

ATTITUDES OF ENGLISH STUDENTS WHOSE SKILLS ARE PEER-ASSESSED

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ABSTRACT

Peer-assessment (PA) has been used in all study cycles for over three decades. In foreign language classes, for example, it has mostly been applied to assess writing rather than other skills. However, this study focused on PA of oral skills and aimed to learn about university students' attitudes towards their experience of being peer-assessed in their English classes online during the pandemic when PA was used as a way of formative assessment (the grades suggested by peers were not a part of final course grades).

The study involved 49 Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) students (Lithuanians) studying general English at upper-intermediate level online in 2021. They were first and second year (first cycle) students aged 19 to 20. The research was both qualitative and quantitative. It used online PA forms, which the students who were assessors filled in anonymously to evaluate their peers' oral production, and an online questionnaire with open and closed questions that the assessee filled in after they had received anonymous feedback from their peers.

The study showed that over 70% of the students liked it when their oral production was assessed by their peers. It seemed to be an interesting activity for them. Yet, they raised many concerns about PA. Some of them believed PA was not accurate and their peers did not put much effort into it. They also thought their peers lacked experience in PA. They emphasised that their teacher was more experienced and objective and thus should assess their skills rather than peers.

Keywords: *being peer-assessed, English as a Foreign Language, oral skills, peer assessment, university students*

Introduction

Peer assessment (PA) has been used in education for quite some time. However, different terms have been invented to refer to it, as it is also known as “peer feedback, peer evaluation, and peer grading” (Double et al., 2020, p. 482). The way it has been and currently is perceived in different cultures and even by individual teachers might also differ greatly. Some educators employ exclusively summative assessment, because they

believe that only a teacher can and/ or should assess student performance, while some others, and, in fact, more and more, see PA as an alternative form of assessment (e. g. Meletiadou, 2012), “an innovative method” (Meletiadou, 2012, p. 240) or a “complementary way of testing in foreign language assessment” (Carrió-Pastor, 2016, p. 61) that is useful in their classes for a variety of reasons (assessment of particular skills is only one of them). Thus, there is a need to look at what PA is and how it is described. Musfirah has defined PA as follows: “Peer assessment is an evaluation done by a peer [assessor] to their classmates [assessee] in an activity [in order to evaluate its quality]. After getting feedback given by their own peers, students are expected to improve their linguistic performance” if it is a language class (2019, p. 68). However, it may be that the students who are assessors rather than assessee gain more from PA, as they can learn from the mistakes made by others (Cheng and Warren, 2005, Jung, 2016). For instance, they may improve their own oral presentations or get ideas of what not to do during their presentations that await them eventually after the presentations done by their peers. On the other hand, the role of assessors is quite challenging, as it is more difficult to assess spoken rather than written production, as students cannot return to what has been said. Thus, assessee may have concerns considering the assessment and feedback given by their peers. Friendships may play a role as well, as students whose peers attend the same class may be assessed better in terms of the skills they demonstrate in a particular task. Yet, learning from peers can be seen as useful for both assessors and assessee (Phuong Quynh, 2021), as among various advantages PA also promotes student collaborative learning (Ubaque Casallas and Pinilla Castellanos, 2016).

PA has widely been advocated to use in different educational contexts (Double et al., 2020, p. 481). The reason for this is the fact that PA can be seen as one of the ways to implement “educational assessment and learner-centred education” (Birjandi and Siyyari, 2010, p. 23). PA can be “used more in the teaching environment to help both teachers and learners achieve their outcomes sufficiently” (Phuong Quynh, 2021, p. 297), since PA “provides learners with the opportunity to take responsibility for analysing, monitoring and evaluating” their skills and learning (Cheng and Warren, 2005, p. 94). In terms of the English as a Foreign Language context, which is the focus of this article, PA has been frequently used to assess written production (Double et al. 2020, Phuong Quynh, 2021). Nevertheless, the study to be discussed in further sections of this paper focused on spoken production that was peer-assessed in an EFL classroom online. As PA involves students who are assessors and students who are assessee, it is pertinent to point out that the study to be discussed focused only on assessee experience of being peer-assessed, as it aimed to learn

their attitude towards PA in terms of their oral presentation skills that were assessed by peers of the same EFL class. All the assessees (as well as assessors) were Lithuanian students of English at upper-intermediate level at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Kaunas, Lithuania, but their classes were delivered online due to the coronavirus pandemic that was continuing at that time.

