

Peer assessment in higher education: A reflection of the experience of an English Language instructor in Hong Kong

Kevin W. H. Yung

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

ABSTRACT

The term ‘assessment for learning’ (AfL) has been used for around a decade in education in Hong Kong, and it has been widely promoted under recent education reform. In higher education, where student-centred learning is emphasised, peer assessment is always used as one of the instruments to enable students to provide feedback to one another, promoting the idea of assessment for learning. This paper discusses the possibilities and limitations of peer assessment for assessment for learning in an English Language classroom of a university in Hong Kong according to the writer’s reflection as an English Language instructor. First, literature related to peer assessment and feedback in higher education will be reviewed. An episode of assessment on English speeches of a class of Year One Social Sciences students will be briefly described and analysed. The implications of peer assessment on classroom practices will be highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Peer assessment has been widely used as a tool for marking and providing feedback, and it has been advocated for making a vital contribution to assessment for learning (AfL) (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Bryant and Carless, 2010). It promotes learner-centredness and requires students to take responsibility by involving them in evaluating the performance or work of their peers using relevant criteria (Carless, 2011). In this paper, literature related to peer assessment and feedback in higher education will be briefly reviewed. The possibilities and limitations of using peer assessment to enhance learning will be discussed in the context of a Hong Kong ESL tertiary classroom according to the reflection of the writer as an English Language Instructor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer assessment, literally, means the process conducted by students to assess one another. However, the level of student involvement can vary. It can involve students simply giving a grade to their peers, or provide them with the opportunities to give extensive feedback to one another, or even allow them to discuss and work together to polish their work or performance. Falchikov (2001) defines peer assessment and peer feedback separately, but in fact, peer assessment can be used as an umbrella term, with peer feedback being its subset, although peer assessment can be carried out without the presence of peer feedback, for example, in the case of summative assessment (SA).

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that the main purpose of peer assessment is to promote the idea of formative assessment (FA), and peer feedback should be involved. Many studies have shown that FA plays a vital role in students' learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Carless, 2011; Wiliam, 2011), and it closely aligns with the key aim of peer assessment, which is to enhance learning (Falchikov, 2001). By providing and receiving peer feedback, students can raise awareness of how their learning can be moved forward, as they can learn from their classmates' work and apply it into their own work (Carless, 2011). They can also uncover problems and develop strategies to correct them (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000). This creates a learning community among the learners themselves and promotes an idea of using 'feedback' from their peers to 'feed-forward' (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton, 2001), emphasising future improvement and echoing the essence of AfL by offering 'great promise as the next best hope for stimulating gains in student achievement' (Cizek, 2010, p. 3).

Peer assessment at the university level has been widely researched, and many studies suggest that scores given in peer assessment are relatively accurate with student scores closely related to teacher grades (for example, Cheng and Warren, 1997; Falchikov, 2001; Falchikov, 2005; Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000; Hughes and Large, 1993). This indicates that students in higher education can provide reliable judgements and feedback for their peers through peer assessment. However, it is important for teachers to work with their students to enable better understanding of the assessment criteria and to train them in the skills of conducting effective peer assessment. Teachers are also responsible for developing learners' capability to reflect on their work and evaluate their peers as well as themselves.

THE SITUATION IN A HONG KONG TERTIARY CLASSROOM

In Hong Kong, English is used as a medium of instruction in most universities, so courses are developed to help undergraduates of different disciplines to use the language appropriately for academic purposes. In one of the courses I taught called 'Academic English for Social Sciences', where students were required to give a speech individually for 4-5 minutes at the end of the course, peer assessments were used for both formative and summative purposes. Before the 'real assessment' where their performance was graded and counted, a tutorial session was arranged for rehearsals. Each of the four groups of five students, within which they had been working throughout the whole semester, came for a 30-minute time slot. Each student gave a speech in front of his/her group-mates and me, and s/he was assessed based on the rubric agreed between the students and me in previous sessions (Table 1). While they were assessing one another, they filled in a peer assessment form, which included specific items in each assessed category in the rubric, namely content, organisation and cohesion, language, and delivery. This gave them an opportunity to analyse and apply the assessment criteria (Falchikov, 2005). They were also asked to write as much qualitative feedback as possible for their group-mates so that they could give suggestions to each other for improvement. After all the students had finished their speech, they were given 5-10 minutes to discuss and share their views and provide verbal feedback to everyone before I gave my feedback to them. At the end, they gave the assessment form with the written feedback to one another.

Rating	Descriptors
<p>Excellent A (+/-)</p>	<p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The speech is tightly centred on a central thesis, and shows a highly developed awareness of socio-historical contexts/issues. - The speaker demonstrates a very good depth of socio-historical understanding by using relevant and accurate details and/or events to support the thesis. - The speaker thoughtfully presents the concepts/arguments through analogies or comparisons and uses relevant examples for illustration. - The speaker fully anticipates the information needs of the audience, skillfully adapts content to the listeners' background and/or refers to listeners' experience. <p>Organisation and Cohesion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A wide variety of appropriate means for connecting utterances is used. Transitions clearly show how ideas are connected. - Relationships among concepts and/or ideas are clearly expressed and appropriately signaled to facilitate listeners' understanding. - Elaborations of ideas is fully coherent and easy to follow. <p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A wide range of complex grammatical structures is always used accurately, with very few or no occurrences of non-idiomatic or other inappropriate expressions - An extensive range of appropriate vocabulary is used. <p>Delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speed of delivery, pausing, sentence stress, tone and intonation patterns are always appropriate. - The speaker displays a high degree of sensitivity to the audience and uses paralinguistic features effectively to help deliver and construct arguments.

