Peer Assessment in Writing: A Critical Review of Previous Studies

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Abstract

Peer assessment has attracted more attention an effective assessment tool in recent years. Peer assessment refers to the arrangement for peers to consider the quality of learning outcomes of others of similar status, it received attention of various studies due to the growing interest in the student-centered approach as learners need to be involved in the learning process even in the assessment. This paper is a critical review of previous studies on peer assessment in English as Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) context. Fifteen peer assessment studies from 2004 to 2017 were extensively reviewed and systematically analyzed. Peer assessment of the reviewed studies were on the quality of the writing outcomes of students in the EFL/ESL contexts, as writing skill occupies an important role in teaching English language. As a critical review paper of these studies, this paper highlights practical use of peer assessment and the important challenges or issues that need to be considered when utilizing peer assessment in the classroom. This paper hopes that practical measures of peer assessment will be utilized effectively by educators in the ESL and EFL classrooms in the near future.

Keyword(s): Peer assessment, Writing, English as Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

1.0 Introduction

Feedback has always been an integral part of learning a second language or a foreign language. In regards to the types of feedback, there has been numerous studies that discussed the effectiveness of teacher feedback when it comes to learning a L2. For this paper, peer assessment is examined as a form of feedback. In today's era, the learning of English language is not only subjected to the teacher of the language. Moreover, the teaching and learning process of English as a second or foreign language has rapidly shifted from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness. Thus, peer feedback, acts as an effective supplement to teachers' feedback and self-feedback, which is considered one of the most important forms feedback in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It is a form of collaborative learning that can be possibly utilized pedagogically when it comes to learning English as a second language or a foreign language.

Peer feedback is important as it offers many benefits in regard of enhancing the quality of the teaching and learning process as it facilitates better understanding of the learning content by highlighting the students' strengths and weaknesses, facilitate interactivity, helps the students to understand the assessment criteria and as a result provides a space for improvement based on that criteria. Furthermore, as noted by Boud and Falchikov (2006), active participation by students in assessment design, choices, criteria and making judgments is a more sustainable preparation for subsequent working life. Compared with other assessments, peer assessment encourages students to take a more active and constructive role in a cooperative way. This is according to Shepard (2000) that states that during the instructional process, peer assessment is closely embedded in and aligned with students' efforts. Students' assessment of their peers has a positive impact on their personal development in terms of increasing their sense of responsibility towards both the processes of assessment and the quality of their learning outcomes.

Despite the fact that peer feedback has been experimented in the ESL or EFL classroom, there has been few negative perspectives towards the use of peer assessment as a pedagogical instrument in the classroom. As there has been a lack of research studies on how students respond to their peers' writing in specific contexts

and why they respond in the ways they do. For instance, individual differences and contextual factors may influence L2 learners' peer feedback practices in the ESL and EFL classroom. Numerous studies have accounted for the positive contribution of peer assessment towards language learning. Significantly, peer assessment permits students to compare and contrast their work among their peers and enable students to keep track of their learning outcomes and help the process of learning and performance in the classroom (Yang & Tsai, 2010). Additionally, peer assessment helps develop higher order reasoning skills and higher cognitive thought (Birdsong & Sharplin, 1986). According to Entwhistle (1993), peer assessment permits for flexible and active language learning as well. Despite many benefits of peer assessment in the ESL and EFL classroom, there has been a lack of research studies accounting for the use of peer assessment should practically in the classroom. Thus, this paper will critically review of the journals selected by highlighting the practicality of using peer assessment in the ESL or EFL classroom and the challenges that are imposed to educators when utilizing peer assessment.

2.0 Summary of Previous Studies

The summary of previous studies is divided into three parts. The first part explores the definition of peer assessment whereas the second part explores the journals selected for the critical review. The last part explores the benefits of using peer assessment in the ESL and EFL classroom.

2.1 Definition of Peer Assessment in Writing

 With the rapid development environment, the role of English has become rapidly important in the world. As an international language, student can utilize English to obtain the latest information from all over the world; students can use English to communicate with the foreign friends about different ideas; students can use English to learn new knowledge from many disciplines; students can use English to promote their careers after graduation; students can use English broaden their horizons. The process of learning English entails four parts mainly: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These four aspects are related to each other. Nevertheless, according to most students, the most difficult task in learning English would be the aspect of writing.

