



Peer and Teacher Assessment in EFL Writing Compositions: The Case Of Advanced English Major Students in Jendouba, Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the difference between peer and teacher assessment of writing compositions of advanced university students in English. Besides, it investigated the likely effect this type of evaluation might have on the learners' writing skill. To this end, 17 participants were surveyed over seven weeks. During every session, the participants wrote an essay on a topic suggested by the teacher. A blind correction was carried by their peers who graded the essays using Jacobs et al's composition profile as a descriptor grading model. Then the essays were corrected and graded by the teacher T-test was used to investigate the difference between the peer and the teacher's corrections. A questionnaire was also run to explore the attitude of the participants to such a practice, and an analysis of the participants' grades was undertaken. The results suggested that there was a significant difference between peer and teacher corrections of the compositions. The findings also revealed that the participants enjoyed such a practice as being aware of their peers' mistakes was helpful in improving their writing skill. Besides, a significant improvement in their grades was observed. The participants also reported that a combination of both peer assessment and teacher assessment had a positive effect on their writing ability.

INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a foreign language in Tunisia starting from primary education. A great focus is put on oral and aural skills. However, when it comes to writing, a general tendency is observed among the students and the teachers who view writing as a challenging task as it requires a good amount of cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural proficiency (Barkaoui, 2007, Maarof et al, 2011). In fact, faced with the aim to complete the curriculum set by the ministry of education, and the large number of students in classes, writing is often neglected as it is highly productive and time consuming (Sommers, 1982). As a consequence, low grades in writing compositions often reflect this tendency (Mahfoudhi, 1999). At the tertiary level, students end up with poor writing skills which affect their performance in the other subjects. In this regard, writing is a skill that needs to be taken into consideration seriously. To this end, different types of feedback are necessary to help learners write more correctly (Tsui & NG, 2000).

With the focus on learner autonomy, new teaching pedagogies have been undertaken. One of the methodologies adopted to enhance learner autonomy in writing practices is peer assessment. Although peer assessment has often been criticized on the way peers offer their feedback, being aggressive sometimes (Zarei & Mahdavi, 2014), it is believed to help the participants observe their own metacognitive development (Soleimani & Rahmanian, 2014) as by evaluating the work of their peers, students can improve their own performance (Topping et al, 2000; Zarei & Mahdai, 2014), and become more autonomous (Maarof et al., 2011). In fact, unlike summative assessment which is carried out by the teachers at the end of an academic year to determine success or failure of the learners through grades, being part of formative assessment, peer assessment can be quite helpful in case it provides rich qualitative feedback (Topping et al, 2000. Wikstorm, 2007).

In an attempt to check the above statements peer assessment of written compositions was undertaken to raise the learners' awareness about the different elements of good writing. In fact, the present work emanates from my experience as a teacher who has witnessed a dramatic decrease in the students' writing ability throughout the years. Despite much time spent on preparing for the different subjects, the latter's grades have fallen considerably. In this regard, not being aware of writing as a measure for academic success, these students have often questioned their falling grades. One main answer that was given to them was their poor writing skills. To this end, the present study was carried out involving some of these students unhappy about their grades in the different subjects in order to make them aware of their mistakes, and at the same time to motivate them to consider the writing skill more seriously. The present work attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Are scores of peer-assessment (PA), and teacher-assessment (TA) similar when assessing writers' abilities?
2. What is the participants' attitude to peer assessment?
3. What is the effect of using PA and TA on the participants' writing ability?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literature about writing assessment has revealed that although teacher feedback is often regarded as a key condition for the improvement of students' writing skills (Tsui et al, 2000), it is, nonetheless, not the only source that may improve such a skill (Maarof et al, 2011). In fact, teachers' feedback is sometimes confusing, and may not lead to the expected outcomes (Sommers, 1982; Paulus, 1999). In this case, peer feedback has often been valued (Subasi, 2014) as it helps learners be more in control of their learning, and more particularly writing (Hansson, 2014).