Table 1: Assessment criteria for speech

While such comments as 'good pronunciation', 'clear organisation' and 'interesting content' were too general, some students could provide high quality feedback which contributed to learning among themselves. Apart from showing appreciation with justifications, such as 'appropriate use of signposting', 'good use of stress and intonation', 'good adoption of topic sentences following with elaboration and examples', they were able to point out grammatical mistakes such as tenses and sentence structure and pronunciation errors, and suggested the correct ways of saying the sentences. They could also provide feedback on the relevance of content and the way it should be organised.

At this stage, grades were not suggested because the key aim of the peer assessment in the rehearsals was to let them focus on the qualitative feedback so that they could make progress and do their best in the actual assessment.

In the actual assessment, peer assessment was used for summative purpose. Students were assessed on two days. The students who were not assessed on the day had to assess the speakers by providing a suggested grade and brief comments for justification by filling in a 'confidential' peer assessment form, which they were told not to show to the speakers and I was the only one who read the form. After the assessment, I read the grades they suggested and compared them with those I gave to each student. As expected, their grades showed a great resemblance to mine, which strengthened my judgement of the students' performance.

DISCUSSION

Peer assessment in speeches requires students to concentrate, which increases students' engagement rather than simply listening when they were not being assessed (Falchikov, 2005). It worked well both in the rehearsals and the actual assessment. In the rehearsals, peer assessment was used for formative purposes. Before the tutorial session, students were involved in negotiation to agree on the assessment rubrics. This made them more familiar with the criteria and, more importantly, increased their sense of ownership (Falchikov, 2001). The procedures and reasons for using peer assessment were then explained to the students. It is important for the students to understand the academic standards and the skills of giving feedback, along with an understanding of the fact that the skills developed can prepare them for lifelong learning, which is transferable to other contexts (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Boud, 2000).

Throughout the course, knowledge exchange among learners had been emphasised as an important element of higher education, so they could understand that teaching and learning were not the sole responsibility of the teacher, but they should take responsibility and regulate their own learning. The promotion of this idea is particularly necessary in the Hong Kong context, where the atmosphere of teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools has been criticised as teacher-dependent, and students are passive recipients of knowledge. This can be attributed to the Chinese Confucian culture, which emphasises respect for seniors and authorities, and teachers' knowledge is taken for granted and not to be challenged (Pierson, 1996). However, the learning style becomes more self-directed and learner-centred because of the change in attitudes and motivation towards learning when they pursue higher education (Kennedy, 2002). Peer assessment forms a community without the teacher being the authority, and it serves the purposes of knowledge exchange and student-centredness and helps them to develop learner autonomy (Morrison, 2003).

Engaging students in group discussion sharing their views and feedback with one another trained up students' tact while they had to critique a peer's performance (Falchikov, 2005). It also provided an authentic environment for them to use the target language. As Topping (2010) mentions, this demands high communication skills of both assessors and assessees.

Therefore, it is particularly meaningful in an ESL classroom. However, discussion time was not enough for in-depth sharing. Moreover, although the group had been working together for the whole semester, they still felt embarrassed when they had to make negative comments verbally to their peers (Peterson and Irving, 2008). Making the assessment form anonymous might make the feedback more comprehensive (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema, 2010).

For summative assessment, peer assessment served to provide reference information for me to give a more reliable score. Despite concerns regarding imprecise marking, research on higher education shows that peer assessments can closely resemble teacher assessments when students are clear about the assessment criteria (Falchikov, 2001; Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000). Student voice was strengthened and I could use their feedback to support my judgement. Making the feedback form confidential enhanced students' psychological safety, so they could write more reliable comments (van Gennip et al., 2010). The form was also modified so that they could give more general and open-ended comments. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that peer assessment used in a summative way here did not facilitate learning. The students' feedback could have been organised and accessed by the students after the assessment, which might be helpful in their future study (Falchikov and Boud, 2008).

REFLECTION AND IMPLICATIONS

The experience of using peer assessment in the tertiary language classroom unveils a number of issues related to teaching and learning. While it is not certain whether adopting peer assessment has enhanced students' performance more than direct, explicit instruction would have done, it has developed a sense of responsibility in learning among the students. It supports the idea of learner-based approach and enables students to take greater control over their learning, serving the purpose of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011). The skills developed can also allow them to conduct self-directed learning in their future study and career, and continuous learning (Boud, 2000). These create more far-reaching and long-lasting benefits than simply achieving the course objectives.