The writing ability is categorized as a written communication ability. Wang (2000) indicated that writing can give students a chance to express their own voice, especially to those who are less confident to communicate with classmates and teachers. Moreover, writing can give students much more time to process their thoughts. Written language is perceived as a language for communication just like a spoken language. It is vital for students to combine what they have learned, such as: vocabularies, grammars and sentences. The writing process can help students reflect and build on what they have learned. However, the writing skill is the most difficult ability for students to master. As Nunan (2001) indicated in his work: Among the four basic skills of English learning, writing is the last in sequence but should by no means be the least in importance. In terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language. It is something most native speakers never master.

Thus, peer assessment in writing could be utilized to evaluate learners' English level. This is so because peer assessment is a way of assessing the output, or product, of student learning but it can be seen as a process of learning in its own right (Hounsell, 1997). Peer assessment can be defined as an arrangement for peers to consider the level, value, worth, quality or successfulness of the products or outcomes of learning of others of similar status (Topping ,1998). Consequently, different types of peer assessment might generate positive effects through different mechanisms through writing.

2.2 Journals Selected for the Review

This paper is focused on journals that are in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) context. The justification of using both contexts in this paper is that there are restricted numbers of journals regarding peer assessment in these areas of research. The critical review focuses on 15 comprehensive journals. These journals were carefully selected as they are Scopus-Indexed journals and have

been peer-reviewed. Additionally, these journals were selected on the basis of the year of publication as the authors of this paper targeted journals from 2004 onwards as there were limited number of recent Scopus-Indexed journals that were available. As the paper focuses on the ESL and EFL context of peer assessment that utilizes the writing ability, these journals are from countries such as India, Saudi, Scotland, America, Iran, Malaysia, Sweden, Japan, and China. The journals that are in the ESL context are journals from India, Scotland, America, and Malaysia whereas the journals that are in the EFL context are journals from Saudi, Iran, Japan and China respectively.

The majority of the number of journals are from China which is 4. It is followed by the number of journals from Japan which is 3. There are 2 journals respectively from Malaysia and Iran. The remaining journals collected were from India, Saudi, Scotland, Sweden and America was one journal respectively. As for the number of participants in the respective 15 journals reviewed, the number of participants varied. The number of participants ranged in the samples ranged from small to large numbers. The samples were as small numbers such as two participants and ranged to large numbers of participants such as 81. The proficiency level of the participants from these respective journals are varied. The majority of the articles were represented by participants with intermediate levels in English.

2.3 Benefits of Peer Assessment in the ESL and EFL classroom

Peer assessment can be used as a supportive feedback tool to teacher assessment and feedback in ESL and EFL classrooms. It provides advantages such as making the range of the feedback wider, facilitating better learning, improving students` personal development as they become more autonomous and responsible through engaging in peer assessment, and in addition peer assessment can reduce the marking load on teachers. Some of the studies of the reviewed literature reported some benefits of using peer assessment in ESL and EFL classes, this part of the literature review states those benefits in terms of the following:

Enhancing the quality of learning:

Enhancing the quality of learning includes improving students' achievements, facilitating their understanding of the learning material and enhancing the development of their skills, Parthasarthy (2014) stated that significant improvement of students' writing skill was reported due to the use of peer assessment and that oral peer feedback sessions can be utilized to enhance discussion and learning in ESL and EFL classroom. Athan (2014) concluded that peer reviewers can enrich the learning process in the ESL classroom even if the provided corrections were on the form level, and that both writers and peer reviewers improved; writers improved in terms of learning new vocabulary and expressions whereas peer reviewers improved in terms of enhancing their language knowledge of the topic or topics focused. Other authors such Khonbi and Sadeghi (2013) recommended to place more weight on peer feedback as it may lead to higher levels of course achievement, they based this recommendation on the posttest results of the peer assessment group which outperformed the self-assessment group.