Even though PA has many benefits, the study to be discussed had some concerns that had been addressed in earlier research on PA of other skills. For example, in the study by Musfirah it is pointed out that students may not look at the assessment procedure seriously and see PA as a form of entertainment or even evaluate their friends better than they should (2019, p. 71). In addition, based on students' previous experience they may think that only their teacher should assess other students' performance (Musfirah, 2019, p. 71), thus the students may have a negative attitude towards PA. Moreover, some students may feel it is not fair that their peers are their assessors, especially if the grades they give have effect on the overall course or assignment grade(s) (Phuong Quynh, 2021, p. 299) or, from their point of view, the level of assessors' English proficiency is low (Cheng and Warren, 2005). Nevertheless, PA in the study to be discussed was used as a means of formative, not summative assessment, so students were not given actual grades that would have effect on the overall final grade of the course. The students had been informed about this in advance.

Methodology

Studies on PA usually focus on the experience of students who assess their peers' performance and certain skills, especially writing skills in various foreign languages. However, little is known how students whose skills are peer-assessed feel about such assessment. Thus, this study attempts to fill in the existing research gap. It focuses on assessees' attitudes towards PA of speaking skills in an EFL classroom online in 2021. It was a class of Lithuanian students of general English at upper-intermediate level (B2) at VMU. In it, English levels are obligatory to all students to study until they reach level C1/C2 proficiency.

49 students took part in the research. Most of them were female students (75%), while others (25%) were male students. Most of them were first (35.4%) and second (60.4%) year students in bachelor's degree study programmes, while others were third and fourth year students. They were mostly 19 (33.3%) to 20 (39.6%) years old, but 18.8% were 22 or older, while the rest of the sample were either 18 or 21.

PA was implemented during one week of presentations (on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday). Each student was an assessee once that

week. The students had been familiarised with presentation requirements and evaluation criteria in class at the beginning of the semester and given around seven weeks for preparation. They knew their pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, speaking rather than reading from notes and ways of engaging their audience during their presentation would be assessed.

The study employed the following tools:

- *Anonymous PA forms online* (criteria set by the Institute of Foreign Languages for all upper-intermediate level of English presentations). Students who listened to presentations filled in the forms on their mobile phones or computers during their peers' presentations. Both assessors and assesseees were familiarised with the forms at the beginning of the semester and assesseees were able to prepare based on the indicated criteria.
- *Anonymous post-presentation questionnaire online* that the students who were assesseees filled in in order to reflect on their experience of being peer-assessed and the feedback they received from their peers based on the evaluation forms online. The collected feedback was sent as MS Excel documents to each presenter (assessee) by their teacher at the end of the presentation week after everyone had presented.

The post-presentation questionnaire that the assesseees filled in consisted of two parts: one focused on the students' demographic information, while the second part included five questions on their experience and attitude towards being peer-assessed in their EFL class in terms on speaking during the week of presentations. The main questions were the following:

- Did you like it when you were assessed by other students? Yes/ No. Explain your answer in the box below.
- Would you want your peers rather than the teacher to evaluate your presentation? Yes / No. Explain your answer in the box below.
- Based on PA, would you do anything differently in your presentation in the future? Yes / No / Maybe. Explain your answer in the box below.
- Do you think you assessed your peers fairly? Yes / No / I don't know. Explain your answer in the box below. (assesseees became assessors after their presentation and assessed their peers' speaking skills as well)
- How do you feel about the grades your colleagues gave you? Explain your answer in the box.
- Should students assess their peers? Yes / No / I don't know. Explain your answer in the box below.

