Peer-assessment: Sri Lankan English as a Second Language Teachers' Perception

By P.B.S.L. PUSHPAKUMARA[1]

Peer-assessment offers various benefits. There is empirical evidence that peer-assessment enhances learner performance, develops cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, professional skills, personal and intellectual skills and social competencies. Also, previous studies on affective factors of peer-assessment suggest that peer-assessment reduces learner anxiety and stress and enhances confidence and motivation. In spite of these benefits, peer-assessment is not common in educational settings. Teachers, the key stakeholders of education, also tend to hold reservation regarding peer-assessment. Therefore, the present study was conducted using six English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers teaching in a compulsory English course in a state university in Sri Lanka to explore their perception regarding peer-assessment in ESL writing class. Qualitative data obtained through one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews were analyzed using content analysis method. Surprisingly, the results of the present study revealed that the participants believed that peer-assessment helps learners develop their cognitive and metacognitive skills, personal and intellectual skills, and some professional skills and saves teachers' time. Also, they believed that peer-assessment motivates learners. However, they identified limited English language proficiency and friendship as some key challenges to effectively implement peer-assessment in the language classroom. Group based peer-assessment and active teacher participation as a facilitator in the peer-assessment process were proposed as solutions to overcome these challenges and to ensure a successful implementation of peer-assessment in the ESL classroom. Taken together, the findings of the present study provide strong empirical support for the use of learner-centred peer-assessment in the ESL writing class and other similar contexts.

KEYWORDS - Peer-Assessment, Perception, ESL Writing

[1] Department of English language teaching, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. Email: sampath@sjp.ac.lk

INTRODUCTION

Peer-assessment is a widely spoken alternative assessment today. Learner centred peer-assessment which is defined as an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners offers various benefits (Topping 2017). First and foremost, empirical evidence suggests that those learners who are involved in peer-assessment outperform others who receive teacher feedback only (Double, McGrane & Hopfenbeck, 2019). Further, previous research findings suggest that peer-assessment develops learners' cognitive competencies such as critical thinking and higher-level thinking (Falchikov, 2005), promotes learning, enhances learners' personal, intellectual and professional skills (Zhu & Carless, 2018) and social competencies such as communication skills, collaborative skills and lifelong learning (Nilson, 2003). Most importantly, there is empirical evidence in peer-assessment literature that peer-assessment reduces test anxiety and stress, enhances students' motivation (Peng, 2009), and enhances students' sense of ownership, responsibility and their motivation to learn (Sivan, 2000).

Studies have examined ESL teachers' perception about peer-assessment, and they generally conclude that teachers hold reservation regarding peer-assessment (Vickerman, 2009; Zhao, 2014). According to Falchikov (2004), teachers do not want to implement peer-assessment assuming that students lack the necessary experience to do the job, or due to the fear that students would collude and award over inflated grades. Similarly, Liu and Carless (2006) point out that teachers are reluctant to allow learners to assess peers because offering grades and marks by peers may affect the reliability of assessment. They further argue that academics do not like to allow students to offer grades because teachers consider assessment to be the sole responsibility of the teachers who possess the necessary knowledge and expertise to conduct reliable assessment (Liu & Carless, 2006). Also, many teachers do not like to integrate peer-assessment into their teaching because they think that peer-assessment is a time consuming activity (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Nasab, 2015). According to Peng (2009), teachers hold positive views regarding peer-assessment, but they are concerned about the friendship biases because students do not want to take a risk of jeopardizing their friendship (Peng, 2009). Thus, teachers generally tend to hold reservation regarding peer-assessment. Therefore, in spite of some benefits of peer-assessment, learner-centred peer-assessment has not become a

popular classroom practice in most of the educational contexts including higher educational institutes in Sri Lanka.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The usefulness of peer-assessment is devalued by some researchers claiming that peers usually offer vague non-specific feedback and provide no solid explanations (Min, 2005). However, studies conducted in other contexts to examine the learner perception and teacher perception regarding peer-assessment claim that learners and teachers hold positive perceptions about peer-assessment. For instance, Peng (2009) conducted a mixed method study in an EFL context in Taiwan employing eighty-eight high intermediate and 76 low intermediate college students and their class teacher. The college students of this study who followed a 3-credit year-long compulsory English course were asked to assess the group oral presentations of their peers. Peng used a closed-ended questionnaire, open ended questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, emails and a 300 word essay on the topic peer-assessment to understand the participants' perception of peer-assessment and the teacher's perception of peer-assessment and found that both learners and the teacher held positive perceptions of peer-assessment. Yet, published research discussing the teachers' perception about peer-assessment in the Sri Lankan educational context is limited (Kommalage & Thabrew, 2011; Silva et al., 2017). The present study, therefore, set out to bridge these gaps by postulating the following research question in order to investigate the Sri Lankan ESL teachers' views regarding peer-assessment.