The practice of having students review each other's work has become commonplace in the composition classroom (Brammer & Rees, 2007) as it has various benefits on learners' writing skill. As pointed out by Tsui and NG (2000) in their review of the literature, being part of a formative evaluation, peer feedback, review or evaluation (Hansson, 2014) is adjusted at the learners' level and is more informative than teacher feedback. Second, it increases audience awareness and makes it possible for the writer to observe his or her self in his or her own writing. Third, in the case when it is supportive, peer feedback can improve learners' attitude towards writing, and their apprehension can be decreased. Forth, learners can learn more about

writing and correction by reading each other's drafts. Five, learners can feel more responsible for their writing. Sixth, peer review can be beneficial for both the writer and the reviewer (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) as the latter can be better writers and self-reviewers (p. 31). Last but not least, peer assessment helps learners acquire transferrable skills required for life-long learning, in particular evaluation skills (Zariski, 1996 in Zarei & Mahdavi, 2014). However, the effect of peer feedback on learners' writing is still a complex issue that has not been resolved yet (Paulus, 1999).

From both the perspective of teachers and learners, peer review is not something easy to carry out. Peer review requires some skills like time management, socializing, and criticizing (Brammer & Rees, 2007) which are often challenging. For the teachers, the main challenge that faces them is the complexity of peer review. In fact, to be able to provide quality feedback, peer reviewers should have a certain amount of proficiency in the target language (Hansson, 2014) in addition to the time such an activity may require (Brammer & Rees, 2007). From the learners' point of view, in many cases, "students may not feel their peers, who are also still themselves learning the language, are qualified to critique their work and may distrust their recommendations" (Paulus, 1999, p. 268); an opinion that was also expressed in Kaufman and Shunn's (2010) study.

Contradictory findings were revealed as to the effect of peer review on learners' achievement. Some surveys revealed that peer review did not assist learners in improving their writing skills. In a study of 328 students attending first year university writing course, unlike their teachers, who viewed peer review as a valuable process in improving students' writings, most students found peer review 'not very helpful' (Brammer & Rees, 2007, p. 75), and only one third believed this strategy to be either "occasionally" or "usually" helpful in revising their essays (p. 77). In another study on eleven university students, Paulus (1999) found out that although revision significantly improved the composition scores of the students, the latter prioritized teacher feedback over peer feedback. Likewise, Tsui and NG (2000) found out that although peer comments did sometimes fill some gaps left by the teachers, all their participants preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback, and "saw the teacher as a figure of authority that guaranteed quality" (p.160). In this regard, expectations about the difference between peer and teacher assessment have led to some distrust among some students in their peer feedback.

Distrust in peer assessment has not often been grounded. In fact, some empirical studies revealed that there was no significant difference between peer and teacher assessment as is the case of Azamoosh (2013) who found out that the mean scores for teacher and peer corrections were quite close to each other. In another study, it was reported that students receiving peer feedback outperformed those who received teacher feedback (Zarei & Mahdavi, 2014).

With regard to students' attitude to peer feedback, different findings were reported in the literature. Azamoosh (2013) found that the post questionnaire revealed more agreement among the students (52,9%) than the pre-questionnaire (44,4%) about peer evaluation. In addition to this, students' negative opinions about peer assessment as being difficult and boring moved to the opposite side. On the other hand, Kaufman and Shunn (2010) indicated that students' perceptions about peer assessment were negative in both the pre and post survey. Such perceptions originate in students' lack of confidence in their peer assessment of their work as well as the feeling that they are not qualified to give feedback to their peers; a view shared by Brammer and Rees (2007).

Peer feedback has often been conducted informally at the tertiary level without a follow up of the results. The present study attempts to contribute to the literature on the combined effect of peer feedback and teacher feedback on learners' writing ability.

