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Examining the Impact of WhatsApp-Aided Peer-Review Technique on EFL Students' Paragraph Writing Skills

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Abstract

WhatsApp is one of the most influential online applications in use today. The present study examines the effectiveness of the WhatsApp-Aided Peer-Review Technique (WAPRT) in enhancing the writing abilities of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia. The study aims to measure the significance of improvement following the WAPRT intervention, gauge students' entry-level writing proficiency, and assess the efficacy of the method from the viewpoint of educators. Data was gathered from 16 participants' electronic surveys and pre- and post-test writing assignments using a quasi-experimental design. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including t-tests, revealed a statistically significant improvement in writing skills ($p = .000$) that supports the efficacy of WAPRT. Writing anxiety of the students was slightly reduced but was not statistically significant ($p = .140$). The findings recognize WAPRT as an effective tool for promoting EFL writing skills, particularly in collaborative and technology-enabled learning conditions. The study calls for the integration of positive peer-review practices within classrooms, training teachers on how to leverage WhatsApp to support writing instruction, and exploring other online spaces for the same interventions. This study contributes to the growing body of research on technology-enhanced language learning and offers practical insights for EFL teachers seeking innovative ways to enhance students' writing. By enhancing EFL students' writing skills, the study contributes to their academic success, employment, and overall quality of life in a technology-driven world.

***Keywords*:** Efficacy, paragraph writing, peer-review, quasi-experimental, University of Ha'il, WhatsApp-Aided

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Introduction

WhatsApp has been widely investigated as a popular platform in the EFL learning. Learners of English as foreign language (EFL) perceive WhatsApp as a rich setting for interaction, communication, socialization, cultural exchange, and language learning (Ulla & Perales, 2021). According to Ulla and Perales (2021, p. 2), "Whatsapp may offer a good alternative for classroom-based teaching" as it "may also promote interaction among teachers and students" (p. 2). When compared with traditional learning, WhatsApp-based learning has a significant impact on developing students' intercultural communication. Furthermore, WhatsApp has the potential to develop students' critical skills, motivation, self-efficacy and problem solving (Kontak, 2021). Apart from these pros, while using WhatsApp, students enhance their values and develop their thinking when commenting on others' posts (Aljabr et al., 2023).

In the context of this study, the use of WhatsApp-Aided Peer-Review Technique (WAPRT) is explored considering that WhatsApp is one of the most useful communication applications in contemporary times, considering the factors of convenience and accessibility, effective peer-facilitation, effective multimedia integration, and its ability to post stories and track students' written ideas. As such, WhatsApp has been seen as an important platform for language teachers to leverage their language teaching and enhance their students' language learning, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia. In addition, studies on the use of online tools have been conducted in this context to maximize the potential for language learning (Al-Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021,; Al-Ahdal, 2020; Alqasham & Al-Ahdal, 2022, Magulod Jr, et al., 2020; Manan, 2017, Rad, et al., 2022,; Tragant, et al., 2022). Yet, these studies have focused on the use of WhatsApp for language teaching and writing. Hence, the present study aims to address this theoretical and methodological gap identified in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Peer feedback has gained a notable status as a critical technique for enhancing the writing skills of students worldwide (Xie et al. 2024). Scholars such as, Latifi et al. (2021) and Orsmond et al. (2013) have deeply investigated the subject of 'peer feedback'. They state that a growing body of research has recommended the use of peer feedback for it delivers diverse benefits - social, cognitive, and affective. Furthermore, Orsmond et al. (2013) support the argument that good feedback does not discourage students; it in fact, provides help to them in better understanding the subject of their learning in all its aspects and it also provides easily understandable guidance on the manner, method and approach for improving their language writing learning and to achieve success. Previous research (e.g., Kontak, 2021; Ulla & Perales, 2021; Hazhar, Kausar & Mohammed, 2023) observed the impact of WhatsApp as a platform for language learning, while Wu and Schunn (2021), and Latifi et al. (2021) investigated the impact of peer feedback on students' learning outcomes. There is a scarcity of research combining peer feedback on WhatsApp to enhance EFL students' learning: This gap is the motivation behind the present study. In nowadays competitive and technological world, writing is key to learning and success. The purpose of this study is to improve the writing skills of EFL students, expand their academic and professional opportunities, and improve their overall quality of life. The study proposed an evaluation of the effect of WAPRT on BA English major students' paragraph-related skills. The study aimed to achieve the following specific research objectives:

1. To determine the entry level proficiency of students in writing text before using WAPRT.
2. To measure the level of significance in improvement in the performance between pre- and post-test.

3. To evaluate the effectiveness of WAPRT in enhancing writing from the perspectives of teachers/educators and online subject-experts.

Literature Review

Hyland (2019) reported that writing is one of the most important language skills because of the interactions of personal and business factors as well as online activities and the different designs of writing. According to Prior (2013), writing has a foundational value in communication from one person to another or from a group to another group and from business or educational entities to others. Writing is the medium through which examinations are passed, teachers teach and students learn. Writing, therefore, represents the core of academic literacy. It is through writing that evaluation of students' knowledge and skill is conducted all over the world. In short, academic success depends upon students' writing ability (Al-Ahdal et al., 2021; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012).

Due to the entry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the writing process and teaching approach have undergone change. The concept of corrective feedback has been integrated in this process of teaching and learning of language, including that of writing (Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Hidayati, 2016). Feedback in modern classrooms is available through multimedia and various devices or applications. This renewed interest in feedback has led to the emergence of innovations in pedagogy to make language lessons easy to understand and writing a pleasure (Ulla & Perales, 2021). Traditionally, only teachers have had the authority to provide feedback on student work; however, recent pedagogical developments have also recognized that peers are capable of providing constructive feedback to their classmates (Saeed & Ghazali, 2017).

According to Thomas (2010), peer-feedback on writing has been used in language classrooms for the educational purposes. Wu and Schunn (2021) claimed that peer-feedback on writing provides an encouraging environment for improving language skills and fostering meaningful social interaction amongst students. This is usually achieved through peer response/peer review activities in writing classrooms. Wu and Schunn (2021); Deliany, et al. (2020) and Zhang, (2025) concluded that both social interaction and dialogue with others are critical in the process of writing even if the text is complex or contains conceptual elements.

Tseng and Tsai (2007) claimed that online peer feedback (OPR) has gained popularity and its acceptance in the academic field has steadily increased as internet-enabled devices and apps have simplified the way evaluations are performed. Leijen (2017) asserted that OPR offers several beneficial procedural uses that the older educational system did not provide for. Similarly, Alt et al. (2022) opined that students feel freer to communicate with peers as they feel mental compatibility, thus enabling them to examine the feedback and effect revision of their work whenever there is need to do so through reflective and critical thinking.

Studies (Lin et al. 2001; Tsai & Liang, 2009) indicate that OPR is a process that fosters student writer-reviewer engagement, increases their interaction, and promotes their willingness to assess each other's performance in writing. This is useful especially when the OPR system follows anonymity in allotment of grading and giving feedback, at no fixed place or time, thus overcoming the feeling of fear that is felt when face-to-face peer review takes place where assessor-peers can express disagreement or annoyance through facial expressions if not by verbal communication. In line with previous research, Lin et al. (2001) stated that online systems of peer feedback make it easier and more convenient to the teacher to access feedback. These systems also allow teachers to monitor learners' engagement in peer review—something that may be difficult to achieve in face-to-face peer review contexts. Moreover, Tsai and Liang (2009) pointed out that direct online

access to data on assessment and evaluation of student-writers' writing assessments facilitates researchers to collect data and students to overcome shyness or any psychological discomfort or inhibition in participating and communicating with each other. On the other hand, Fithriani (2017) opined that through OPR, student-writers are empowered to communicate with peers without any hesitation; they voluntarily invite and welcome feedback and submit to suggestions made for improvement, thus encouraging them to engage in reflective thinking and continuity of activities aimed at enhancing their proficiency in writing.

