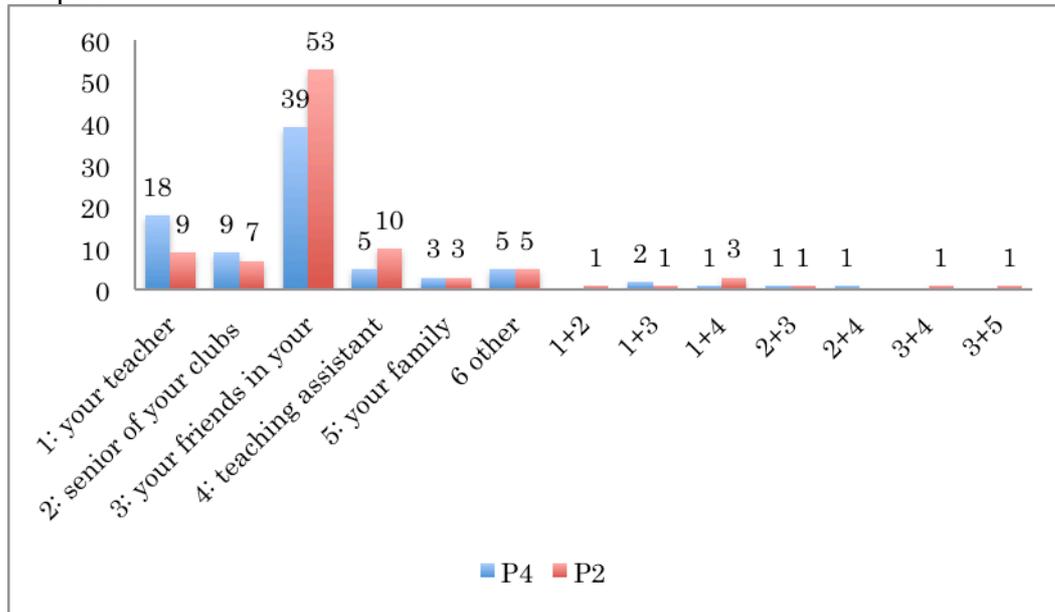
Graph 6



Results of Q8 show whether students showed their drafts of the final papers to someone before they submitted it by the deadline. 43% (n=85) of P4 students asked someone to review their final papers while 57% (n=111) of P4 students did not do it. 51% (n=110) of P2 students showed their final papers to someone while 49% (n=106) of P2 students did not do it.

Results of Q9: If you answered yes on Q8, then who did you ask?

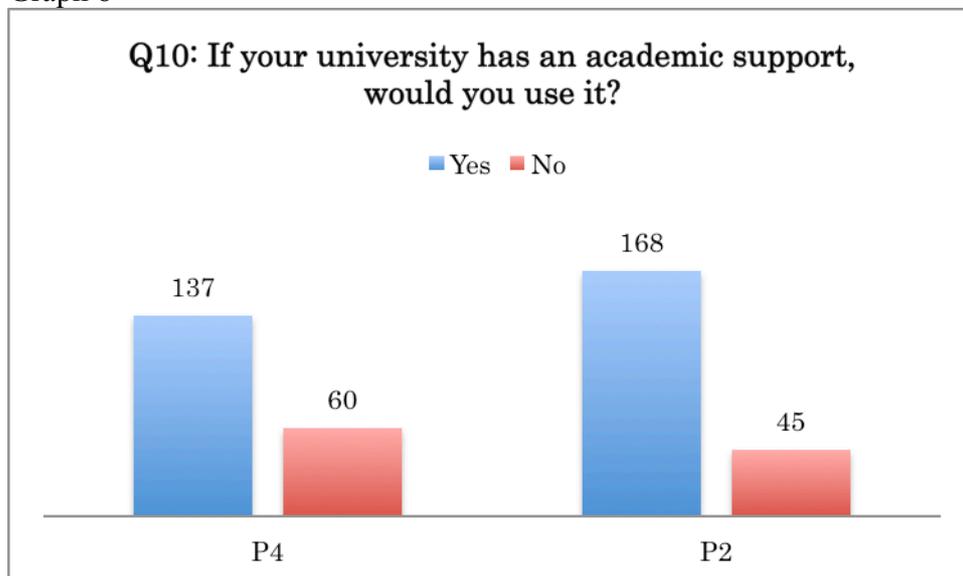
Graph 7



The majority of both P4 (47%: n=39) and P2 (56%: n=53) students showed their final paper drafts to their friends. Only 21% (n=18) of P4 and 10% (n=9) of P2 students showed their final paper drafts to their teachers.