Jahin (2012) stated that peer reviewing had a positive impact on developing essay writing ability of the participants. Peer feedback on writing helped students to improve their knowledge, because it gave them the chance to think critically according to Bijami, Kashef and Nejad (2013). White (2009) mentioned that 60% of the students agreed that rating their peers helped them with their own presentation and how to deliver it, and 96 % of them agreed to recommend peer assessment in future classes which refers to peer assessment as a positive assessment experience to the students. Lee (2015) reported that inter-feedback was found to nurture a mastery-oriented learning without much emphasis on competition among peers or normative evaluation. In the EFL context, Zhao (2010) reported that students understood a larger portion of peer feedback than the teacher feedback which was used in the redrafts, because of L1 use in peer interaction which facilitated mutual understanding among peers.

Enhancing the affective aspect of the learners

Enhancing the affective aspect of the learners includes reducing students' stress, encouraging interaction, enhancing their motivation and confidence and independence, Jahin (2012) reported that peer reviewing in the EFL context had positive impact in reducing the writing apprehension level for the participants of the experimental group. Azarnoosh (2013) stated that students had positive feelings toward peer assessment and this form of assessment creates opportunities students` interaction while increasing the objectivity in assessment. Yu and Lee (2016) also mentioned that peer review enhance interaction among peers due to the use of both of L1 and L2 as a fruitful strategy in the peer assessment. According to Ruegg (2015), peer assessment enabled peer feedback that increased students' interaction, confidence and critical thinking skills. Athan (2014) reported that students were more comfortable with peer reviewers as they discussed their difficulties expressing certain ideas or thoughts in the English language. Finally, Parthasarthy (2014) reported that peer feedback equipped students with sense of both independence and identity in their writing because the assessor is a peer and as they were more anxious and conscious towards being corrected by teachers.

3.0 The Critical Review

The critical review explores two main aspects of peer assessment. The first aspect explores the practicality of using peer assessment in the ESL or EFL classroom. The second part explores the challenges imposed when utilizing peer assessment in the classroom.

3.1 Practicality in the ESL/ EFL Classroom

The use of peer assessment has been experimented through various researches. The practicality of peer assessment in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) entails lowering anxiety levels of students pertaining to writing apprehension in the classroom. Students in the ESL and EFL classroom are more confident to present their work in front of their peers compared to their teachers (Jahin 2012, White, 2009, Zhao 2010, Azarnoosh 2013), and even were at ease discussing their writing issues such as the difficulties of expressing certain feelings in English language due to the lack of varied vocabulary and expressions (Athan, 2014). Despite the use of peer assessment to lower anxiety levels of writing apprehension, teachers must first prepare students for the peer assessment.

According to White (2009) and Azarnoosh (2013), students must be given a specific period to familiarize with peer assessment. Peer assessment should never be done as an impulsive or blind assessment in the ESL and EFL classroom (Azarnoosh, 2013). This is because students must be sufficiently trained. The training phase to students about the peer revision procedures was essential to studies such (Athan 2014, Parthasarthy 2014, & Khonbi and Sadeghi 2013). Teachers that are keen on utilizing peer assessment should provide training for students in terms of providing appropriate feedback, for both aspects, written and oral feedback. According to Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) states that peer interaction must be encouraged by providing appropriate written and oral feedback to increase objectivity and ensure students are able to make sense of their knowledge gap pertaining to that task.

When teachers assess English language learners, they need to ask themselves some fundamental questions such as: Can I assess English language learners in my own classroom? What specific aspects of writing am I going to assess? In order to answer such important questions, teachers will need to learn more about their students' prior schooling and background at home. English language learners enter schools from vastly different backgrounds, teachers should not make assumptions that all English language learners' level are same, so it is important for teachers to become knowledgeable about of their students live outside of school, it is essential if students are English Language Learners. Freeman (2003) has established four categories to help classroom teachers better understand English language learners and their backgrounds:

(1)   Newly arrived students with adequate formal schooling,

(2)   Newly arrived students with limited formal schooling,

(3)   Students exposed to two languages simultaneously, and

(4)   Long-term English language learners.

The most effective teachers of English language learners understand the differences amongst individual students' academic performance and they focus on what each individual student is capable of achieving instead of what the student cannot do.

Comparatively, peer assessment must first be constructed or designed to accommodate a specific task that the teacher wants to be implemented in the classroom. According to Yarrow and Topping (2001), teachers that utilize peer assessment in the classroom should be mindful of 'goal specification', a clear goal of the task so that students are constantly reinforced with achieving specific objectives that has been established. Additionally, to ensure specific objectives are achieved in the classroom, the students must be presented with a scoring criterion that has been carefully constructed for them to assess their peers during the assessment.