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

A total of 35 participants from an advanced English level course in the Higher Institute of Human Sciences of Jendouba, Tunisia participated. This number was reduced to 17 after eliminating the students who did not write the 6 required dissertations. The remaining participants were all females ranging in age between 23 and 24. Professional written communication was among the subjects they studied. The researcher was also the teacher of this course. The survey was carried out during the second semester of the 2015/2016 academic year over seven weeks where the students met once a week for two hours. According to the curriculum, the objectives of the course were to use standard business formats, analyze the target audience and adapt writing to its needs, write documents clearly, concisely, and effectively, collaborate effectively with peers to create documents, proofread the writing of peers and recommend appropriate revisions, and be aware of the importance of intercultural communication. To reach such objectives, students are required to implement critical reading and discussion, and vocabulary building. The topics that were selected for this 7-week program were as follows: motivation in the workplace, negotiation and sales, organizational structures, supply chain management, marketing, and the issue of a single currency. During the first week, the participants were trained on how to make peer review by following Jacobs et al's (1983 in Azamoosh, 2013) guidelines.

Instruments

To answer the three research questions, three types of instruments were used. The first one was Jacobs et al's (1983 in Azamoosh, 2013) writing scale. It was used to score the participants' compositions. This scale provides five subscales for the evaluation of a written composition; namely: 1 content, 2 organization, 3 vocabulary, 4 language use, and 5 mechanics. The participants were asked to score each subscale out of 4, and add up the scores to get a total grade out of 20.

The two other instruments were used to explore the students' attitudes to peer review, and the effect of peer and teacher review on their essays. To this end, two questionnaires adapted from Planas LLado et al (2013) were used to explore the participants' attitude to peer evaluation before and after the seven-week project. The first questionnaire containing 10 closed questions and one open-ended question was handed to the participants before starting peer evaluation. The second questionnaire contains 15 closed questions and two open-ended questions. It was distributed to the participants at the end of the seven-week project. The closed questions were answered using a three-point *Likert* scale: ranging from yes, not sure, to no. Finally, the students' grades were analyzed to see any effect of the combined peer and teacher remarks and grades on their essays.

Procedure

Over the seven weeks, the participants were asked to write about a topic as outlined previously. They were introduced to the topic, and they made some comprehension and vocabulary questions. Then they were asked to write an essay about the topic studied. To eliminate peer bias, the teacher collected the compositions, removed the names on each paper and coded them. Then the papers were redistributed in a random way ensuring that no one received their compositions. The students were asked to keep their respective codes for the coding of the upcoming essays.

In the first session the students were trained to use Jacobs et al's (1983, in Azamoosh, 2013) scoring scales. Over the seven sessions, the scale was displayed on the data show in case the raters forgot the rating procedure. The scale displayed five subscales as follows: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. The raters were asked to rate each subscale out of 4. They then added up the sub scores to get a grade out of 20. At the end of the session, the teacher collected the copies and took them home for assessment. These compositions were returned to the writers over the following session for discussion and a review of the errors was made. Six other sessions followed the same procedure. The following figure displays the procedure followed during this survey.

