Artículo de Investigación

Peer Feedback to Improve Message and Format of Writing Formal Letters in International Baccalaureate (IB) Students

Retroalimentación para mejorar el Mensaje y Formato en la Escritura de Cartas Formales en los Estudiantes de Bachillerato Internacional

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Abstract

This study was carried out in an International Baccalaureate (IB) class of a public school from the coastal region of Ecuador. It aimed at improving format and message of formal letters using peer feedback facilitated by blogs. The IB program demands writing documents in several formats, one of those is letters. However, students were not writing formal letters successfully. The present action research used quantitative methods. It was conducted for six weeks and there were 17 participants. The quantitative instruments were a checklist, a pre- and post-test, a rubric, and a survey. At the end of the innovation, there was an improvement in the mean in the post-test compared to the pre-test. This determined a large effect size of 0.75. This innovation had a positive impact on students' formal letters writing. Participants also improved the organization of ideas, addressed the prompt, content, spelling, and capitalization. The proper application of the writing process for educational purposes was evident. Awareness of the importance of peer feedback in a collaborative environment was also raised. This study is addressed to people involved in education such as authorities, teachers, and researchers who want to improve writing in their classes.

Keywords: formal letters, blogs, peer feedback, writing, IB program

Resumen

Este estudio fue llevado a cabo en un curso de Bachillerato Internacional de un colegio público de la región costa de Ecuador. Dirigido para mejorar el formato y mensaje de las cartas formales utilizando retroalimentación facilitado por blogs. El programa del Diploma de Bachillerato Internacional demanda varios formatos y uno de ellos son cartas. Sin embargo, los estudiantes de este estudio no escribían cartas exitosamente. Por esta razón, esta innovación fue implementada. El presente trabajo de investigación usó el método cuantitativo durante seis semanas (30 horas). Se aplicó a 17 participantes. Los instrumentos cuantitativos incluyeron una lista de comprobación, pruebas de inicio y final, rubrica y encuesta. Al final de la innovación, hubo un mejoramiento en la media de la prueba final en comparación a la prueba de inicio. Esto determinó un impacto de 0,75. Esta innovación tuvo un impacto positivo en la escritura de cartas formales de los estudiantes. Los participantes también mejoraron en la organización de ideas, responder a una instrucción, contenido, ortografía, y uso de mayúsculas y puntuación. La adecuada aplicación del proceso de escritura para propósitos educativos fue evidente. También se elevó la conciencia de la importancia de la retroalimentación entre pares en un entorno de colaboración. Este estudio está dirigido a personas involucradas en la educación, como autoridades, maestros e investigadores que desean mejorar la escritura en sus clases.

Palabras claves: cartas formales, blogs, retroalimentación de los compañeros, redacción, programa del BI

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecuador was one of the countries in Latin America which has a great number of participants within the Diploma Programme (DP) of the International Baccalaureate Organization (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013). Diploma Programme (DP) of the International Baccalaureate Organization is a learning program which pretends to shape students with depth knowledge who can properly develop themselves in physical, intellectual, emotional, and ethical fields (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2019).

Nowadays, there are 62 private schools in Ecuador which offer BI program (International Baccalaureate, 2024). However, in 2017 there were 201 public schools which offered the same program (Ministerio de Educación, 2017). It demanded that students develop higher writing skills. Its external assessment requires that students produce different types of texts such as formal and informal emails and letters, advertisements, recipes, notices, journals, and others (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). From this list, formal letters have been the most difficult for participants in this research. Participants misunderstood how to express the appropriate message and the format of writing formal letters. In order to pass the external assessment, one solution to this problem is for students to improve writing formal letters, specifically in message and format.

Yu and Lee (2016) highlighted that peer feedback is useful for learning due to the social and collective environment that it builds. However, there are no studies which revealed peer feedback to improve writing letters or messages in IB students. There are studies that implemented peer feedback to improve speaking (Van Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2015) and for reading comprehension (Sidekli, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to undertake a study on peer feedback for writing letters in IB students.

The implementation was based on the Curriculum Development Domain from Ecuadorian in-service English Teacher Standards which established the use of technological resources (e.g., internet, software, computers, and related devices) to enhance language and content-area instruction for students (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). The technological tool chosen to improve writing is web blogs.