Research question:

How do Sri Lankan university-level ESL teachers perceive peer-assessment?

METHODOLOGY

Six teachers who were teaching in a compulsory English programme in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Sri Lanka were involved in the study, and they shared their views regarding peer-assessment. They were numbered for anonymity purposes. Their details are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Details of the participants

Teachers	Highest educational/ professional qualifications	Teaching experience at tertiary level
Teacher 1	M.A. in Applied Linguistics	5 years
Teacher 2	M.A. in Applied Linguistics	4 years
Teacher 3	M.A. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages	6 years
Teacher 4	M.A. in Applied Linguistics	4 years
Teacher 5	PhD in English	40 years
Teacher 6	M.A. in Applied Linguistics	6 years

Source: Compiled by the researcher, 2020

At the time of the study, one lecturer was working as a temporary assistant lecturer of the same university where the study was carried out, and others were teaching at different universities as visiting lecturers. Of the six teachers, two teachers observed students assessing nine writing tasks including paragraphs, essays and a letter written by their peers and gained hands on experience in peer-assessment. Their role during the peer-assessment exercise was critical. For instance, when the learners were involved in the peer-assessment process, they were grouped by the class teacher into small groups of six or seven. The teachers made sure that the learners interactively worked and helped each other to assess the peers' writing. Also, the class teacher facilitated the peer-assessment process by explaining the purpose of peer-assessment and how to use the marking rubric to objectively assess peers. All the teachers who participated in the study were female teachers with varying degrees of peer-assessment experience.

After the teachers conducted peer-assessment exercises, one focus group interview and two one-on-one interviews were conducted with the teacher participants of the study in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their views about peer-assessment. An interview guide adapted from Peng's (2009) study was used to conduct semi-structured focus group interviews with the teacher participants of this study. The data obtained were analyzed using the content analysis method to identify themes and to draw conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study takes a theme-based approach in presenting and discussing results. Accordingly, the teacher views related to each theme are presented and analysed in order to gain a better understanding of teachers' views regarding peer-assessment.

A. Cognitive and Meta-cognitive Competencies

Cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies such as critical thinking, higher level thinking and active independent learning rather than passive learning are considered to be important skills for students. The teacher participants of this study pointed out that peer-assessment helped the learners develop these skills. For instance, the teacher participant one pointed out that

"When the student thinks why this is wrong, they are actively involved in the process of learning. For instance, today activity took about twenty minutes to write and twenty minutes to correct it. So students were involved in learning for all the forty minutes. Some asked why this is wrong and how to correct it." A similar view was shared by teacher four; "During peer-assessment, teacher becomes less authoritarian and teaching and learning become student centred. Instead of unidirectional feedback from teacher to the student, here we see that students give feedback to each other. They don't depend on me, which is good... as students seem to be actively involved in the learning process, I think it is good."

Thus, the participants of the present study believed that peer-assessment enhanced the learners' critical thinking skills, higher order thinking skills, reasoning skills, reflective skills and independent active learning skills. These findings are consistent with the views shared by Falchikov (2005), Peng (2009) and Topping (2005).

B. Personal and intellectual development

Life-long learning, taking responsibility for one's own learning and enhancing knowledge through mutual interaction are important personal and intellectual skills. The results of the present study suggested that peer-assessment helped learners develop their personal and intellectual skills. For instance, peer-assessment encourages the learners to take the responsibility for their own learning. According to the teacher one,

"Now students do not generally read. They don't read what they write. They don't read to gather information. So this way at least they read others' essays. So reading peers' essays helps them to improve. Peer comment may trigger them more than my one."

A similar view is shared by Tsui and Ng (2000) who claim that learners who are involved in peer-assessment exercises benefit from reading other students' work as they prepare to give feedback.