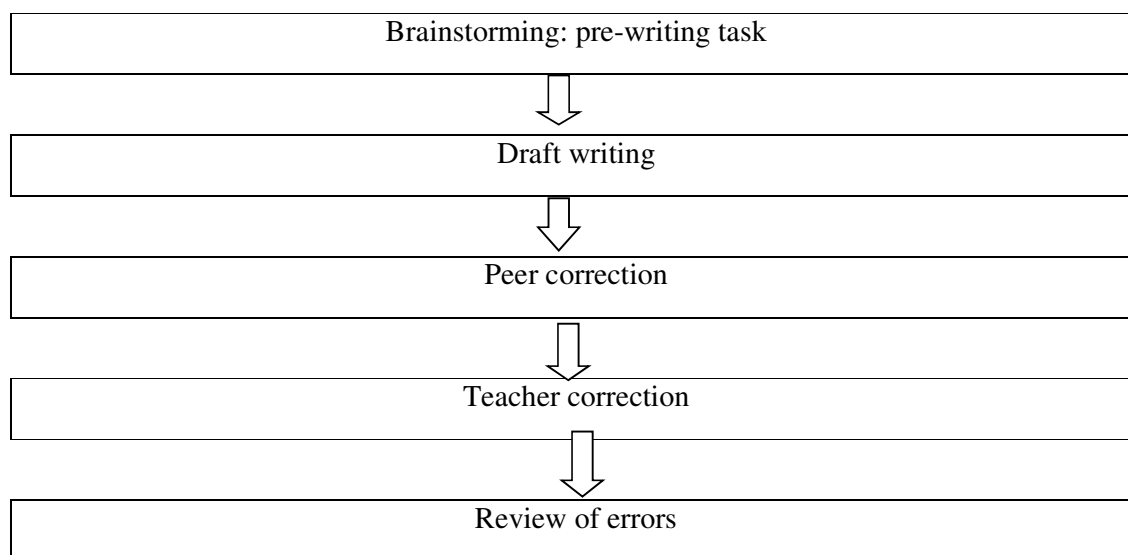


Figure 1: diagram presentation of peer and teacher feedback procedures

Two other types of analysis were carried out. To check the students' attitude towards peer assessment, a questionnaire exploring such an attitude was handed to the participants during the first session. At the end of the seven week project, the students were asked to fill in a similar questionnaire to check any change in their attitude. Finally an analysis of the participants' grades was carried out to investigate any positive or negative effect of the combination of both peer and teacher assessment on the participants' grades.

Concerning data analysis, percentages, means and standard deviation were used to explore quantitative data. Paired sample T-test was used to explore the difference between peer assessment and teacher assessment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the findings of the three research questions namely;

1. Are scores of peer-assessment (PA), and teacher-assessment (TA) similar when assessing writers' abilities?
2. What is the participants' attitude to peer assessment?
3. What is the effect of using PA on the participants' writing ability?

The results are discussed in relation to other findings as revealed in the review of the literature section.

Research question one

To answer research question one, descriptive statistics as well as paired sample t test were applied.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for peer and teacher assessment

| Type of assessment | Mean | Std. deviation | Std. error mean | T value | P value |
|--------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------|---------|---------|
| Peer assessment | 10,23 | 2,81 | .68 | | |
| Teacher assessment | 9 | 2,80 | .68 | 1,54 | .05 |

Contrary to Azamoosh (2013), the t test in the present study indicated that there was a significant difference between the peer and teacher corrections of the compositions ($T=1,54$, $p=.05$), and the mean scores of corrections were not close to each other (Table 1). Such incongruence may be explained by the participants' responses in the open-ended questions. In fact, twelve participants said that they apprehended the fact that their lack of writing and editing skills would prevent them from carrying out the task. They also pointed out the lack of understanding of their peers' handwriting. The same view was maintained in the post-questionnaire. Five participants pointed out that although they were undertaking a blind peer correction, this may not prevent them from being subjective knowing that they would have to explain their corrections to the peer in question. This issue was raised by one participant who pointed out some difficulty of interaction with her peers. This supports Bramer and Rees (2007) idea about the challenge of peer review as it involves socializing and criticizing skills.

Research question 2:

Frequencies and percentages were used to answer research question 2. Table 1 displays frequencies and percentages of each answer to ten questions about peer assessment in the pre and post questionnaires. The details in this table show the participants' tendency toward the adoption of peer assessment. An overall idea about the trend toward a more positive attitude towards peer assessment is presented in figure 2.