Richardson (2010) claimed that web blogs are easy to create, manage, maintain, update, and publish to the internet. Alsamadani (2018) mentioned the blog as a revolutionary EFL pedagogy and methodology for learning and teaching. Also, he recommended the incorporation of blogs into the school curricula as a resource for writing classes.

This study carried out the implementation of peer feedback facilitated by blogs as an effective, operative, and appropriate technical resource. Compared with papers, blogs enable students to take advantage of information, media, and technology to improve the message and the format of writing a letter. Seventy percent of IB students had gotten low scores on letter writing and thus did not achieve their international standards based on the IB assessment criteria.

2. DEVELOPMENT

This section provides the topics related with the present study research. It determines academic connections with other authors, theories, and an overview of the topics. This section defines and describes writing skills, writing process, formal letters, message, format,peer feedback, blogs, and perspectives of blogs.

Writing Skills

Writing is one of the productive skills. It is an essential resource within English learning. Kitchakarn (2014) stated that writing is relevant for learners to achieve educational and occupational achievement. Aydin (2014) claimed students that develop writing skill in the EFL show better performances, attitudes, perceptions, interactions, and participations.

When they use blogs, they increase holistically. Cross (2007) said regarding writing that it is complex to validate information. According to Sapkota (2012), writing is a group of written symbols which represent syllables and words. It also involves different conventions as capitalization, spelling and punctuation, word form and function.

Writing Process

According to Harmer (2004), the writing process can be developed in three ways: content (subject matter) of the text, the type of writing (shopping, letters, and essays), and theresource (pen and paper, and computer word files). Additionally, he stated that the writing process has five main elements.

Prewriting is the first and broad stage within the writing process where the writer determines and chooses from a list one topic to write. The content is based on the writers oraudience's needs and preferences. Also, the writers can apply techniques such as brainstorming, reading, and interviewing to gather information. This step permits writers toorganize ideas, define topic sentence, set goals, and draw an outline (Faraj, 2015).

Drafting is when the writer has to put all the data gathered together to hook the audience through the document. The most important fact in this step is that writers have to focus on the main points of their paper and correct errors such as capitalization, spelling, andpunctuation (Faraj, 2015).

Revising step is when the writer has the opportunity to check key points and content of the document. According to Kallestinova (2017) the revision can be addressed in two ways. In the first way, the writer checks vocabulary and local grammatical errors, and in the secondway, there is a concern on developing content and organization of ideas.

Editing considers the observations made in the revision step. Editing is focused on expressing clear content for the audience who will read the document. In this step, the writer corrects errors in punctuation, spelling, grammar, mechanics, and capitalization, among others (Carolan & Kyppö, 2015). Moreover, Bayat (2014) said that the editing stage preparesthe document to be published after its final edition.

Publishing is the last stage of the writing process. The document has been improved after considerable changes during the whole process and it is ready to be published (Harmer, 2004). The publication can be done in different ways such as posting in a classroom, blogs, performing, and magazines.

Formal Letters

The formal letter is a standard genre in professional and academic settings. The main purpose of writing letters is to persuade and request something, to apply for a job or course, to complain, among others (Starovoit, 2017). This type of letter requires a formal writing style according to the specific audience.

Message

The message in writing formal letters must be clear, polite, respectful, specific, organized, coherent, and concise. Writers should observe proper spelling and punctuation as well as full words (Scribendi, 2018). Also, the message must be developed in a logical, effective, and understandable structure (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014).

Format

The formal letter must follow specific standards on format because the given information must be serious to professionals, authorities, and executives (Scribendi, 2018). Also, the parts of the letter must be taken into account based on a high importance. The format has a relevant part in this assignment which must be appropriate (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). The repetition of the format of the letters demonstrated automaticity. According to Brown (2001), automaticity is a subconscious process that people get through meaningful practice.

Peer Feedback

Nowadays, Huisman, Saab, Van den Broek, and Driel (2018) claimed that peer feedback is considered as a holistic part of students' academic writing learning. Yu and Lee (2016) stated that peer feedback has a great contribution to learning since it creates a social and collective environment to learn from peers. As Vygotsky (1978) highlighted, based on his sociocultural theory, if a learner has public interactions and demonstrations as the ones in real life, the learner will take advantage of this for his learning developing high order functions.