C. Professional development

The participants of this study pointed out that peer-assessment helped learners develop key professional skills such as teaching skills, independent evaluative skills, professional collaboration and teamwork, communication skills, negotiation skills, listening skills and editing skills. For instance, the teacher participant one pointed out that "Peer-assessment helps the learners to develop editing skills." A similar view is echoed by Leki (1990) who claims that peer-assessment helps learners develop various writing skills including brainstorming, outlining, drafting, rewriting and editing.

D. Time factor

Teachers of the present study pointed out that peer-assessment saved their time. The teacher participant one elaborated how teachers can save time during the peer-assessment exercise.

"If there is a procedure where peers give feedback for their friends before teacher marks the essay, that will help students to produce better pieces of writing. There will be an improved version by the time it comes to the teacher. During the process of editing and rewriting students will be learning. It saves teacher's time for marking, because it has already been marked by a peer and there will be fewer errors. When we do peer-assessment, I have about 45 students in my class, all of them are peer marking after they write. So time is saved." The finding that peer-assessment saves teachers' time is consistent with the previous findings of McDowell (1995), and this is contrary to the views of Cheng and Warren (2005) and Nasab (2015) who argue that peer-assessment is time-consuming. In fact, planning and implementation of peer-assessment consume time, yet the time spent for peer-assessment appears to be worth as involvement in peer-assessment ensures improved learning and creates an opportunity for the learners to receive specific, timely and comprehensive feedback from their peers. This conclusion lends support

to the findings of Min (2005) who points out that the time spent on training for peer-assessment compensates for the learners' enhanced learning.

E. Learner motivation

The participants of this study shared their views related to affective factor, motivation of the learners. For instance, the teacher participant three said, "In my class, students enjoy correcting others' essays. They seem to feel that they are privileged. They like it." Thus, the results of the present study suggest that peer-assessment motivates learners. Previous studies report similar findings (Topping, 2005).

F. Challenges to peer-assessment

Teacher participants in the present study pointed out that the limited language proficiency is a key challenge to administer peer-assessment in ESL classes. For instance, the teacher participant one explaining during the focus group interview said, "One day I asked my students to write a paragraph and did peer correction. At the end of the day when I collected the papers, and I could see that none of them have spotted any error even a grammar or spelling error. They have ignored it. Maybe they are not very sure how to correct the error." Thus, limited language proficiency appears to be a key challenge in administering peer-assessment in ESL classes successfully. A similar view is echoed by Yu and Lee (2016) who question whether peer-assessment can be effectively and successfully implemented in ESL contexts where L2 proficiency plays a significant role in determining students' ability to give and utilize peer-feedback. Therefore, it is important to devise a mechanism to overcome this challenge.

Friendship was another challenge to implement peer-assessment successfully. According to the teacher participant one, friendship strongly operates in a country like Sri Lanka. "In our country, students just say something for the sake of saying something and simply because of friendship." Thus, learners believed that friendship negatively affects peer-assessment, in particular, in a country like Sri Lanka. This finding lends support to the findings of Connor and Asenavage (1994) who claim that students from collectivist cultures (such as Asian) tend to avoid giving critical comments in order to maintain interpersonal harmony, cooperation and consensus between friends. A solution is needed to overcome this challenge too.

G. Suggestions for effective peer-assessment

Group-based peer-assessment is recommended by some participants to resolve the aforementioned challenges including limited proficiency issues and ensure more effective and productive peer-assessment exercises objectively. For instance, the teacher participant three said, "We can put them into groups and then do it. Then there are diverse viewpoints. When someone doesn't know something, others can help." This finding supports the previous observations of Freeman (1995) who claims that group-based peer-assessment can ensure objectivity, reliability and validity of assessment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the present study indicate that the ESL teachers of the present study generally hold positive views regarding peer-assessment. They believed that peer-assessment develops learners' skills. However, when organizing peer-assessment activities, challenges such as learners' proficiency and friendship biases need to be effectively handled using some techniques such as effective grouping. Also, teacher guidance before, during and after the administration of peer-assessment is extremely vital as Zhu and Carless (2018) too point out in order to successfully implement peer-assessment and gain maximum benefits. Therefore, peer-assessment exercises can be cautiously used in ESL writing classes in Sri Lanka and other similar contexts to develop learners' skills. The generalisability of the findings of the present study is subject to certain limitations such as the small sample size drawn from one particular state university in Sri Lanka. Future studies need to be conducted with a larger sample representing several universities in order to shed more light on this under explored area.

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