


Learners' Perceptions of Peer Assessment: Implications for Their Willingness to Write in an EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, several researchers have expressed their concern regarding students' attitudes towards writing. To address the effects of peer assessment (PA) on 100 young intermediate EFL learners' writing performance, this study examined whether the use of anonymous reciprocal PA in 4 public secondary schools in Cyprus would result in considerable improvement in students' motivation towards PA of writing and their willingness to write. The analysis of the data from the pre-PA questionnaires indicated that students' attitudes were positive before experimenting with PA but improved even more after the implementation. This was also confirmed by the focus group discussions in which shortcomings of PA were also highlighted. Students expressed their wish to use multiple forms of assessment, receive more training, and increase their exposure to PA. All in all, students' positive attitude towards PA seemed to have affected their writing performance and vice versa.

KEYWORDS

Attitudes, EFL, Inclusive Assessment, Inclusive Practices, Motivation, Peer Assessment, Peer Learning, Students' Perceptions, Writing Performance

INTRODUCTION

Peer assessment (PA) is a prominent learning and assessment method in terms of which learners engage in providing grades and/or feedback to their peers (Topping, 2017). It is frequently highlighted that the main aim of PA is not to provide a final grade or evaluation but to improve students' learning journey (Planas Lladó et al., 2014). PA has been successfully used at all levels of education including remedial education (Topping, 2009). It has been viewed as an important component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing instruction and has proved to have an impact on increasing learners' motivation and improving their self-reliance through a sense of personal accountability (Topping, 2010).

The current study wishes to add a secondary school learner's voice which has been so far absent in the literature (Hovardas et al., 2014). It intends to compare strengths and weaknesses of PA from a young learner's perspective which is lacking (Pinter, 2017) and provide recommendations for the successful implementation of PA in the EFL writing classroom. It aims to broaden the knowledge

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of PA by exploring adolescent EFL students' attitudes focusing on writing skills since relatively few studies devoted time and effort to examine students' perceptions of PA in an EFL secondary school context (Tsivitanidou et al., 2011). Finally, it hopes to promote the idea of involving learners in the assessment process and encourage educators to collect multiple sources of feedback for their students by using innovative learning-oriented assessment methods such as PA.

BACKGROUND

According to the literature, there is an extensive body of research on learners' attitudes towards PA (Lin, 2018; Meletiadou, 2012, 2013). The affective benefit of peer review over teacher review in EFL writing has been typically rationalized in many studies since students prefer receiving multiple feedback rather than one-sided teacher comments wishing to gain more experience in writing and editing by reflecting on the written work of their peers (Gielen & De Wever, 2015).

Other studies report that learners clearly prefer to receive feedback from their teacher although they do appreciate and acknowledge their peers' assistance (Zhao, 2014). In their study, Hovardas et al. (2014) implemented reciprocal online PA in their science course and reported that their 28 secondary school students' overall feelings were positive, but some did question the quality of peer recommendations, the cynical tone of certain peer assessors and the doubtful sincerity of their classmates' feedback. According to Ruegg (2015), learners opt for both peer and tutor feedback as they think it is equally important. Topping (2017) also indicated that students' inspiration depends on learners' intellectual involvement and achievement. From this point of view, researchers claim that learners using PA were more inspired as their writing performance was significantly better than that of learners relying on teacher assessment (TA) only (Cheng et al., 2015).

Hwang et al. (2014) report that their 167 participants, who were involved in a PA-based game development approach, thought that PA assisted them in assimilating new information more easily and encouraged involvement in the evaluation process. Learners showed high engagement and were interested in exploring PA techniques to enhance their writing skills. Moreover, PA increased their motivation since students were able to discuss their personal views and had a chance to identify similarities and differences with their peers' drafts. The marks produced in terms of PA were more reliable as more people were involved in the procedure rather than only one individual, their teacher. Finally, lack of favouritism was also evident in the evaluation process.

However, research has indicated various challenges associated with PA. Learners sometimes feel they are unfit for this type of approach and cannot assess their peers' work reliably (Snowball & Mostert, 2013). This results in taking their role lightly and investing less time and effort in familiarizing themselves with this new alternative assessment method, especially if they are inexperienced in PA and receive no training. McConlogue (2015) has reported on learners' resentment when they first engage in it. However, researchers claim that learners' attitudes towards PA improve as they become more involved in the process of implementing this innovative assessment approach (Mulder et al., 2014). Variation in learners' dispositions towards evaluation may rely considerably on how individual teachers initiate and plan PA (Kearney, 2013).

Moreover, according to Tighe-Mooney et al. (2016), learners may occasionally be ill-disposed, overly judgemental, or impolite when using PA. Overall, learners may start finding excuses and justifying themselves to their peers when their work is viewed unfavourably, especially by classmates. While experimenting with PA, some learners may question the validity of their peers' comments and may find it difficult to understand their classmates because of their accent or pronunciation. Due to absence of second language (L2) formal (rhetorical) schemata, several learners may have unreasonable assumptions about the ideas and organisation of their classmates' essays. Consequently, peer assessors may provide comments that do not assist these young writers as they try to improve their drafts, thus fulfilling their instructors' anticipations.

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