According to Wakabayashi (2013), after peer feedback, writers develop critical paramount improvements in their first draft. Moreover, Bijami, Sharafinejad, and Kashef (2013) concluded that students determined the peer feedback as effective as the teacher's feedback. They pointed out that learners can be autonomous in the writing process.

Wiggins (2012) defined feedback as a continuous process of improvement doing our best to achieve aims. Thus, Nelson and Schunn (2009) named two kinds of feedback: cognitive and affective. Cognitive is related to content of the work and specific data after the revision. On the other hand, affective feedback refers to the improvement of work and encouraging words based on non-verbal expressions such as gestures and kindness tones. Likewise, Ahea, Ahea, and

Rahman (2016) said that teachers empower students´ learning environment by giving feedback in a positive way.

Perspectives on the Use of Blogs

In Saudi Arabia, Aljumah (2012) stated most of the students perceived the use of blogs as a great tool to communicate better and improve writing skills. Mohd, Yunus, Doring, Asmi, Aqilah, and Su (2013) concluded that participants in their study determined blogs as remarkable tech tool to writing and that they feel encouraged to write.

Perspectives on Peer Feedback

Moneypenny, Evans, and Kraha (2018) stated that learners feel confident through peer feedback in their writing practices. They concluded that peer feedback has a strong influence on students' confidence and in their academic performance. Mulder, Pearce, and Baik (2014) mentioned peer feedback provides learning advantages to apply methods and strategies to achieve successful academic goals. For these reasons, peer feedback is highly recommended within the teaching-learning process based on learners' perspectives.

Blogs

Blogs are technological resources that empower and strengthen the writing skill in an easy and interactive way. Matheson (2004) determined blogs as an asynchronous journal where users can post messages at any time and place. Ferreiro (2001) pointed out that the use of e-mails, web pages, blogs, and Internet produce deep modifications and accelerate changes in people´s communication from giving and receiving information. Zhang (2009) stated students who use blogs are aware and keep in mind their specific audience. Alsamadani (2018) highlighted that blogs contribute to the student's macroscopic and microscopic writing skills, such as rational, consistency, logic, content, attitude, and social interaction.

Rojas (2011) determined that the use of blogs evidence online interaction which engages students into writing. One of the uses of blogs is to post diaries and journals (Raab, 2013). Consequently, with the implementation of blogs, IB students will take the role of active writers of their own online sites.

Likewise, group participation is relevant to reinforce social interaction. Kitchakarn (2014) declared that blogs are a great support to work in groups. Pairs provide feedback and collaborate in their learning. Namouz, Misher-Tal, and Sela (2017) highlighted that blogs usage and massive peer feedback strengthen learners' use of language, enrich the correct use of grammatical structures, and increase significantly the quality of writing.

According to Barrett and Russell (1999), the information published in students' personal blogs must be addressed to different kinds of audiences. Answering the information given in the prompts may give students the opportunity to develop different topics. Through this technological resource, teachers can organize collaborative learning environments where students provide feedback (Coll, Rochera, De Gispert, & Díaz-Barriga, 2013). Kuimova and Zvekov (2016) concluded the use of blogs encourages communication skills, practice the

language and organization process as well as a meaningful learning. After deep research regarding this study, there were no opposing points of views of use of technology, and peer feedback within the International Baccalaureate context.

Due to the problem of students in their writing section of the evaluation and to the effectiveness of using peer-feedback and blogs as expressed in this literature review, this study proposed the following research questions: To what extent does peer feedback improve the format in writing formal letters? To what extent does peer feedback improve the message in writing formal letters? And, what are the international baccalaureate (IB) students' perspectives on peer feedback and the use of blogs to write formal letters?

3. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this academic intervention is that IB students learn how to write appropriate messages and apply the format of formal letters. To this end peer feedback through blogs was implemented.