Results of Q10

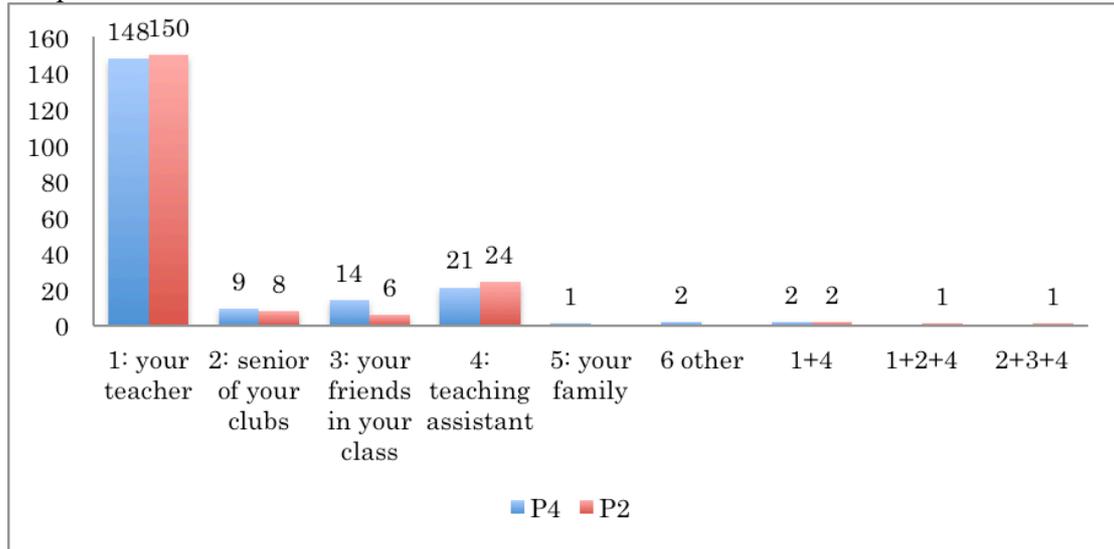
Graph 8



Results of Q10 show whether the participants use an academic support or not whether it is available or not. In P4, 70% (n=137) of participants answered they would use it and in P2, 79% (n= 168) of the participants answered that they would use it.

Q11: Who do you think you want to get advice from for writing your final paper?

