

A Step in the Right Direction: Peer-assessment of Oral Presentations in an EFL Setting

Ismaeil Fazel

University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

As a result of increasing focus on learner independence, peer assessment has received considerable attention in the past decade. Nevertheless, this idea is still new to most English teachers and students in the EFL setting of Iran, where traditional assessment still dominates. The investigation reported here focuses on students' views of a peer-assessment framework used within the particular context of a course that primarily focuses on oral presentations, which is relatively under-researched. Using students' responses to an end-of-course survey as well as their written remarks, the study looked into the perceived benefits and weaknesses of peer assessment within the context of oral presentation. Findings, in general, indicate a positive response from the students.

INTRODUCTION

With the burgeoning influence of social constructivist theories on education, which stress students' responsibility for their own learning, and the corollary emphasis placed on the learner independence and autonomy, peer and self-assessment have gained increasing popularity in the past decade (Sambell, McDowell, & Sambell, 2006). Peer assessment and its close partner self-assessment allow for the direct participation of learners in the assessment process, which enables learners to reflect on their experience and monitor their learning (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000). Peer assessment has been defined as the process through which groups or individuals rate their peers (Falchikov, 1995). According to Topping (1998), peer assessment is "an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status" (p. 250).

Review of Literature on Peer Assessment

The existing literature on peer assessment has identified both benefits and potential issues in using peer assessment. Peer assessment has been recognized as having numerous benefits in terms of learning gains, and is increasingly being applied in higher education to involve students more actively in the assessment process (Race, Brown, & Smith, 2005). If properly framed and implemented, peer assessment can foster autonomy and collaboration skills, and enable students to understand and critically examine their own learning (Reinders & Lazaro, 2007). It has also been argued that peer assessment can make students more active, motivated and autonomous (Orsmond & Merry, 1996; Sivan, 2000; Brown, 2004), and promote their higher order thinking (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Nilson, 2003; Oliver & Omari, 1999; Orsmond & Merry, 1996; Sivan, 2000). Peer assessment is also a valuable assessment for learning procedure because student learning is promoted as they take on the roles of teachers and examiners of each other and

students find it easier to make sense of assessment criteria if they examine the work of other students alongside their own (Black & Wiliam, 2006). Active engagement in the process of learning can be conducive to students' sense of ownership and responsibility (Sivan, 2000) and make students active and autonomous (Orsmond & Merry, 1996; Sivan, 2000). Ballantyne, Hughes, and Mylonas (2002) argue that peer assessment helps to develop self-directed learning skills as students participate and engage in the assessment experience.

In addition to being a way of assessing the products of student learning, peer assessment can itself be deemed a process of learning. The potential for peer assessment to enhance students' learning has a key place in the ideas associated with assessment for learning. According to Stiggins (2008), in classroom assessment geared toward student learning, the assessment process and its results are turned into instructional interventions that are designed so as to promote, not just monitor, student learning, motivation, and confidence (Stiggins, 2008). From this perspective, peer assessment is considered "uniquely valuable" as it motivates students to be more careful in the work they do, amplifies students' voice in the learning process, and improves their learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003). According to Black et al. (2003), peer assessment can be productive provided that students are trained and guided by their teachers to develop peer-assessment skills. They also note that "the ultimate aim of peer (and self) assessment is not that students can give each other levels and grades—these are merely a means to an end . . . the real purpose—the identification of learning needs and the means of improvement" (p. 62).

Notwithstanding the stated benefits of peer assessment, some criticisms and concerns have also been documented in the related literature. Some students may not feel confident and comfortable about evaluating their peers (Orsmond & Merry, 1996; Cheng & Warren, 2005). Another potential issue with peer assessment, according to Brown (2004), is its subjectivity which needs to be resolved. In order to achieve more objectivity, Freeman (1995) stressed the importance of appropriate training and practice in peer assessment. Echoing the same concern, Patri (2002) argued that in order to ensure the effectiveness of peer assessment, training and experience are necessary, which can be deemed a potential drawback in using peer assessment since doing so requires considerable time, training, preparation, and monitoring (Cheng & Warren, 1997, 1999, 2005; Falchikov, 2005; Topping, 1998). Even with proper training, still students may feel nervous and resistant (at least at the outset) toward peer assessment (Falchikov, 2005; Topping, 1998). Another criticism raised against peer-assessment is the validity and reliability of assessment done by students. Some researchers (e.g., Bostock, 2000; White, 2009) have pointed out other concerns on the part of teachers for instance the likely influence of friendships and solidarity among students, unfair assessment or mis-assessment.