The intervention of this study lasted six weeks. During this intervention, IB students practiced formal letter writing through blogs as a technological tool as a part of their external writing assessment. Students wrote letters formally for different purposes such as complaining about a service, applying for a job, and requesting something specific answering an IB prompt. Likewise, the audiences of these letters were people who manage high proficiency levels with better language use such as authorities, executives, businessmen, and school principals. The production of these letters would go hand to hand with the appropriate register according to the audiences.

Furthermore, the researcher provided specific information regarding the message and format for these letters. The researcher explained all parts of formal letters and blogs in order to help students to manage their posts in their personal blogs when they started to write online. In addition, the researcher was able to read, reply and provide feedback on all of the letters by commenting on students' posts. In the same way, the whole class could give comments, suggestions, and corrections considering peer feedback about the letters in their personal blogs. Lastly, students used and connected text on topics which were familiar or of personal interest and wrote personal letters describing experiences and impressions. This study provided the complete and detailed activities of this innovation in a lesson plan This section describes the paramount components that had a part in the present study.

In addition, this part describes the participants, instruments, data analysis, and ethical standards. These components provided specific information about how the study was taken into account in the process of the innovation.

Participants

The study was addressed to 17 International Baccalaureate students from the first

Baccalaureate at a public High School in a coastal city in Ecuador. The students' ages ranged from 16 to 17 years old. They were mixed race, twelve females and five males. Students' mother tongue is Spanish. They were at the A1 English level based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This is one of the classes assigned to the researcher at the beginning of the school year. As a result, the researcher chose this group of IB students to take part in this innovation due to the international standards assessment.

Instruments

This study is an action research which applied quantitative instruments for data collection. According to Mills (2000), action research is a study of a problem where a researcher collects data through instruments and analyzes it to solve the problem. The instruments considered in this study were a checklist, pre- and post-test, rubric, and a survey. First, in order to answer *To what extent does peer feedback improve the format in writing formal letters?* The instrument used was the checklist (see Appendix D). It was selected in order to record the improvement on the format of formal letters writing. It was used during the innovation to get information about the format as a part of the rubric. This checklist has nominal scale based on yes and no options. The checklist contained the parts of the letter which were assessed by the peer. This instrument was managed and monitored at the beginning and at the end of the implementation.

Second, *To what extent does peer feedback improve the message in writing formal letters?* A pre and post-test was applied. It was scored with a rubric. At the beginning of this project, participants took a pre-test (see Appendix B). The pre-test provided the students` background on writing' letters. Consequently, at the end of the implementation, they took a post-test to examine performance and determine improvement. The pre-test and post-test were performance tasks taken from an IB prompt which were assessed by a rubric (see Appendix C). The rubric was based on proper original text, generation of ideas, and organization of ideas, answers to the information requested on the prompt, spelling, and capitalization. Also, the rubric was read, revised, corrected, and modified by experts to be applied as an instrument in this project.

Third, the survey was chosen to answer this research question *what are the*

international baccalaureate (IB) students' perspectives on peer feedback and the use of blogs to write formal letters? A survey was developed (see Appendix E). Participants determined their perceptions from statements regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using blogs (items 1 to 5), and the importance of peer feedback (items 6 to 10). This survey used a by Likert scale that included strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3) and strongly agree (4) options. Participants responded to a survey based on their A1 proficiency level. Also, the survey was piloted to know the reliability due to the number of participants in this study. Cronbach's alpha was run to calculate the reliability of the survey. The survey indicated 0.71 as reliability.

Data Analysis

In order to obtain more concise, reliable and accurate results, two experts assessed the

innovation. One was the leader researcher and another expert who was in charge of grading the tests of the innovation to reduce bias. These results were input on a spreadsheet, then were exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to get descriptive statistics (maximum, minimum, mean, standard deviation). This information was used to get the effect size in an online calculator.

Ethical Standards

The researcher got the permission from the high school authorities to apply this innovation with the IB students. Likewise, the students were informed that they would participate in this implementation to improve their IB external assessment. Another significant fact in this innovation was that the information gathered from the results of this implementation was confidential where participants' names were not disclosed.

4. RESULTS

This section describes the results considered in this study. The data obtained in this study were analyzed based on the three research questions determined in this study. The results are explained statically according to each question. The data were input to a SPSS program, and online calculator to obtain reliable results.