According to Daweli (2018), collaborative systems for online peer review enable EFL students to collaboratively work "with each other to share opinions and suggestions that improve their written texts" (p. 272). They also argue that these systems enable EFL students to provide insightful corrective comments at both local and global levels, improving writing results and student attitudes. Similar tech-enhanced peer feedback methods, like WhatsApp-based review, may encourage critical engagement and lower affective barriers to peer connection, according to his research.

According to Almahasneh and Abdul Hamid (2019), systematic peer-assessment training improves the writing quality of EFL students, demonstrating that thoughtfully crafted peer feedback methods produce quantifiable benefits. Their research highlights the need of training students to provide feedback, a strategy that may be applied to mobile-mediated settings like WhatsApp to enhance writing growth.

According to Noyan and Kocoglu (2019), learners find WhatsApp-based dialogue journaling to be just as beneficial as traditional journaling for enhancing EFL writing. This supports the idea that peer review facilitated by WhatsApp could improve paragraph-writing abilities by providing immediate, easily accessible, student-centered feedback.

Despite the growing body of research on WhatsApp as a language learning tool and the proven benefits of peer feedback in writing instruction, few studies have specifically examined the combined effects of WhatsApp-assisted peer review techniques (WAPRT) on the paragraph writing skills of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, especially in the Saudi Arabian context. Previous studies have examined the role of WhatsApp in language learning in general (Ulla and Perales, 2021; Aljabr et al., 2023) and the cognitive and affective benefits of peer feedback (Wu and Schunn, 2021; Latifi et al., 2021), but there is little empirical research examining how WhatsApp-assisted peer review improves paragraph-level writing skills. Furthermore, while some studies highlight the role of technology in reducing anxiety (Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000), others contradict these findings (Spielberger, 2015), leaving the affective impact of WAPRT unexplored. This study fills these gaps by (1) evaluating the effectiveness of the WAPRT program in improving paragraph writing skills, (2) measuring its impact on writing anxiety, and (3) providing context-specific insights for EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia, where such interventions remain unexplored.

Methods

Research Design

This study used a quasi-experimental research design. This type of design is common in many teaching-learning settings. Specifically, since this study is experimental, it employed a pre- and post-test design to generate comparative results over a period of time.

Sample

A group of 16 students represented the study sample. These students were enrolled in a writing course during the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024 in the Department of English Language at the University of Ha'il. All participants consented to voluntary participation in the current study, with no incentives given to the participating students. The objective of evaluating the participants' paragraph writing skills before and after the utilization of WAPRT was disclosed and discussed in detail with the participants.

Data collection

The data collection steps were planned and executed as follows:

Stage 1: Planning

The respondents gathered in a study hall placed at the researcher's disposal for the purpose of the study. The researcher then discussed the entire process of the study. Queries were answered to the satisfaction of the participants. The researcher then created a WhatsApp group for the purpose of the research activities. The WhatsApp group was also used for peer-reviewing of the student-writers' paragraph writings as well as for postings of any information or instruction relevant to the current study.

Stage 2: Pre-treatment

An electronic survey was administered to the participants for determining their profiles (bio-data, etc.) using WhatsApp. In the second step, a Google-survey form (questionnaire) containing 20 items was given to the students to obtain information about their initial (entry level) anxiety display. The survey also included 10 items addressing students' emotional engagement in online peer review. In the writing exercise, the participants were required to prepare a write-up in English in a maximum of about 500 words on their awareness about the consequences of Covid- 19 pandemic, symptoms, precautions and treatment, as well as the pandemic's effect on human living and activities, etc. The writing exercise served as the pre-test for assessing students' performance, determining their proficiency in paragraph writing. After the writing exercise was over, the students posted their written output in a private WhatsApp group that had been created for this purpose.