A scoring criterion is essential for students as it will serve as a guide for them to assess their peers according to the range of specific criteria that has been set for the objective of that task (White, 2009, Boud & Falchikov, 2008). Furthermore, student's proficiency level in the language must be considered. Students that possess low proficiency in the language should be avoided when utilizing peer assessment. It is recommended that peer assessment should be utilized in the ESL and EFL classroom with intermediate level students. This is because intermediate students that utilize peer assessment have enough input of knowledge of the English language to provide appropriate feedback to their peers (Jahin 2012, Zhao 2010, Azarnoosh 2013, White 2009). According to Parthasarthy (2014), by considering peer feedback in ESL contexts as possible alternative form of feedback, especially in the absence of adequate feedback on students` writing skills depends on the quality of peer feedback, the quality of PF depends on the institutional culture with its environment, and the availability of trainable students with good writing skills to act as peer reviewers.

Certain strategies were found to be fruitful in enhancing peer interaction during peer review, such as the use of both L1 and L2 (instead of merely L2) (Yu, 2016). In both ESL and EFL contexts, the use of L1 can be more appropriate in motivating interaction between students-students and students-teachers than merely using L2. Through the process, students can enhance their oral communication ability and deepen the bond with peers. With the help of L1, students can better understand the target language so that they can give better feedback to peers. Ambag (2013) stated that students learn more by giving peer feedback. The value of students' feedback in writing, and their creativity in presenting peer responses, are measured by the extent to which they use their own language to expand and amplify the views of other students and themselves. The students can identify strengths and weaknesses in their work, which also promotes their critical ability to reflect, assess, evaluate, plan and take responsibility for their own learning (Pol, Berg, Admiraal & Simons 2008).

3.2 Challenges when Utilizing Peer Assessment

One of the most highlighted issues pertaining to peer assessment would be the issue of proficiency levels of students in the classroom. The level of proficiency in the language is essentially important to peer assessment. Students should be more proficient in the language, knowledge and skills to be capable to act as peer reviewers and such availability cannot be granted in every typical classroom. Without having a proficiency level that is greater than the 'intermediate' level in the language, students would not be equipped to provide feedback that may help bridge the gaps of knowledge of their peers. According to Athan (2014), insignificant levels of improvement in grammatical knowledge of the students were noticed because the provided explanations by peer assessors were on the surface level as peer reviewers themselves did not have in depth / extensive knowledge of grammar. According to Zhao (2010) and White (2009), teachers must not assume students are proficient in the language even if they are excelling academically in other subjects.

This is because in the ESL and EFL context, most students, especially in primary and secondary schools, are divided into different classes based on their academic ability. There are not divided based on their language

proficiency of the language. Thus, students have different developmental level of the language among their peers in the classroom (Nelson & Murphy, 1993 and Zhang, 1995). Therefore, before utilizing peer assessment, it is advisable to have a proficiency level test to ensure students possess at least an 'intermediate' level proficiency in the language. This will permit the teacher to know his or her students accordingly and decide whether to use peer assessment in the classroom, albeit this step is a time-consuming process.

Another issue that is prevalent pertaining to peer assessment would be dealing with 'power relationships' among peers (Cheng and Warren, 2005). Students that utilized peer assessment stated that their negative attitudes towards peer assessment as they did not like their peers having power over their assessment. Similarly, there were students that felt uncomfortable assessing their peers as they felt pressured to not hurt their peers' feelings and cause embarrassment to them. This could possibly contribute to bias among peers (Azarnoosh, 2013, Zhao, 2010 and White, 2009). Yu (2016) suggested that L2 writing teachers may consider friendship grouping in collaborative learning activities as friendship is helpful in reducing the power distance and enables students to work collaboratively. There are still questions existing about the preference in peer assessment as a collaborative assessment tool. The assessing process may consist of bias or other interference factors. Intimacy can also lead to injustice of the peer feedback. Students may not take it seriously in the process and the result can be different from what they supposed to be.