Question 1: To what extent does peer feedback improve the format in writing formal letters?

Table 1.

Format results from the checklist

Component	N	Mean pre-test	Std. Deviation	Mean post-test	Std. Deviation	Effect size
Format	17	1,47	,943	4	,000	0.8846263

Source: Own elaboration

The format of formal letters was analyzed as a component of a rubric. Participants showed improvement through peer feedback using the checklist. The feedback provided among peers encouraged participants to achieve higher standards based on rubric. The improvement was taken into account in comparison from the pre-test and the post-test. Also, participants created automaticity regarding to the checklist to assess the format component of the rubric because they could check the requirements of the letter by memorization.

Question 2: To what extent does peer feedback improve the message in writing formal letters?

Table 2.

The pre-test and post-test results

Instruments	N	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Mean Statistic	Standard deviation
Pre-test	17	9	17	13,29	3,098
Post-test	17	17	24	19,35	2,060

Source: Own elaboration

Paired samples t-test was used to analyze the data. Table 2 shows participants' improvement on the message of writing formal letters. The results of Cohen's *d* 2.30 which demonstrates a large effect size. In other words, this study has a great impact in improving writing letters. The results of this innovation on formal letters was significant for the participants.

Table 3.

Message results based on the rubric through peer feedback

Components	N	Pre-test mean	Std. deviation	Post-test mean	Std. deviation	Effect size
Organization of ideas	17	2,18	,636	3,24	,562	0.6619469
Provide info requested on the prompt	17	1,94	,966	2,94	,556	0.5357036
Content	17	2,18	,636	2,59	,712	0.2905698
Spelling	17	2,29	,686	2,82	,529	0.397054
Punctuation and capitalization	17	3,35	,493	3,76	,437	0.402787

Source: Own elaboration

The researcher used a rubric to assess the message of formal letters. The researcher graded the six components determined in the rubric such as organization of ideas, providing information to the prompt, content, spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and format from 0 to 4 points per component in total was 24 points. Table 3 shows that organization of ideas component and provide information requested on the prompt component represented a medium effect size. Likewise, content, spelling and punctuation and capitalization represented a small effect

size. On the other hand, format has a large effect size. In conclusion, based on the pre and post- test results, there was noticeable improvement in the writing of formal letters.

Question 3: What are the international baccalaureate (IB) students' perspectives onpeer feedback and the use of blogs to write formal letters.

Table 4.

Students' perspectives on peer feedback and the use of blogs to write formal letters.

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Writing on the blogs made me more careful about sentence and paragraph structure.	3,53	,514
Writing on the blogs made me check word choice, word spelling, capitalization, and punctuation more carefully.	3,71	,470
Blogs can motivate me into more active, interactive writing and increase my interest, motivation, and confidence in Writing	3,24	,562
Blogging can improve the quality of my writing.	3,59	,507
I enjoy writing on blogs for developing my writing skills, learning, and interacting with peers	3,29	,588
Peer feedback online helped me to improve my formal letter.	3,65	,606
I felt comfortable when I provide feedback to my friends' paper.	3,24	,437
The feedback received by peers was significant.	3,53	,514
Peer feedback creates autonomy which strength a learning environment.	3,41	,507
I can provide peer feedback based on a rubric.	3,88	,332

Source: Own elaboration

Participants answered ten statements in the survey. Participants indicated positive comments from the survey regarding their perspectives on blog usage and peer feedback. Participants were pleased to be part of this implementation because they noticed their improvement in writing and in providing peer feedback through blogs. As a result, participants determined that they improved their formal letters through peers' comments using a rubric in their personal blogs.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Based on the results obtained in this study, regarding the use of blogs to improve message and format of formal letters, these findings were determined.

Question 1: To what extent does peer feedback improve the format in writing formal letters?

An important fact from the results is the enhancement in the format of formal letters. It is noticeable the participants' awareness regarding to formal letter writing style, purpose and audience as Starovoit (2017) mentioned in his paper. Brown (2001) stated that automaticity is a subconscious procedure that people get through significant usage. Likewise, Samuels and Flor (1997) pointed out that automaticity supports the development of an expert behavior.