Stage 3: Implementation

Following the students' pre-achievement test, the WAPRT was introduced as an intervention using a template to guide the students in the peer-review activity. In pairs, the students peer-reviewed each other's writing by furnishing their assessment in the comment section of the private WhatsApp group that had been created for this study.

Stage 4: Post-treatment

During this stage, the student-respondents were given an exercise on essay-writing in about 250 words. This task comprised their post-test assessment and evaluation. The researcher asked the respondents to post their outputs in the private WhatsApp group for plagiarism check as well as skill assessment. The WAPRT was used at this stage. This was followed by uploading the post-test output for evaluation. The respondents were also asked to evaluate their engagement experience in the online peer review activities.

The researcher asked one of the English teachers to assess the students' evaluation of the essays they had written earlier. The rubrics that were used for evaluating the students' writing included: developing the topic and collecting details, information integration, organization and formatting, word choice, sentence variety and structure, grammar, usage and mechanics, totaling to a maximum of 20 points.

Statistical Treatment of Data Analysis

Data from the respondents was extracted from the questionnaire. It was tabulated and analyzed. Observations were made, and inferences were drawn. The tools used for this purpose were frequency counts and percentages. The results were posted on the respective profiles of the respondents after the data was tabulated, analyzed and interpreted using a descriptive statistics approach. Inferential statistics such as dependent sample t- test was also used for determining or finding emerging significant differences on: (i) the pre-test attitude (emotion); (ii) post-test attitude (emotion); (iii) pre-test paragraph writing performance (skill); and lastly, (iv) post-test paragraph writing performance (skill).

As stated earlier, the second part of the questionnaire contained 10 question-items. These items evaluated the attitude of the student-respondents regarding essay writing. The criterion scale was used to determine the descriptive statistic; the overall results were as follows: mean 4.21-5.00 for Very High; 3.41-4.20 for High; 2.61-3.40 for moderate; 1.81-2.60 for low; and 1.00-1.80 for very low.

Regarding the paragraph writing outputs of the respondents, analytic rubrics contained: developing of topic and details, information integration, organization and format, word choice, sentence variety and structure, grammar, usage and mechanics. For the evaluation of performance, the measuring scales used included: weighted score of 17-20 points for excellent; 13-16 points for very good; 9-12 points for good; 5-8 points for developing; and 1-4 points for beginner. For making interpretations concerning the scores of the student-respondents, the scoring scale was: 17-20-excellent; 13-16-very good; 9-12-good; 5- 8-for developing; and 1-4 for beginner.

Results

The analysis of pre-test and post-test writing performances revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' paragraph writing skills after the implementation of WAPRT. As Table 1 shows, the mean score increased from 7.7 (SD = 2.45) in the pre-test (interpreted as developing) to 11.45 (SD = 2.48) in the post-test (interpreted as good), with a mean difference of three. Figure 1 provides statistical manifestation of the improvement in the writing performance after the use of WAPRT. A dependent samples *t*-test confirmed this improvement as significant (*t*(9) = 3.56, *p* = .001).

Table 1. *Results on the difference in pre-test and post-test performances of the students in writing skills*

Performance Scores	Mean Score	SD	Interpretation	Mean difference	T- Value	df	p-value
Pre- Test	7.7	2.45	Developing	3	3.56	9	.001**
Post- Test	11.45	2.48	Good				