As the study was both quantitative and qualitative, it received a variety of data that needed to be generalised. Therefore, thematic analysis was used in order to discuss open-ended answers received through the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

71.4% of the participants liked being assessed by their peers. As demonstrated in Figure 1, only 28.6% of them were not happy about such an experience.

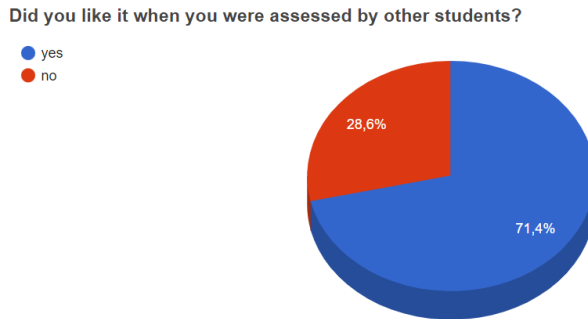


Figure 1. Students liked being peer-assessed

Their reasons could be put into the following categories that dominated in student responses:

1. They thought their peers had not put much thought/ effort while assessing their performance.
2. PA may not be accurate.
3. Peers do not have as much experience in assessment as the teacher does.
4. PA made the students feel uncomfortable because they knew they were being peer-assessed.

Therefore, these concerns should be discussed before PA is implemented in any activity or a class (not necessarily related to a foreign language), for example, while providing training on PA. However, as indicated above, the majority was happy to be peer-assessed. The main reasons they indicated in the provided box in the questionnaire were these:

1. It was a new experience.
2. It was interesting to see how others saw their performance and get many opinions.
3. Students could learn about their mistakes and know what was not clear to their peers.
4. Students could learn about their strengths and weaknesses from their peers.

On the other hand, even though over 70% of the students liked being peer-assessed, they would not like their peers to give them real grades (77.1%). This time they knew that PA would not have effect on their grades,

even though assessors were able to provide such grades in the evaluation forms, which they filled in, but it seems that assessees would not like their peers to suggest or give such grades in general. The assessees were asked to explain why they thought so. Their answers (the language of open-ended student answers here and elsewhere in the paper has not been corrected) were to some extent similar to those that they provided while explaining why they did not like PA: “the teacher is the more qualified expert in assessing students” R. 1 (research participant no. 1), “Because students don’t have a right to do that” (R. 3) or “because other students would not be assessed as accurately as by the teacher” (R. 9). The reasons, which were provided by the assessees, why they would not like to get grades from their peers could be grouped like this:

1. The teacher is more competent than peers.
2. The teacher is a specialist/ professional and should assess.
3. The teacher is objective, while students may evaluate their friends better than they should.
4. Students may give lower grades to their peers out of jealousy.

In other words, most of the reasons (3 out of 4) for wanting the teacher to assess students’ skills rather than peers were related to the role of the teacher in an EFL classroom. EFL teachers are seen as competent specialists who are objective, can spot mistakes better because of their proficiency in English and thus should carry out assessment rather than students who lack experience in PA and English skills. This is in line with the results of Musfirah’s study (2019) and consistent with further findings of this study. Even though this study was about students’ experience of being assessees, they were asked to indicate if they believed they had been fair assessors themselves when they performed that role (see Figure 2 below), which had been thought to explain possible results while constructing the questionnaire for the study.