Comparatively, the use of students' L1 in the ESL and EFL classroom is an issue to peer assessment. In the ESL and EFL classroom, it is stated that L1 does facilitate the learning of L2 in the classroom (Brown 2005, Bhooth, 2014, and Mart, 2013). However, teachers do find it difficult to balance the use of L1 when learning L2. According to Parthasarthy (2014), oral peer feedback required attention to each students' issues which cannot be done in a teacher-centered classroom with large number of students as the peer assessment demanded considerable preparation by the peer reviewers which may influence the availability of students as peer reviewers.

Another challenge is the scoring practices, these practices can act as potential factors that might influence the assessment results, according to Khonbi &Sadeghi (2013), teachers should be careful dealing with the issue of scoring practices: students in self-assessment might tend to be lax in assessing themselves and students in peer assessment probably tend to be stricter in assessing their peers which might lead to students underestimating their peers.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation for Further Research

 Despite the many advantages of using peer assessment, there are many areas of ESL and EFL to be explored with the use of peer assessment. For instance, there should be more in-depth research conducted in the area of language proficiency in which explores of studying students with beginner, intermediate, and advance level of English proficiency. There is a need for further studies, in terms of the design of studies to control the validity and reliability of peer assessment, and to investigate the relative accuracy of peer and teacher feedback, also comparing the individualized peer feedback with a predetermined form of feedback (Ruegg, 2015).

Some of the reviewed studies had unrealistic size of classes such as two to nine students and 10 pairs as a sample in the studies which ultimately suggest the need for further studies to investigate the same context with bigger sample and relatively closer in size to the typical classroom so that generalizations can be made to the population of students in the ESL and EFL classroom.

On other hand, according to Khonbi & Sadeghi (2013), it is recommended that peer assessment should not account for large proportion of students` semester grades due to the issue of scoring practices which may influence the assessment results. Also, according to Ruegg (2015), it is recommended that in regards of the benefits of peer feedback in writing in the ESL and EFL classroom, peer reviewers should only give feedback in regards of organization and presentation of ideas.

Moreover, comparisons on the preference among self-feedback, peer feedback and teacher feedback in the ESL and EFL context should be explored thoroughly. According to Zhang (1995), since all three types of feedback

are beneficial with varying degrees of appeal, further research can explore the connection between the different types of feedback and their influences to both individuals and groups. Lastly, in regards to popularity and practicality, further research can also be conducted on online peer assessment as a new assessment tool for educators and students to utilize in the classroom.

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Appendix (Year & Publications)

NO.	TOPIC OF JOURNAL	YEAR	PUBLICATIONS OF JOURNAL
1.	Characteristics and User Acceptance of Peer Rating in EFL Writing Classrooms	2004	Language Teaching Research
2.	The Importance of Marking Criteria in the Use of Peer Assessment	2006	Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education

3.	Students Perspectives of Peer Assessment for Learning in a Public Speaking Course	2009	Asian EFL Journal-Professional Teaching Articles
4.	Investigating Learner's Use and Understanding of Peer and Teacher Feedback on Writing: A Comparative Study in a Chinese English Writing Classroom	2010	Elsevier
5.	Formative Peer Assessment of Academic Writing between Postgraduate Students	2010	Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education
6.	The Effect of Peer Reviewing on Writing Apprehension and Essay Writing Ability of Prospective EFL Teachers	2012	Australian Journal of Teacher Education
7.	Peer Assessment in an EFL Context: Attitudes and Friendship Bias	2013	Language Testing Asia: A Springer Open Journal
8.	Peer Feedback in Learning English Writing: Advantages and Disadvantages	2013	Journal of Studies in Education
9.	The Effect of Assessment Type (Self Vs. Peer) on Iranian University EFL Students` Course Achievement	2013	Procedia
10.	Empowering Peer Reviewers to Nurture Writing Skills in Peer Writers	2014	International Scientific Publication
11.	Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom	2014	Fortell _ (Teaching English and literature)
12.	The Relative Effect of Peer and Teacher Feedback on Improvement in EFL Students` Writing Skill	2015	Elsevier (Linguistic and education)

13.	Peer feedback in Second Language Writing: Investigating Junior Secondary Students' Perspectives on Inter-feedback and Intra-feedback	2015	Elsevier
14.	Exploring Chinese Students' Strategy Use in a Co-operate Peer Feedback Writing Group	2016	System
15.	Understanding University Students' Peer Feedback Practices in EFL Writing: Insight from a Case Study	2017	Elsevier