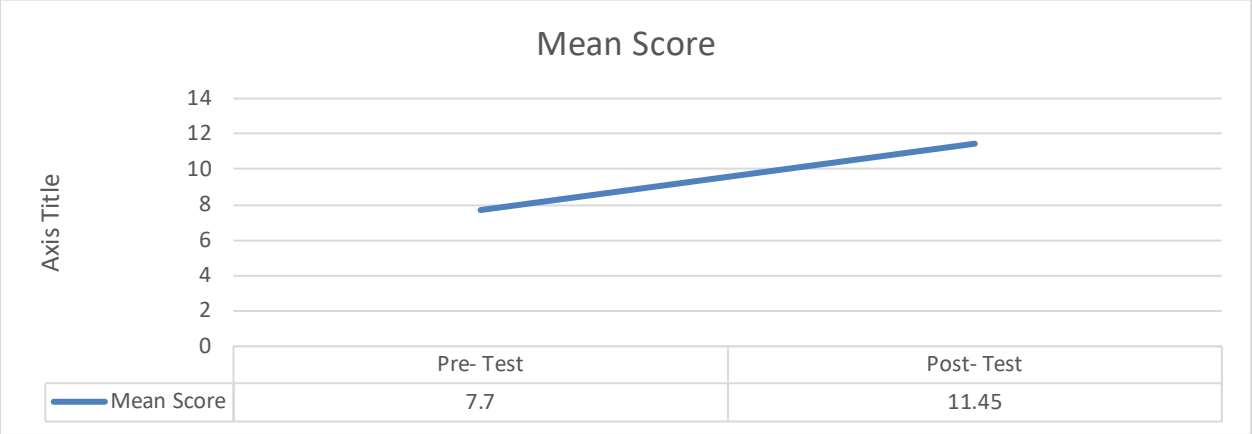


Figure 1. Improvement in the writing performance of students after the use of WAPRT

Regarding students' anxiety and emotional engagement, Table 2 indicates a slight reduction in writing anxiety from pre-test (M = 4.53, SD = 0.54) to post-test (M = 3.24, SD = 0.32). However, this change was not statistically significant (*p* = .323). Similarly, no significant shift was observed in the students' emotional responses to online peer feedback. See Figure 2.

Table 2. *The difference in students' anxiety and emotion regarding using PRT in evaluating writing before and after utilizing WAPRT*

Students' Anxiety	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation	Mean difference	T- value	df	P- value
Pre-test	4.53	.54	High	-0.14	-3.55	23	.0.323*
Post- test	3.24	.32	Low				
Students' emotion on the use of online peer-feedback	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation	Mean difference	T- value	df	P- value