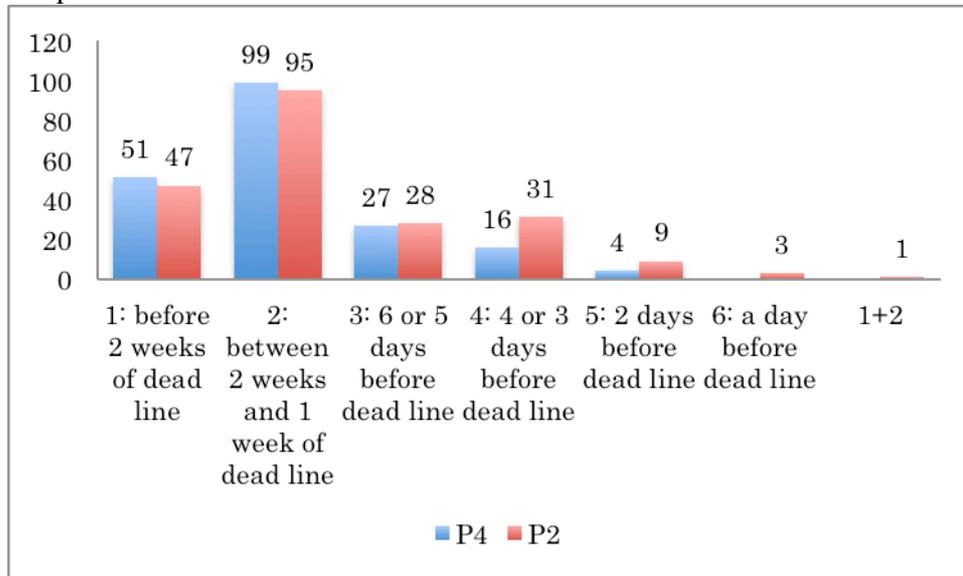
Graph 9



The results of Q11 show that 75% (n=148) of P4 and 78% (n=150) of P2 students answered they wanted to get advice from their teachers. Then 11% (n=21) of P4 and 12% (n=24) of P2 students answered advice from their teaching assistants. Compared to the results of Q9 (Who did you ask?), there is a trend that students want to get advice from teachers as the results of Q11 showed, but they, in fact, did not tend to show their writing drafts to their teachers. Instead, they tend to show their writing drafts to their friends as the results of Q9 showed.

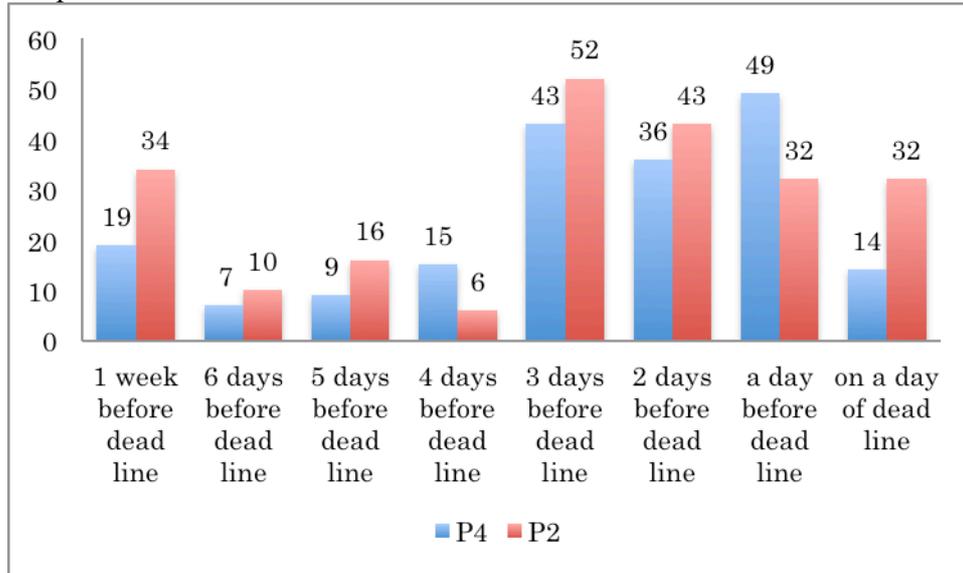
Q12: When did you start writing your final paper?

Graph 10



Q13: When did you finish writing your final paper?