As a teacher at higher education in this era, building up an image of authority and taking control in the classroom may not be the most effective way of teaching. Instead, being a learning facilitator, showing trust in the students, and letting them take the responsibility for their own learning through peer assessment may achieve unexpected outcomes. Being one of the assessors in the peer assessment process in the rehearsals, my status was closer to the students' because I became part of their learning community. This has also improved my relationship with them. However, teachers should be cautious not to criticise the students' feedback which may be different from theirs because every comment should be respected in the peer learning community. Besides, it will discourage the students from speaking in front of the teacher, especially in the Hong Kong context, where the concept of 'face' is of high importance (Kennedy, 2002).

Considering peer assessment from the students' psychological perspective, grouping the students at the beginning of the semester allowed them to work together and get familiar with one another, which made them feel more comfortable when giving feedback to their group-mates. This made the comments more reliable. I had also encouraged the students to build up friendship with their group-mates throughout the semester. While some groups did not have a very strong bonding, I could see that quite a number of students have become friends.

I have introduced the strategies of peer assessment with my colleagues and shared my views on it in relation to language teaching and learning. Some of them adopted it in their classrooms and they showed positive response in general, although a few of them expressed concerns such as the lack of class time and the large class size. Therefore, for peer assessment to reach its maximum potential, teachers need to work closely with the course co-ordinators in course planning. It is also important for teachers to have a clear picture of how peer assessment works, and adjust classroom practice to maximise students' learning.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Peer assessment is the key to learning from formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998), although it can also be used for summative purpose for teacher's reference. It can be a very useful instrument to facilitate learning if we use it appropriately and can increase the reliability of scores. Further research may focus on learners' attitudes towards peer assessment for both formative and summative purposes and its effectiveness in student learning. Studies can also be extended to workplace to see whether students will adopt the skills of peer assessment in their career and for life-long learning.

REFERENCES

- Assessment Reform Group. (2002) *Assessment for learning: 10 principles*. Retrieved 29 October 2011, from http://methodenpool.uni-koeln.de/benotung/assessment_basis.pdf.
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Pearson.
- Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5(1), 7-74.
- Bloxham, S. and Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing effective assessment in higher Education: A practical guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Boud, D. (2000) Sustainable assessment: rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2), 151-167.
- Bransford, J.D., Brown, A. L., and Cocking, R. R. (Eds.) (2000) *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- Bryant, D.A. and Carless, D. R. (2010) Peer assessment in a test-dominated setting: Empowering, boring or facilitating examination preparation? *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 9(1), 3-15.
- Carless, D. (2011) *From testing to productive student learning: Implementing formative assessment in confucian-heritage settings*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cheng, W. and Warren, M. (1997) Having second thoughts: Student perceptions before and after a peer assessment exercise. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(2), 233-239. doi: 10.1080/03075079712331381064
- Cizek, G. J. (2010) *An introduction to formative assessment: History, characteristics, and challenges*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Falchikov, N. (2001) *Learning together: Peer tutoring in higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Falchikov, N. (2005) *Improving assessment through student involvement: Practical solutions for aiding learning in higher and further education*. London: Routledge.
- Falchikov, N. and Boud, D. (2008) The role of assessment in preparing for lifelong learning: Problems and challenges. In A. Havnes and L. McDowell (Eds.), *Balancing dilemmas in assessment and learning in contemporary education* (pp. 87-100). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Falchikov, N., and Goldfinch, J. (2000) Student peer assessment in Higher Education: A meta-analysis comparing peer and teacher Marks. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 287-322.
- Higgins, R., Hartley, P., and Skelton, A. (2001) Getting the Message Across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6(2), 269-274. doi: 10.1080/13562510120045230
- Hughes, I.E. and Large, B. J. (1993) Staff and peer-group assessment of oral communication skills. *Studies in Higher Education*, 18(3), 379-385. doi: 10.1080/03075079312331382281
- Kennedy, P. (2002). Learning cultures and learning styles: myth-understandings about adult (Hong Kong) Chinese learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 21(5), 430-445. doi: 10.1080/02601370210156745
- Morrison, K. (2003) Complexity theory and curriculum reforms in Hong Kong. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 11(2), 279-302.
- Peterson, E. R. and Irving, S. E. (2008) Secondary school students' conceptions of assessment and feedback. *Learning and Instruction*, 18(3), 238-250.

Pierson, H. D. (1996) Learner culture and learner autonomy in the Hong Kong Chinese context. In R. Pemberton, E. Li, W. Or & H. D. Pierson (Eds.), *Taking control: Autonomy in language learning* (pp. 49-58). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Topping, K. (2010) Peers as a source of formative assessment. In H. L. Andrade and G. J. Cizek (Eds.), *Handbook of formative assessment* (pp. 61-74). New York, NY: Routledge.

van Gennip, N. A. E., Segers, M. S. R., and Tillema, H. H. (2010) Peer assessment as a collaborative learning activity: The role of interpersonal variables and conceptions. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 280-290. doi: 10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.010

Wiliam, D. (2011) *Embedded formative assessment*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Correspondence

Kevin W. H. Yung
Centre for Applied English Studies,
The University of Hong Kong,
Pokfulam Road,
Hong Kong SAR,
China
wyunghku@hku.hk