After the implementation, participants did not have to look at the checklist to provide feedback, so this process and continuous repetition built their automaticity in this regard.

Question 2: To what extent does peer feedback improve the message in writing formal letters? The participants were able to express in a coherent, specific and organized way the message in a letter as well as a logical and effective structure which is claimed in Scribendi (2018) and Guide, (2011). Overall, the results indicated the participants' improvement holistically in writing aspects additionally. The participants improved on the writing performance which coincides with the results Sapkota (2012), Kitchakarn (2014). Participants noticed the importance of writing process, put into practice and take advantages from it as in Faraj (2015) and Harmer (2004). Furthermore, participants could provide information requested in the prompt of each letter which is related to Aydin`s study (2014).

Question 3: What are the international baccalaureate (IB) students' perspectives on peer feedback and the use of blogs to write formal letters? Another finding determined is the powerful impact of peer feedback among participants. Participants noticed excellent results taking into account the participants` feedback. They could read the suggestions and recommendation which permit them to improve their first post as Wakabayashi (2013) mentioned in his research.

Participants developed a strong belief of the power of the peer feedback because it helped to create a comfortable learning environment which matched results in Moneypenny et al. (2018) and Yu and Lee (2016). For this reason, they could reinforce friendship and self-esteem when they received and provided feedback. Also, participants acknowledged the encouraging influence from the researcher who was providing feedback in a nice and deep way about their letters which coincide with; Ahea et al. (2016); and, Bijami et al (2013). In addition, it is

meritorious to mention the technological resource used was blog as an ICT tool. Blogs motivated participants to carry out their performance as also Alsamadani (2018) and Kuimova and Zvekov (2016) took into account in their research.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of this study, students improved their formal letters. This is noticeable because writing is a productive and complex skill due to its components such as mechanics, the organization of ideas, punctuation, and spelling. After this innovation, it is pertinent to add some conclusions determined from the results in this study.

The use of a checklist made the process more operative when the students checked each required part of the letter in its proper format of the formal letters. Participants used the checklist to assess elements of the letter one by one and were aware of their significant role in the letter. Another important fact based on this study was that participants saved time using the checklist to assess the letters. Moreover, checklist usage strengthens automaticity in the participants when they read the peers' letters without revising again the requirements of the letters' format. The aim of the checklist usage in the innovation to verify the format of the formal letter was accomplished taking into account the successful results.

The message of the formal letters was improved determined by pre and post-test assessed by a rubric. According to the rubric, the students wrote letters better based on organization of ideas, provide information requested on the prompt, content, spelling, punctuation and capitalization. These quantitative instruments helped to discover the improvement in the message in formal letters. Moreover, within academic purposes the writing process is a fundamental part of the knowledge. In this study participants were aware of the application of the writing process in a paper which creates autonomous writing. The participants created a writing habit which promotes improvement in their papers. Awareness of original IB prompts to write the formal letters. Participants had an idea of how the writing external assessment will be given because they already practiced with them and are familiarized.

The survey supported data to determine the reliability of the study and perspectives on peer feedback and blogs. Peer feedback had a positive impact on participants because they learned from their peers based on their comments and suggestions post in the blogs. Peer feedback gave a great advantage to the participants to be more concise and specific in their comments using the rubric to help their classmate to improve their paper. Another important thing based on peer feedback is to generate critical thinking to contribute to the learning community to improve from their mistakes. Moreover, the use of blogs as a technological resource was confirmed as a helpful tool which permits the participants to meet the standards in this innovation. Personal blogs were the mean where participants post their letters, receive and provide peer feedback. In fact, blogs were meaningful instruments to create interaction by peers. Also, participants believed that a blog can be used with the rest of the types of texts that they have to know for IB external assessment.

As a conclusion, this innovation achieved the aims of the study as evidenced in the results provided by the instruments applied. Also, the participants demonstrated that they enjoyed learning to write formal letters using a technological resource such as blogs despite the limitations in the process.

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Conflicto de Intereses: Los autores afirman que no existen conflictos de intereses en este estudio y que se han seguido éticamente los procesos establecidos por esta revista. Además, aseguran que este trabajo no ha sido publicado parcial ni totalmente en ninguna otra revista.