To sum up this section, needless to say, peer assessment, like any other mode of assessment, is not without potential problems; however, it seems that there are many more advantages than disadvantages in integrating peer assessment in classes. According to the Institute for Interactive Media and Learning of the University of Technology Sydney (<http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/assessment/students/peer.html>), the pros and cons of using peer assessment can be summarized as follows:

Advantages

- Helps students to become more autonomous, responsible, and involved.
- Encourages students to critically analyze work done by others, rather than simply seeing a mark.

- Helps clarify assessment criteria.
- Gives students a wider range of feedback.
- More closely parallels possible career situations where a group makes a judgment.
- Reduces the marking load on the lecturer.
- Several groups can be run at once as not all groups require the lecturer's presence.

Disadvantages

- Students may lack the ability to evaluate each other.
- Students may not take it seriously, allowing friendships, entertainment value, etc. to influence their marking.
- Students may not like peer marking because of the possibility of being discriminated against, being misunderstood, etc.
- Without lecturer intervention, students may misinform each other.

In order to maximize the benefits and minimize the likelihood of problems with peer-assessment, some guidelines have been proposed by scholars and researchers. For example, Vu and Alba (2007) suggested four conditions for the successful implementation of peer assessment:

(a) adequate and appropriate preparation for the use of peer assessment; (b) alignment of assessment, learning objectives, and the broader purpose of the course (e.g. preparation as professionals); (c) the availability of assistance from a teacher throughout the peer-assessment process; and (d) constructive discussions after peer assessment, sensitively handled by a teacher. (p. 551)

Peer Assessment in EFL Settings

Although the body of literature on peer assessment is growing, still little is known about the use of peer assessment in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts like that of Iran. Most existing scholarship on peer assessment is the result of studies carried out in ESL contexts. While the findings have implications across all contexts, it would be worthwhile to further explore the effect of peer assessment in different contexts, as the contextual and cultural factors can have a role to play in students' perceptions and the applicability of peer assessment. Furthermore, in EFL contexts like that of Iran, where the teacher-centered approach to education is still dominant, further research in this line of inquiry can serve to convince more EFL teachers to bring in more student-centered modes of assessment like peer-assessment.

Purpose of the Study

Although, there are many arguments regarding the potential benefits of integrating peer assessment in language teaching education, still peer assessment is not commonly practiced in many EFL contexts like Iran. Thus far, a few studies on the use of peer and self-assessment in Iran have been conducted; however, none have investigated this method of assessment from the perspective of English language learners. Birjandi and Siyyari (2010) investigated the effect of doing self- and peer assessments on the paragraph writing performance and the self and peer-rating accuracy of a sample of Iranian English-major students and found peer assessment to be more effective in improving the writing performance of the students than self-assessment. More

recently, Birjandi and Tamjid (2012) in a similar study on the essay writing of university students in Iran, concluded that the students in their study had benefited from self- and peer assessment methods. While the effects of peer assessment on students' writing have been studied, much less is known about students' perceptions and perspectives of assessing and being assessed by their peers. It is worth noting that while assessment practices can have a strong effect on learning, most assessment is designed and implemented with little or no input from the students themselves (Stefani, 1998). Thus far, no published studies have investigated the perceptions of Iranian EFL students toward peer assessment. In an attempt to address this gap, this study aimed to contribute to the existing body of literature on peer assessment in language pedagogy in particular in the EFL context of Iran. The focus of this study was on oral presentations assessment since relatively little research has been done in this area. The assessment of students' oral presentations is a form of performance-based assessment, in which students perform a task and show specific skills and competencies (Stiggins, 1987). Basturk (2008) contends that in performance assessments, the role of the students in the assessment process shifts from being passive learners to active participants, and states that it "allows instruction and assessment to be woven together in a way that more traditional approaches fail to accomplish" (p. 13). Since peer assessment is a viable option to promote students' autonomous and independent learning, the research in this area is hoped to provide EFL teachers with a promising alternative assessment mode for the EFL classes.