Graph 11



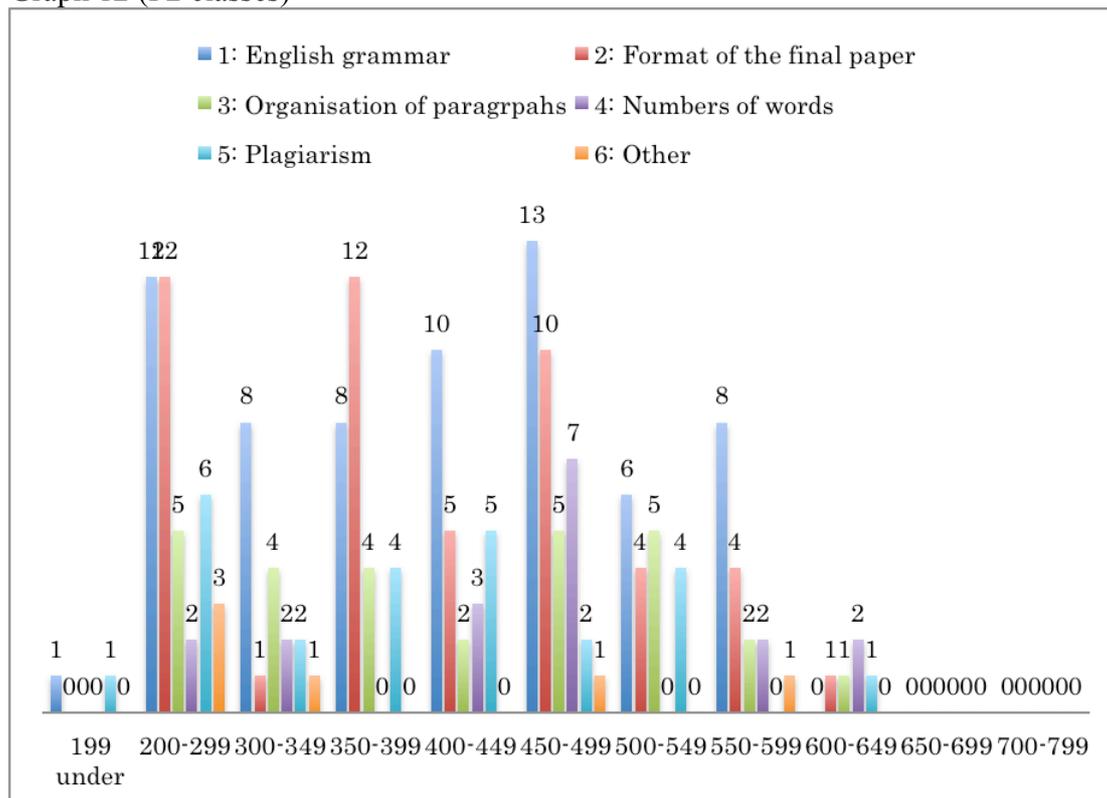
Both graphs 10 and 11 show the results of Q12 and Q13. The most popular answer of when participants started writing their final paper was between two weeks and one week before the deadline (P4, N=99: 50%, P2, N=95: 44%). The second popular answer was “before two weeks of the deadline” (P4, N=51: 26%, P2, N=47: 22%). There were few participants answered either “two days before of the deadline” (P4, N=4: 2%, P2, N=9: 4%) or “a day before of the deadline” (P2, N=3: 1%).

On the contrary, the graph 11 shows when the participants finished writing their final papers. In P4 classes, the most popular answer was “a day before the deadline” (N=49: 25%) and then “three days before” (N= 43: 22%) comes next. In P2 classes, the most popular answer was “three days before the deadline” (N=52: 23%) and then “two days before the deadline” (N=43: 19%) comes next. Interestingly, 10% (N=19) of P4 participants and 15% (N=34) of P2 participants answered that they finished their final papers one week before the deadline.

Results of relationship between participants and their TOEIC scores

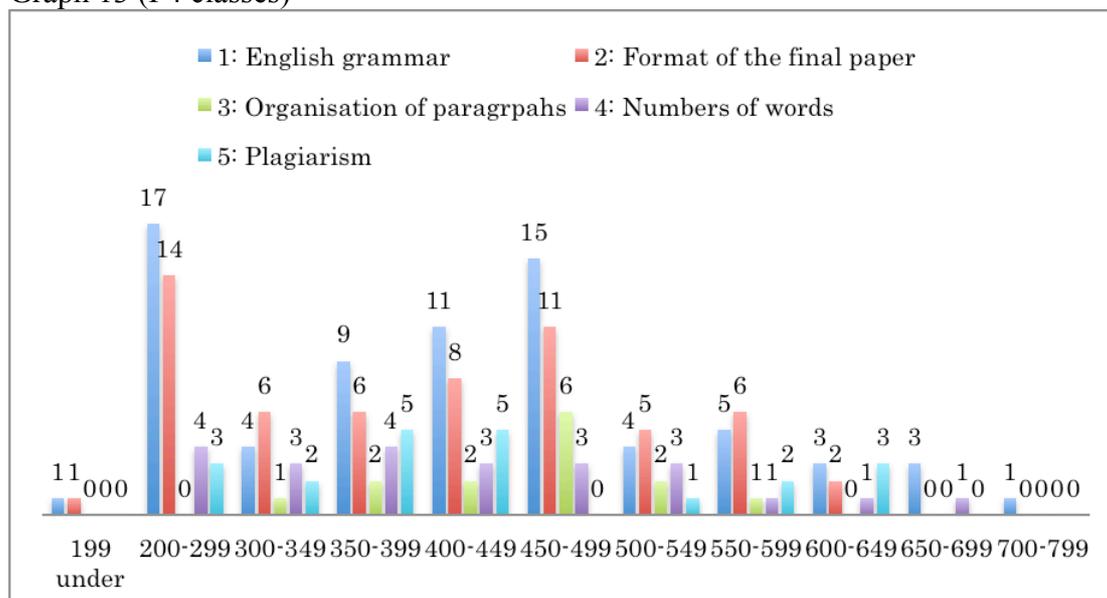
Graphs 12, 13 and 14, and Tables 2 and 3 show the results of some questions with participants’ TOEIC scores. To start with, graph 12 shows that the relationship between participants’ TOEIC scores and results of Q5 (What was the most difficult part for you when you wrote your final paper?) in P2 classes.