Table 2 Frequencies and percentages of attitudes towards peer assessment

| Statement | Responses | Pre-questionnaire N=17 | | Post-questionnaire N=17 | |
|---|-----------|---------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | frequency | Percent |
| 1. I have/had the necessary skills to participate in a peer-assessment process | Yes | 9 | 53% | 16 | 94% |
| | Not sure | 2 | 12% | 0 | 0% |
| | No | 6 | 35% | 1 | 6% |
| 2.The professor(s) clearly explained the procedure for effective peer-assessment | Yes | 14 | 82% | 17 | 100% |
| | Not sure | 2 | 12% | 0 | 0% |
| | No | 1 | 6% | 0 | 0% |
| 3.The professor(s) made the tools and instruments available to me to perform effective peer-assessment | Yes | 10 | 59% | 17 | 100% |
| | Not sure | 3 | 18% | 0 | 0% |
| | No | 4 | 23% | 0 | 0% |
| 4.Peer-assessment means/meant a lot of responsibility for the student | Yes | 13 | 76% | 15 | 88% |
| | Not sure | 2 | 12% | 0 | 0% |
| | No | 2 | 12% | 2 | 12% |
| 5.Peer-assessment will make/made me prepare my work better | Yes | 14 | 82% | 16 | 94% |
| | Not sure | 3 | 18% | 1 | 6% |
| | No | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 6.Peer-assessment will force/forced me to look for more and broader information on the contents of the module or activity | Yes | 14 | 82% | 17 | 100% |
| | Not sure | 1 | 6% | 0 | 0% |
| | No | 2 | 12% | 0 | 0% |
| | Yes | 16 | 94% | 16 | 94% |
| | Not sure | 1 | 6% | 1 | 6% |

| | | | | | |
|--|----------|----|-----|----|-----|
| 7. Peer-assessment will allow/allowed me to detect my own mistakes and learn from them | No | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 8. Peer-assessment will allow/allowed me to view learning critically and constructively | Yes | 12 | 71% | 15 | 88% |
| | Not sure | 4 | 23% | 2 | 12% |
| | No | 1 | 6% | 0 | 0% |
| 9. I think my peers will be/were more subjective in their assessment (not following predetermined and representative criteria for the activity being assessed) than the professor(s) | Yes | 4 | 23% | 4 | 23% |
| | Not sure | 10 | 60% | 10 | 60% |
| | No | 3 | 17% | 3 | 17% |
| 10. My peers will not be/ were not as demanding as the professor(s) in their assessment | Yes | 9 | 53% | 8 | 47% |
| | Not sure | 7 | 41% | 5 | 30% |
| | No | 1 | 6% | 4 | 23% |

Data from the pre-questionnaire as displayed in table 2 show that the participants had already a positive attitude towards peer assessment from the start. Such an attitude was kept and enhanced in the post questionnaire (figure 2). Similar findings were reported by Azamoosh (2013) who pointed out to the positive trend among the participants towards peer assessment. The present findings are also in line with Subasi (2014) and Hansson (2014) who value peer assessment as it helps learners be more in control of their learning. However, different results were reported by Kaufman and Shunn (2010) who indicated a negative perception of peer assessment in both the pre and post survey. Unlike Kaufman and Shunn's (2010) participants, the present participants expressed more agreement on peer assessment as it helped them learn from their peer mistakes and develop their writing skill as reported by eleven participants in the pre-questionnaire. In the post questionnaire twelve participants expressed the same opinion. Four participants said that peer correction helped them learn from their peer mistakes, the same view that was expressed in the post-questionnaire. Two participants said that peer correction made them feel like a teacher, and hence this would be helpful in their future career.