The investigation reported here focuses on students' views of a peer-assessment framework used within the particular context of a course called Speaking and Listening II, at a university in the south of Iran. In this study, peer-assessment scores for oral presentations constituted 30% of the final grade. The purpose of this investigation was to explore Iranian EFL students' perceptions of peer assessment, using students' responses to an end-of-course Likert scale survey as well as their written remarks. The following research question was posed in the present study: What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses reported by EFL students after experiencing peer assessment of oral presentations in their course?

METHOD

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the English department at a major university in the south of Iran. The participants in this study were all students ($n = 42$) enrolled in Speaking and Listening II, a requisite course for a Bachelor's degree in English Translation in Iran. Of the 42 students, 36 were female and 6 male and their ages ranged from 18 to 32 years. The participants had all taken Speaking and Listening I and were thus familiar with giving oral presentations. During the data collection period, the participants were taking the course Speaking and Listening II, which is a three-credit course so the class met twice a week for 1.5 hours. In total, there were 17 sessions (one class was cancelled) during the semester. In Speaking and Listening II, in addition to improving listening skills, students are generally expected to build on their presentation skills and oral proficiency. During the course, each student was responsible for delivering two presentations. The students were asked to select topics from English news media—mostly from English newspapers, in print or on the Internet. They had to present for 15 minutes but in some cases an extension of five minutes was allowed.

Materials and Procedures

In the first session, the teacher gave the students an extensive introduction to peer assessment including the potential benefits of integrating it in the course. They were also told that they had the choice to opt out and join the other section of the course, where the assessment was based on teacher assessment only. In the second session, the students were given the assessment rubric, which would be used by peers and the teacher to assess and score their presentations. From the third session onward, every session, 4-5 students delivered presentations and were then graded by their peers and the teacher. Both the peer assessment and teacher assessment were based on the presentation peer-assessment form (see Appendix A), which was adapted from Yamashiro and Johnson (1997). The 14 key points for oral presentations, adapted from Yamashiro and Johnson, comprised voice control, body language, content and effectiveness.

Every session—from the fourth session onward—prior to each presentation, the teacher distributed the copied peer-assessment forms so that the students could complete them during and after each presentation for each presenter. The students did not write their names on the peer-assessment forms. After each presentation, the teacher collected all peer-assessment forms. In the following session, the collected peer-assessment forms from the previous class were returned to the students who had presented. A completed teacher assessment form (using the same peer-assessment criteria) was given to each presenter as well.

Data Collection

At the end of the term, in order to glean students' perceptions of peer assessment, a student survey (see Appendix B) was conducted. The survey was based on the Likert scale and comprised ten items. A five-point Likert scale survey was used to investigate the participants' perceptions of peer assessment. The survey was adopted from Wen, Tsai and Chang's (2006) study, which was based on the results of some relevant studies such as Brindley and Scoffield (1998), Cheng and Warren (1997) and Falchikov (1995). It consists of two scales, general peer assessment and online peer assessment. I only adopted the scale of general peer assessment, as the online peer assessment was not relevant to this study. Wen et al. (2006) reported that Cronbach alpha reliability for the general peer assessment was .84. I also added three more questions to the survey (Appendix B). The participants were asked to fill out the survey at the end of the term. They were also asked to write written comments on the use of peer assessment in their class. Quantitative data was collected in the form of the responses given to the end-of-term survey. The students' written comments were used for qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

Analysis of Student Survey

The student survey was intended to elicit students' perceptions of the use of peer assessment in the Speaking and Listening II course. The survey consisted of a total of ten items plus a section for additional comments. As mentioned, a five-point Likert scale was used. Table

1 summarizes students' responses to the survey items. Numbers and percentages for each item are presented, as well as combined agreement or disagreement response total for each item.