Graph 12 (P2 classes)



There is a trend among participants that four categories were important for them such as “English grammar”, “Format of the final paper”, “Organization of the paper” and “Plagiarism”. However, participants in between TOEIC 200 and 249 thought both “English grammar” and “Format of the final paper” were important, while participants in between TOEIC 300 and 599, except in between TOEIC 350 and 399, thought “English grammar” was more important than “Format of the final paper”. Participants in between TOEIC 600 and 649 thought “Numbers of the words” was more important than “English grammar” and “Format of the final paper”.

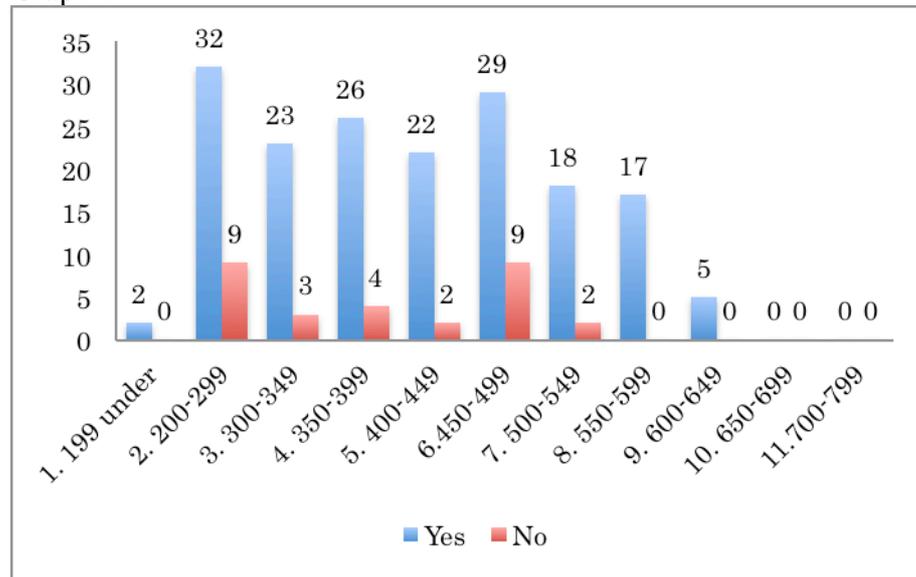
Graph 13 (P4 classes)



The graph above shows the results of the relationship between participants' TOEIC scores of Q5 in P4 classes. Participants in between 200 and 649 thought both "English grammar" and "Format of the final paper" were more important than "Organization of the paper", "Plagiarism" and "Numbers of words". In particular, Participants in between TOEIC 200 and 299 (N=17) strongly thought both "English grammar" and "Format of the final paper" were important to them compared to other participants who achieved higher TOEIC scores. Interestingly, although there are not many participants, there were some who answered "plagiarism" was important for them.

Q6: Do you think academic writing skill is important for you?

Graph 14



In graph 14, there is a trend that those who have under TOEIC 500 see academic writing skill as important in general. Among these participants, in particular, those who have TOEIC between 200 and 299 (N=32) placed the highest value on the importance of academic writing skill.