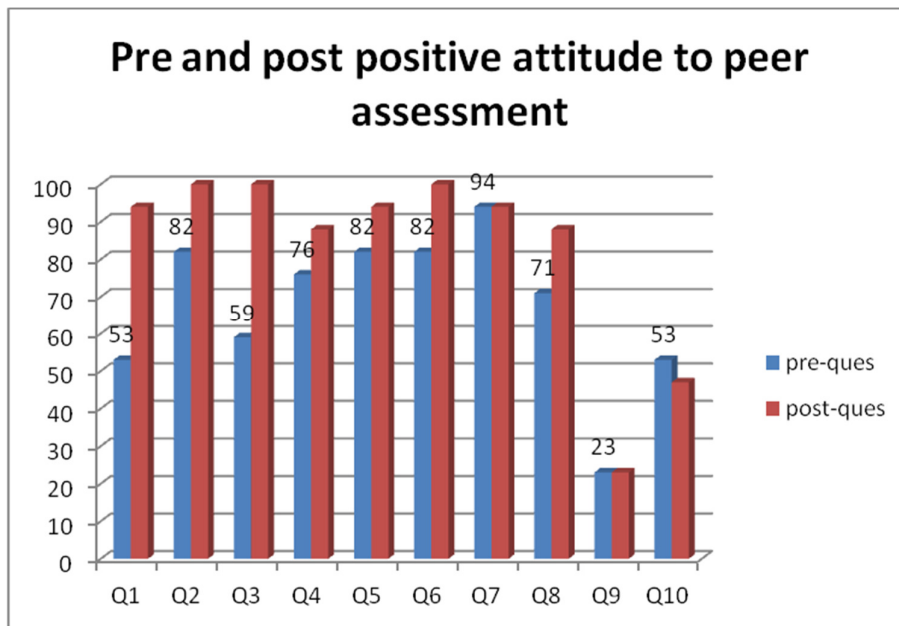


Figure 2 : pre and post positive attitude to peer assessment

In general, as shown in figure 3, the participants perceived peer correction as a way that helped them think about criteria assessment when writing their essays as reported in part two of the post-questionnaire. A combination of both peer correction and teacher correction was unanimously favored by these participants as is shown in their answers. Peer correction would help them be more aware of the different criteria required in writing a composition, and teacher assessment was the most reliable authority that would reflect their real levels. In fact, the participants felt that as peer assessors, their writing improved, a view supported by Maarof et al (2011).

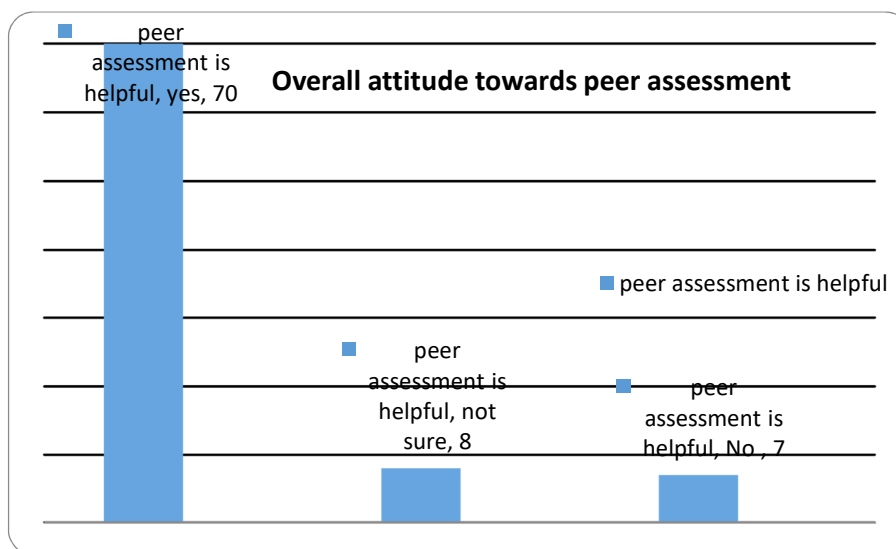


Figure 3 Overall attitude towards peer assessment

Research question 3

An analysis of the participants' grades was undertaken to answer research question 3. To simplify, only grades of the first and the last week were entered. Figure 4 displays data about participants' writing grades. As can be seen ten out of seventeen participants benefited from both the combined effect of peer and teacher evaluation. In fact, their grades increased remarkably. However, still more work needs to be carried out with four of the participants as their grades were not stable, and did not show any sign of improvement. This can be explained by the fact that some students are faster learners than others. The duration of the present project was seven weeks which could be a good duration for some and not enough for others. This supports the fact that each learner is unique and has his/her own pace of learning which needs to be taken into account. Another explanation for this is that peer correction may not on its own improve the writing skill as pointed out by Maarof et al (2011), and Brammer and Rees (2007). To this end, other pedagogies might fill this gap.