**significant level at p<0.05

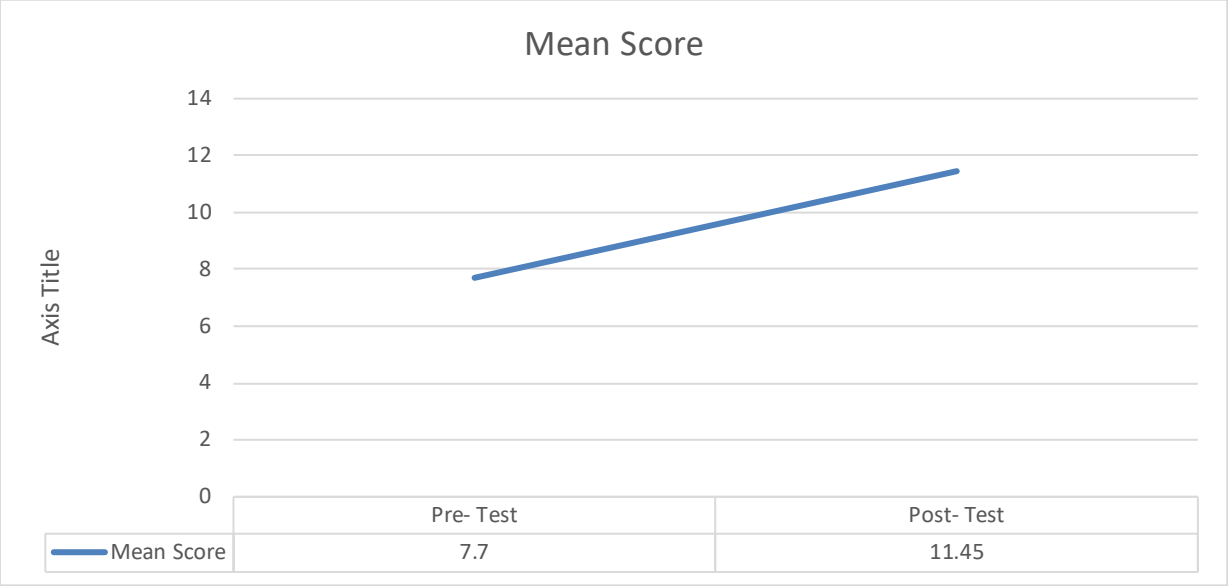


Figure 2. Change in the anxiety of students after the use of WARPT

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Discussion

The findings demonstrate that WAPRT effectively enhanced EFL students' paragraph writing proficiency, aligning with prior research (Al Mukhallafi, 2024; Sartika & Arriyani, 2020; Ferris, 2003). The peer-review process enabled students to critically evaluate texts, apply grammatical knowledge, and improve coherence, reinforcing their writing skills through collaborative learning.

Contrary to expectations, WAPRT did not significantly reduce writing anxiety, a result consistent with Spielberger's (2015) findings but contrasting with studies advocating prewriting interventions (Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). This suggests that while WAPRT improves writing outcomes, supplementary strategies may be needed to address anxiety.

The study underscores the potential of technology-mediated peer review in EFL contexts, though further research could explore blended approaches to mitigate anxiety and enhance emotional engagement.

Conclusion

The current study indicated that students' writing anxiety did not undergo a significant change after the exposure of paragraph writing skills to WAPRT. As far as the students' emotion was concerned, no significant change was noticed therein when online peer-feedback was used both before and after the respondents were exposed to WAPRT. It can be concluded, therefore, that the students' writing anxiety and emotion at play while using online peer-feedback did not change before and after the intervention of WAPRT. It was found that students' writing anxiety was 'pre-attitude' which was 'high'. But students' writing anxiety was seen as 'developing' at the post-attitude stage. It was thereby seen that the students did not gain a positive attitude towards writing even when they were exposed to WAPRT. The students' attitude regarding use of online peer-feedback showed a high score for not only the pre-test stage but also for the post-test stage. From this it can be concluded that the students possessed positive attitude towards online peer-feedback.

Concerning proficiency in writing, the respondents can be stated to be at the 'developing' stage with respect to using WAPRT. This observation points to the effort needed on the part of both teachers and students to improve paragraph writing skill rather than achieving excellence in it. In addition, the students attained a higher level of proficiency after the utilization of WAPRT. Their grade increased to 'good', which is indicative of improvement in the paragraph writing skill after adopting WAPRT. Regarding the efficacy and efficiency of WAPRT, it is effective, supportive and a veritable morale booster for improving writing, which is borne out by the results of the current study. The entry level proficiency scored a mean of 8.7 and a standard deviation of 2.16. These parameters underwent significant change after the WAPRT was introduced. This gain in the level of proficiency was indicated by the mean value of 12.7 and the standard deviation of 2.54.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following based on the analysis and the findings:

1. The onus is on the teacher to develop such lessons as are engaging for the learners to ensure that they are keen to try out new and effective teaching strategies.
2. Peer review needs to be constantly promoted in the language classrooms given its proven benefits.
3. Teachers should consider working with their students as a team with friendly disposition. Teachers need to create suitable peer feedback assessment guidelines for their students to follow in reviewing and assessing their peers' writing.

4. Teachers need to play the role of being researchers who strive to find reasons for low performance and come up with innovative ideas to overcome these deficiencies found in the students.
5. Students need to engage in writing tasks actively and meaningfully. Group work may be given as students feel more open in the peer group and learn faster from each other.
6. Teachers need to be trained on how to effectively use WAPRT through WhatsApp as a medium as this approach will result in enhancement of paragraph writing skills.
7. Finally, based on the findings, researchers should examine the use of other media, such as social networking webs that the teachers consider usable and efficacious for the purpose of improving students' writing.

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