Table 1. Students' Responses to the Survey

Survey Item	1. Agree	2. Tend to Agree	3. Undecided	4. Tend to Disagree	5. Disagree	Combined
1. Peer assessment is helpful to students' learning	32 (76.1%)	7 (16.6%)	2 (4.7%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 92.7% Disagreement = 2.3%
2. Peer assessment makes students understand more about teacher's requirement	31 (73.8%)	8 (19%)	3 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 92.8% Disagreement = 0%
3. Peer assessment activities motivate students to learn	7 (16.6%)	19 (45.2%)	11 (26.1%)	5 (11.9%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 61.8% Disagreement = 11.9%
4. Peer assessment activities increase the interaction between the teacher and the students	2 (4.7%)	8 (19%)	15 (35.7%)	10 (23.8%)	7 (16.6%)	Agreement = 23.7% Disagreement = 40.4%
5. Peer assessment helps students develop a sense of participation	20 (47.6%)	15 (35.7%)	7 (16.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 83.3% Disagreement = 0%
6. Peer assessment activities increase the interaction among students	5 (11.9%)	13 (30.9%)	18 (42.8%)	6 (14.2%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 42.8% Disagreement = 14.2%
7. I think students are eligible to assess their classmates' performance	27 (64.2%)	9 (21.4%)	3 (7.1%)	2 (4.7%)	1 (2.3%)	Agreement = 85.7% Disagreement = 7%
8. The scores and comments my peers gave me were fair and reasonable	6 (14.2%)	19 (45.2%)	4 (9.5%)	8 (19%)	5 (11.9%)	Agreement = 59.4 % Disagreement =30.9 %
9. Assessing other students' presentations helped me plan and deliver my own presentations.	16 (38%)	24 (57.1%)	2 (4.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 95.1% Disagreement = 0%
10. I recommend using peer assessment in future Speaking and Listening II courses.	13 (30.9%)	25 (59.5%)	4 (4.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	Agreement = 90.4% Disagreement = 0%

DISCUSSION

The objective of the survey was to glean the participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of peer assessment, so that hopefully better assessment designs can be framed and implemented in the future.

Analysis of Responses to the Survey

Effects of Peer Assessment on Learning, Motivation, and Participation

In response to item 1, “Peer assessment is helpful to students’ learning,” an aggregate of 92.7% (39 out of 42) of the students agreed that peer assessment contributed to their learning. Interestingly, of all items on the survey, this one had the highest ‘agree’ score of 76.1% (32 of the 42). The students’ positive responses add to the “substantial evidence that peer assessment can result in improvements in the effectiveness and quality of learning” (Topping, 2009, p. 22). The data supports the idea that it is possible to have “learning by assessing” (Topping, 1998, p. 254). Items 3 and 5 were also intended to elicit students’ responses regarding the effect of peer assessment on their motivation and sense of participation respectively. For item 3, “Peer assessment activities motivate students to learn,” a total of 61.8% indicated that peer assessment inspired their motivation to learn and in response to item 5, “Peer assessment helps students develop a sense of participation,” a total of 83.3% (35 out of 42) expressed a feeling of enhanced participation. The responses to items 3 and 5 further lend support to the idea that when students are directly involved in their own assessment, they feel more in charge of their own learning which promotes their sense of autonomy and enhances their motivation (Brown, 2004). According to Sivan (2000), the active engagement of students in the assessment process and a heightened sense of ownership and responsibility serve to further increase students’ motivation. Similarly, Stiggins (2007) argues that assigning more responsibility to students and allowing them to actively analyze their works helps them to better discern the flaws in their own work, and serves to improve their performance. It can also be argued that by bringing students “into the heart of teaching and learning processes and decision-making” (James & Pedder, 2006, p. 28), peer assessment, as a means of “assessment for learning,” contributes to students’ learning. From the perspective of “assessment for learning,” students learn when they become teachers and examiners of others (Black et al., 2003; Stobart, 2006).