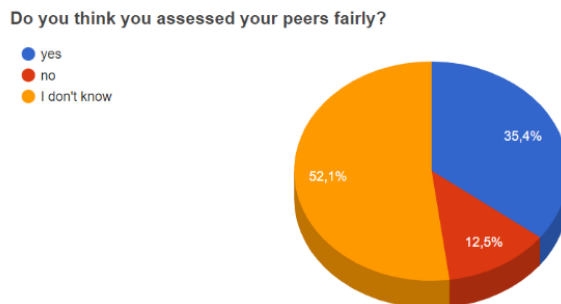


Figure 2. Students who were assessees thought they had been fair assessors

In fact, more than a half of the students (52.1%) indicated they did not know if they had assessed their peers' oral skills fairly earlier and 12.5% said they had not. Consequently, it is not surprising that they felt they should not be given grades by their peers, since they felt they probably had not given accurate grades either when they had assessed the skills of their peers. Yet, peers were able to suggest grades even if they were not taken into account by the teacher. The assessees were usually happy about them, because the grades were good or very good, but the assessees agreed that the grades given by their peers were better than they should have been, so they had not expected to see such grades and thus did not look at them seriously. Despite the high grades suggested by peers, it is possible to say that the assessees liked being peer assessed as long as peer grades were not included in the overall course grades.

Even though the assessees would not like to get grades from their peers (even if they are good), they would probably take into account their comments, as they appreciated them. 54.2% of the assessees said that based on PA they would do some things differently in their presentations in the future. They indicated that they would spend more time on their presentation in the future, put less text in their slides and focus more on the correctness of language in their speech (grammar in particular). Open-ended answers show that quite many assessors indicated in their feedback that their peers should improve their speaking skills, thus assessee comments in the questionnaire included such phrases as "I have to improve my speaking skills" (R. 13), "I would improve my speaking and try to involve the audience more" (R. 16), and "I saw that I have some problems with speaking, so I will try to improve it" (R. 27). In other words, peer comments are seen as helpful in terms of improvement in presentations or similar activities in the future.

33.7% of the students indicated that they "might" do some things differently. As they had studied modals of low possibility earlier in the course, they probably chose this answer intentionally to reflect on the fact that either they were not sure they would do something based on the PA and feedback they had received or to indicate there was a low chance they would take PA into account. Only 12.5% of the participants were straightforward about not being interested in the feedback received from their peers in any way. Here are some explanations why: "Because I do not believe in peer evaluation" (R. 1); or "I rely on the teacher's assessment" (R. 2). In other words, once again the role of the teacher as an assessor is pointed out.

In relation to the previously discussed study findings, it is probably not surprising that not all students who were assessees believed oral production (or language skills in general) should be assessed by their peers. The number of those who said they should was 47.9%. However, 35.4% of

the assessees did not have an opinion, and 16.7% said students should not assess their peers in any way. Thus, as noted above, even though over 70% of the assessees liked being peer-assessed, only 47.9% thought students should do PA, which is rather strange. Those who said “yes” mostly provided comments similar to the following one made by R. 4: “because it’s interesting and important to know other people’s opinion about your presentation.” However, those who expressed an opposing view once again focused on the role of the teacher as a specialist in the field who is the only one to assess. Therefore, students’ opinions, insights and feedback did not matter to them.

The study was limited in the sense that it involved quite few students and only the experience of assessees, not both assessee and assessor experience. Nevertheless, as a case study, it provides valuable insight that could be taken into account by EFL and other foreign language teachers while implementing PA in their classes for formative assessment or other purposes.

Conclusion

After being peer-assessed, not many students thought their peers should assess their skills even though a lot more of them liked being peer-assessed as long as PA did not affect their overall course grades. Consequently, more information and training should be provided to students before employing PA in order to address not only various formal requirements related to PA of particular skill(s) but also student concerns related to objectivity, fairness, purposes of PA in an EFL or other classroom, and benefits of PA.

It is also pertinent to address the issue of the role of a teacher in the twenty-first century EFL classroom. Students still see their teacher as a sole provider of knowledge and evaluation, but students should become aware that they could contribute in their EFL classes in many ways as well. Therefore, the value of student opinions and feedback should be given more attention and appreciation in an EFL classroom in general, not only when PA is implemented. This would be beneficial for independent student learning and at the same time reduce stress while learning from their own and their peers’ mistakes.

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