Table 2 (P4)

TOEIC Scores (P4)	200-299	300-349	350-399	400-449	450-499	500-549	550-599	600-649	650-699
Hours on average of the Final Paper	7	4~5	6	4~5	3~4	5~6	5~6	4~5	2~3

Table 2 shows the relationship between TOEIC scores and how much time participants of this study spent for their final paper in P4 classes. As the authors of this study predicted, those who have TOEIC 200 to 299 spent the longest (7 hours) while those who have TOEIC 650 to 699 spent the shortest (2 or 3 hours). However,

for those who have TOEIC 300 to 649, hours they spent vary. Thus it is hard to conclude that those who have lower TOEIC scores tend to spend longer in their writing and neither, those who have higher TOEIC scores tend to spend shorter in their writing.

Table 3 (P2)

TOEIC Scores (P2)	200-299	300-349	350-399	400-449	450-499	500-549	550-599	600-649	650-699
Hours on average of the Final Paper	1 - 2	0.5-1	0.5-1	0.5-1	2 - 3	0.5	0.5	0.25	0

Table 3 shows the relationship between TOEIC scores and how long participants of this study spent for their final paper in P2 classes. Unlike P4 classes, participants in P2 classes tend to spend fewer hours for their final papers. This is because P2 classes have a different course structure from P4. In P2 classes, students are learning basic research skills in English while P4 classes aim to teach academic writing.

Discussions

First of all, as both graphs 12 and 13 showed, there was a trend that those who have lower TOEIC scores tend to want to get advice on “English grammar” on their final papers. This result suggests what kind of feedback teachers should be giving to their students. At the same time, this result suggests teachers have a problem when peer feedback is introduced in classes. When teachers try to use peer feedback among those who have lower English skills, students might find it difficult to correct grammatical errors for each other.

Second of all, as the results of Q8 (Did you ask someone to check your final paper draft before you submitted it?) showed that nearly the half of the participants in this study (P4: 57% and P2: 49%) did not ask anyone to check their final papers before they submitted their assignments. The reason of this phenomenon is explained by the results of Q13 (When did you finish writing your final paper?). As the graph 11 showed, many participants in this study finished their final papers within three days before the deadline. In addition, both the results of Q 11 and 12 showed-76% of P4 and 66% of P2 students started writing their final papers two weeks before the deadline. Based on these results, many students tend to take a long time to write their final papers although they started writing their final papers in advance. Because of it, they did not tend to have enough time to have checked their final papers before the deadline. Furthermore, in P4 classes in particular, as the table 2 shows, there was a trend that those who had lower TOEIC scores tended to spend longer to finish their final papers. In both P2 and P4 classes, the authors of this study also gave their students homework to complete every week. One of the aims of giving students homework every week is to simplify the task of writing their final papers by breaking it down into smaller tasks. Thus if students do homework every week seriously, then they would have enough time to finish writing their final papers. In fact, the results of

Q7 (Your homework every week was given to you in order to make your final paper. Did you do it?) showed that the majority of students did their homework. However, they still did not tend to have time to have checked their final papers before the deadline.

Third of all, the results of Q9 (if you showed your final paper, then who did you ask?) revealed that the majority of participants (P4: 47% and P2: 56%) in this study showed their final papers to their friend while only both 21% of P4 and 10% of P2 participants showed their final papers to their teachers. However, the results of Q11 (Who do you think you want to get advice for making your final paper?) showed that the majority of both P4 students (75%) and P2 students (78%) answered that they wanted to get advice from their teachers. There is a gap between what participants wanted and what they actually did in seeking feedback. Tsui and Ng (2000) found the teachers' feedback was preferred. They explain that teachers' feedback gave students more confidence because teachers were more experienced, authoritative and gave better quality comments than their peers. Trahasch (2004) also found students did not believe in feedback by their peers while they believed in the feedback from their tutors and teachers. Participants in this study also preferred teachers' feedback to peer feedback as the result showed. However, Gibbs et al. (2005) points out the problem of teachers' workload in giving feedback to students. Giving feedback to individuals depends on the class size. As the class size increases, teachers' workload also increases. Teachers tend to be very busy and it is often difficult for them to give individual feedback on students' writing. The authors of this study in fact had 10 classes per semester. Each class had between 25 and 30 students and thus teachers often have limited time to deal with individual students. Thus, it might be difficult for participants in this study to try to find their teachers to get some comments on their writing drafts before the deadline of the final paper. In addition, there is a positive side of peer feedback which can explain a reason why the participants of this study used their friends to get feedback. Tsui and Ng (2000) point out peer feedback encourages collaborative learning among students. Students had the opportunity to clarify and to negotiate their writing products more effectively. In P4 classes in this study in particular, students were asked to do small group projects and therefore peer feedback made it easier for the participants easy to enhance the quality of their writing drafts.