Effects of Peer Assessment on Understanding of the Requirements

In response to item 2, “Peer assessment makes students understand more about teacher’s requirement,” a large proportion of students (92.8%) agreed that peer assessment helps them better understand what the teacher requires of them. In the literature on peer assessment, there is a common agreement that clear and accurate understanding of assessment criteria enhances the validity of peer assessment (Langan et al., 2005). Giving students a rubric or checklist of what constitutes optimal performance and what precisely is expected by the teacher together with the tailored feedback they receive based on the specified criteria can immensely help students find out their areas of strength and weakness and work toward optimal performance.

Effects of Peer Assessment on Class Interactions

Items 4 and 6 were intended to elicit the students’ perceived effect of peer assessment on their interaction with the teacher and among themselves. Interestingly, while an aggregate of 42.8% (18 out of 42) agreed that peer assessment created more incentive for them to interact amongst themselves, but when it comes to interacting with the teacher, only 23.7% (10 out of 42) of the students thought peer assessment increased interaction with the teacher, and interestingly

40.4% (17 out of 42) of the students disagreed that peer assessment increased interaction with the teacher and 35.7% (15 out of 42) of the students had no idea in this regard. This is interesting as alternative modes of assessment like peer assessment, aligned with student-centered approach to pedagogy, are intended to lessen students' reliance on the teacher, and are more geared toward enhancing interactions among students. In the context of Iran, although sporadic efforts have been made to shift to a more student-centered approach, still the teacher-centered approach to education is dominant, and it is interesting to note that students seem to favor such a shift toward the student-centered approach, which involves students further in their own learning process.

Students' Attitudes toward Assessing Peers

Items 7 and 8 seem somehow related in that the former seeks the students' opinions of the eligibility of students to assess their peers' performance and the latter taps into the students' perception of the fairness of the assessments by their peers. In response to item 7, "I think students are eligible to assess their classmates' performance," the majority of the students, 85.7% (36 out of 42) of the students agreed that they are eligible to assess their peers' performance and only 3 students disagreed. As regards item 8, "The scores and comments my peers gave me were fair and reasonable," the opinions were rather divided. While 59.4% (25 out of 42) of the students thought their peers' assessments and comments were fair and reasonable, 30.9% (13 out of 42) of the students did not think so and four students had no idea in this respect. The responses support the contention that "even with subjective methods of assessment ... students are generally capable and conscientious self- and peer-assessors, as long as they are adequately prepared and reassured about the value of the exercise" (Mowl & Pain, 1995, p. 330). It should, however, be noted that, as Harlen (2006) has rightly stated, assessment is not without error and bias, since it involves making subjective judgments. Given the fact that the students in this study did not have any previous experience with peer assessment, the responses may be different if they experience peer assessment further and receive more training to do so.

As for item 9, "Assessing other students' presentations helped me plan and deliver my own presentation," the overwhelming majority of students, 95.1%, agreed that doing peer assessment helped them plan their own presentations. This indicates the practical benefit of peer assessment for the students, as supported by the literature (e.g., Topping, 1998; Falchikov, 2005; Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2000). The students' favorable perceptions of peer assessment are also reflected in the last item, "I recommend using peer-assessment in future Speaking and Listening II courses." Interestingly enough, it can be seen that 90.4 % of students think it is a good idea to use peer assessment in future Speaking and Listening II courses.

Analysis of Students' Written Remarks

The students were also asked to write additional comments about their perceptions of peer assessment. Of the 42 only 31 students wrote additional remarks. The 31 written comments were categorized into the three categories of positive remarks, mixed comments, and negative remarks and concerns. A few examples from each category are provided.

Positive Remarks

In this category of remarks, noteworthy points were expressed. An interesting point expressed by 19 students was that they found the course more appealing than the previous courses they had taken as represented by the extract below:

We were more interested in presentations and activities. I felt more a part of the class ...but other classes were not very exciting for me like this class.

Another point expressed by some students (6 out of 31) was that they felt more empowered by being part of the assessment, as the comments below show:

We could mark as the teacher so it felt really good.
I like to have a say in giving grades.

Interestingly, eight comments were about the heightened attention of students to their peers' presentations as shown in the example below:

I focused one hundred percent on presentations because I wanted to be exact in my grading.