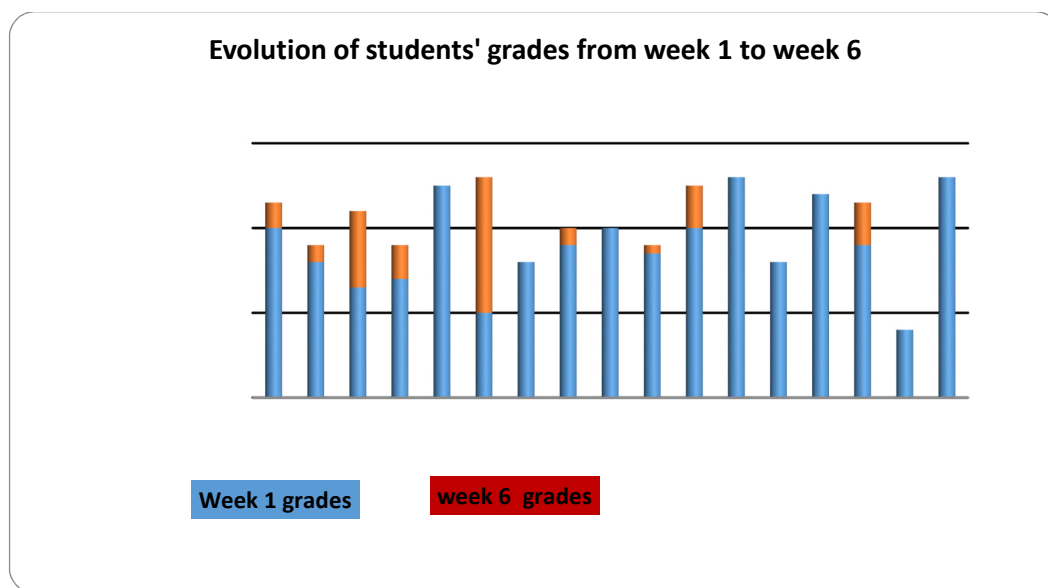


Figure 4: Evolution of students' grades from week 1 to week 6

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

This study has some limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. First, the number of participants was limited to seventeen. Therefore, generalizations to larger samples should be taken with caution. A larger sample is recommended for future work. Generalizability is also limited by the type of feedback provided. The fact that the researcher was also the teacher of the class may have impacted the objectivity of the study. In fact, dealing with the same teacher may not benefit the students in the long term. Future work may involve a larger population, and researchers other than the teacher in question.

CONCLUSION

The study explored peer assessment from three angles. First it explored the difference between teacher and peer assessment of writing compositions of a group of advanced EFL learners. Second it investigated participants' attitude to peer assessment. Third it examined the effect of both peer and teacher assessment on the participants' grades. The findings revealed a significant difference between peer and teacher assessment of the writing compositions. This was due to the participants' lack of editing skill and lack of objectivity. The second finding showed a positive attitude of the participants towards peer assessment. They reported that this method helped them learn from the mistakes of their peers. The last finding revealed that most of the participants' grades improved.

The findings of this study show that evaluation is no longer the exclusive practice of the teacher but should be regarded as a shared responsibility between the teacher and the students. The success of the peer assessment sessions depend on how well the assessment criteria and a sense of shared community are presented as pointed out by Brammer and Rees (2007). Thanks to this communication based on trust will be the building stone of interactivity among the learners. According to the findings reported by the participants in this study, peer and teacher feedback can complement each other.

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