Implications

Firstly, the results of both graphs 12 and 13 showed, to satisfy learners' needs of peer feedback, teachers need to pay attention to how groups for peer feedback are formed. As Rollinson (2005) and Miao, Badger and Zhen (2006) explained the effectiveness of peer feedback on writing, the authors of this study admitted effectiveness of peer feedback to improve the quality of the final papers. However, in order to maximize students' expectation as both graphs 12 and 13 showed, it is important for teachers to consider members of a group for peer feedback.

Secondly, the results of both graphs 10 and 11 showed participants of this study tended to spend longer finishing their final papers. To support learners' time for their final papers, improving the quality of weekly homework is important for learners to have enough time to show and received feedback on their writing drafts before the deadline. The authors of this study gave their students weekly homework which was

aimed at assisting writing their final papers. Many of the participants of this study in fact did their homework every week but they did not tend to have enough time for getting some advice on their final papers before they submitted. Therefore, teachers need to ensure the quality of weekly homework of learners and encourage learners to do homework seriously.

Finally, as both results of Q9 and Q11 showed, there was a gap between what participants wanted and what they actually did regarding feedback for their writing. Students expect to get advice from their teachers but teachers tend to be busy which often makes it difficult to give individual feedback. In order to solve this problem, the authors of this study encourage both teachers and students to use academic support service if it is available. Hendriksen et al. (2005) found that students who utilized their academic support center and had tutoring sessions earned better final results in their course on average. Thus when academic support service is effectively used for students, teachers' workload will be reduced but students still can access some advice on their writing drafts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to investigate EFL learners' strategies of how they improved the process of their writing assignments before they submitted their final written assignments. Firstly, this study found the participants who had lower TOEIC scores tended to get advice on "English grammar" for their final papers. Secondly, the results of this study found that the participants of this study tended to spend longer to finish their final papers. Nearly half of the participants in this study started writing their final papers two weeks before the submission deadline but many participants finished writing their final papers within three days before the deadline. Thirdly, the results of this study revealed that participants preferred teachers' feedback to their peer feedback. However, the majority of the participants of this study, in fact, showed their final paper drafts to their peers instead of teachers. To support learners of English, the authors of this study suggest three implications. Firstly, it is important to consider the levels of learners' English skills when teachers give their learners' feedback. Secondly, to give learners enough time for writing their final papers, it is important for teachers to check the quality of weekly homework that supports completion of these final assignments. Lastly, to satisfy learners' needs of feedback, using an academic support service for learners is recommended. This study was limited to exploring learners' writing strategies in PBL English classes. Within the PBL English classes, learning writing skills as well as participating in presentations and discussions is utilized to improve students' English skills. In the future, examining learners' writing strategies in the other types of English classes, such as English writing classes, might show a different result from this study.

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Appendix

Questions on questionnaires

Q1: Are you a man or woman?

Q2: Please tell us your TOEIC score

Q3: What year are you in?

Q4: How long did you spend on your final paper?

Q5: What was the most difficult part for you when you wrote your final paper?

Q6: Do you think academic writing skill is important for you?

Q7: Your homework every week was given to you in order to make your final paper.
Did you do it?

Q8: Did you ask someone to check your final paper draft before you submitted it?

Q9: If you answered yes on Q8, then who did you ask?

Q10: If your university has an academic support, would you use it?

Q11: Who do you think you want to get advice for making your final paper?

Q12: When did you start writing your final paper?

Q13: When did you finish writing your final paper?