Negative Remarks and Concerns

In this category of comments also some points worthy of considering emerged. One of the concerns expressed by 8 students was that they were worried about their final mark.

... I am not sure if my friends in other classes [without peer assessment] get a higher mark.
Sometimes I do not know how to mark my very near friends.

Mixed Remarks

A few students had mixed remarks, for instance:

I think it was good to have peer evaluating but it was not very easy for me and my friends. I do not suggest it for other students and courses because it is maybe not fair. Of course, I liked doing it as an activity.

All in all, most students expressed a positive response to the use of peer assessment in the course. However, some reservations were also expressed. Some students, although small in number, expressed concerns about this type of assessment. In general, students' perceptions about peer assessment, both positive and negative, are mostly similar to views expressed in the literature on peer assessment, which were discussed at the beginning of the paper.

CONCLUSION

Peer assessment is more about learning than about assessment (Liu & Carless, 2006). The findings of this study confirm the conclusion by Langan et. al. (2005) that "benefits of learner

inclusion and active learning dimensions merit inclusion [of peer-assessment] in future courses” (p. 31). The students’ responses to the survey items yielded useful information regarding their perceptions of peer assessment used in the Speaking and Listening II course. Generally, most students had a positive take on the use of peer assessment. However, some concerns and reservations, for example, fairness and unfamiliarity, also emerged.

Notwithstanding the potential pitfalls and concerns, the arguments for including peer assessment into courses, particularly for oral performance classes, outweigh the concerns and uncertainties. With careful attention to design and implementation, the “learning from assessing” that results will make up for the efforts made and problems encountered. Teachers in different contexts are encouraged to experiment with and report on attempts to incorporate peer assessment for learning in the courses they teach, and include the perspectives of the students involved.

Ismaeil Fazel is a PhD student in TESL at the University of British Columbia. His main research interests are assessment and academic writing.

Email: ifazel@alumni.ubc.ca

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Presentation Peer Assessment Form (based on Yamashiro & Johnson, 1997)

Speakers Name: _____ Presentation topic: _____

Score scale: 5(very good) 4(good) 3(average) 2(weak) 1(poor) Circle a number for each category

Voice Control					
1. Projection (loud/soft)	5	4	3	2	1
2. Pace (speech rate; fast/slow)	5	4	3	2	1
3. Intonation (patterns, pauses)	5	4	3	2	1
4. Diction (clear speaking)	5	4	3	2	1
Body Language					
1. Posture (standing straight, relaxed)	5	4	3	2	1
2. Eye contact	5	4	3	2	1
3. Gestures (well used, not distracting)	5	4	3	2	1
Contents of Presentation					
1. Introduction (grabs attention, has main points)	5	4	3	2	1
2. Body (focused on main ideas, has transitions)	5	4	3	2	1
3. Conclusion (summary of main points, closing statement)	5	4	3	2	1
Effectiveness					
1. Topic choice (interesting for audience)	5	4	3	2	1
2. Language use (clear, correct sentences/slide information)	5	4	3	2	1
3. Vocabulary (words well-chosen and used)	5	4	3	2	1
4. Purpose (informative, teaches about topic)	5	4	3	2	1

Comments (optional, in English):

Appendix B. Students' Perceptions of Peer Assessment

Choose one of the following numbers and write it after each statement:

1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Undecided 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree (Please circle the letter)

1. Peer assessment is helpful to students' learning.
2. Peer assessment makes students understand more about teacher's requirement.
3. Peer assessment activities motivate students to learn.
4. Peer assessment activities increase the interaction between the teacher and the students.
5. Peer assessment helps students develop a sense of participation.
6. Peer assessment activities increase the interaction among students.
7. I think students are eligible to assess their classmates' performance.
8. The scores and comments my peers gave me were fair and reasonable.
9. Assessing other students' presentations helped me plan and deliver my own presentations.
10. I recommend using peer-assessment in future Speaking and Listening II courses.

Any more comments on the peer assessment for oral presentation? Please write any positive or negative things you can think of? (in English only please).