

Applying the Benefits of Peer Assessment to the High School English Classroom

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The vast majority of studies and literature relating to peer assessment has focused on university level students. Proponents of peer assessment (PA) argue that the active involvement of students in the creation of assessment criteria, ongoing feedback, and the opportunity to grade and be graded by their peer group leads to greater understanding and ownership of the learning process. Critics of the process point to students' reluctance and lack of ability to effectively engage in the process of assessment. Limited knowledge and a lack of confidence in their ability could result in the assessment element of PA being a step too far for high school students. Involving students in the creation of assessment criteria and the giving and receiving of feedback are, however, elements of PA that can be adopted for use in high school English classes in Japan.

ピアアセスメント（生徒相互評価）に関する研究や考察は大学レベルの生徒に焦点が当てられているものが大多数である。ピアアセスメントの肯定論者は、生徒自身が積極的に評価基準の作成に関わること及びフィードバックの生徒間相互付与が、学習過程における理解深化及び積極性を高めるのに非常に有効であると主張し、否定論者は限られた知識及び自身の能力に対する自信の欠如を挙げ、生徒の非積極性と評価基準作成に対する能力の欠如を指摘する。本論では、評価基準作成における生徒の参加、フィードバックの相互付与といったピアアセスメントの要素の、高等学校英語授業における有効性について述べる。

Dissatisfaction with perceived limitations of traditional assessment methods has led to a reevaluation of the role of assessment within the learning process. Traditional summative assessment focuses on the result of the learning process in the form of a grade, certification or some indication of attainment information. There is little focus on the actual process of learning; it merely verifies that learning has occurred (McDowell, 1995). Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans (1999) argue, “the view that the assessment of students' achievements is solely something that happens at the end of a process of learning is no longer tenable” (p. 332). Various forms of alternative assessment methods have emerged as ways of moving away from, or supplementing, summative assessment. Attention has turned to assessment as a formative process whereby the focus is on providing students with ongoing information and feedback about their progress (Orsmond, Merry, &

Reisling, 2000). Peer assessment is one such method of formative assessment.

Definition of Peer Assessment

Topping (1998) defines peer assessment (PA) as “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). Cheng and Warren (1999) add that PA also requires students to reflect on what they have learnt and how that learning has taken place. The PA process tends to be implemented in the form of students assessing each other using a set of pre-determined criteria. A key element in the process is student involvement in the creation of the criteria.

Benefits of Peer Assessment

One of the main themes running through the literature on PA is the benefit students receive from being involved in the creation of the assessment criteria by which they will grade and be graded. The process of discussing, deciding, clarifying, and employing the criteria leads to a greater understanding of what constitutes a good piece of work (Topping, 1998). As well as gaining an explicit understanding of the criteria, students are able to feel a sense of ownership of and responsibility for the process (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2008; Peng, 2008; Pond, Rehan, & Wade, 1995).

In an analysis of 48 PA studies, Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) concluded there are many other benefits to PA beyond the understanding and involvement in assessment criteria. One of these is the opportunity for students to receive feedback from both teacher and peers during the process itself rather than solely at the end, when it is too late for remedial action. In an earlier study, which placed emphasis on critical feedback, Falchikov (1995) found the giving and receiving of feedback required more thought from the students, and as a result they learnt more. The main strength of the process was the “enhancement of student learning by means of reflection, analysis and diplomatic

criticism" (p. 175). Indeed, McDowell (1995) found students preferred an emphasis on feedback rather than the allocation of marks.

A related benefit of PA is the opportunity for norm referencing. Students are, through the feedback and assessment process, able to judge and gauge their own performance in relation to their peers (Falchikov & Magin, 1997). This understanding may also reveal to them where they need to improve and how to make those improvements (Topping, 1998).

Criticisms of Peer Assessment

Involvement in the creation and employment of assessment criteria, the giving and receiving of feedback during the learning process, and the ability to rank their performance within their peer group, are among the benefits students receive from PA. There are, however, reported problems with the process that inhibit its efficacy. One of the most frequently reported problems is students' unwillingness or inability to assess their peers (Brindley & Scofield, 1998; Falchikov 1995; Peng 2008). This is clearly a critical flaw. Student buy-in and support for the process is vital for its success. In a study of upper-intermediate learners of English, Lim (2007) found learners were not comfortable assessing their peers, particularly when they were asked to assess the grammatical accuracy and pronunciation of more proficient peers. Despite this, in an analysis of 63 studies, Dochy et al. (1999) found the reluctance to assess peers decreased as students gained confidence. This emphasizes the need to train students in the process.

Some studies have also shown student involvement in the creation of assessment criteria does not always lead to a greater understanding of what is expected of them. Orsmond et al. (2000) concluded students might not be able to clearly distinguish elements of the marking criteria when they create it themselves, as opposed to criteria they have been provided. This is due to the students creating "mind maps" of the marking criteria they create themselves and not being able to see the elements in discrete terms as they may when they are provided with pre-determined criteria (p. 36).

A final criticism of PA is the issue of whether students should be involved in the assessment process at all, and specifically in the allocation of grades. Do students have the knowledge and expertise to give an accurate assessment of their peers, particularly when those judgments will affect final grades? While the majority of studies have reported positive feedback from students regarding the overall

process and benefits of PA, it has also been shown that many feel they should not have more involvement in their final grade (Brindley & Scofield, 1998; McGarr & Clifford, 2013).

Issues of Validity and Reliability

A final issue relating to PA as a feasible method of assessment is the validity and reliability of the process. In their analysis of 63 studies, Dochy et al. (1999) found results were mixed. In his analysis, Topping (1998) found 18 out of 31 studies reported agreement between peer and teacher marks, while 7 found the agreement was too low to be deemed acceptable. The literature on PA does indeed produce varied results in this area with many studies reporting similar teacher/peer marks (Falchikov, 1995; MacAlpine, 1999; Peng, 2008; Pond et al., 1995), while others failed to find any such correlation (Cheng & Warren, 1999; Mowl & Pain, 1995).

An interesting question raised about the issue of teacher/peer marking agreement is whether it is a valid measure of the success of PA as an assessment method. Do student grades have to reflect those of the teacher to make the process worthwhile? Is this the key goal of PA? While some researchers have used this as their measure of success or failure, others argue it is the learning outcomes of the PA process that are of the greatest benefit to students, not the actual act of assessment.

Using the Benefits of PA in the High School English Classroom in Japan

Most PA studies have focused on university students. There has been less attention paid to the implementation of PA processes in high schools. This is perhaps not surprising given the reported limitations of the process. There are questions as to whether university students have enough expertise to judge their peers. This doubt would surely be amplified at high school level, particularly for students learning a foreign language. This doubt could also be echoed in the reservations students have when it comes to assessing their peers. In addition, it could be prohibitively time-consuming to fully implement a PA process in a high school. Finally, with most high school students working towards university entrance exams, there may be little inclination within the school to move away from summative assessment.

With these reservations in mind, it is fair to question whether there are any benefits to adopting or adapting PA for high school learners of English. This would, however, ignore the hugely positive

feedback about the process from students. Despite its drawbacks, the vast majority of PA studies have reported positive evaluations from students in relation to the learning that took place. If this learning can be of benefit in terms of their final summative assessment, it is surely a worthwhile exercise.

One way of implementing the positive elements of PA into a high school English class setting would be to focus on the criteria and feedback elements of the process rather than the actual assessment stage. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, many of the criticisms of PA focus on the actual act of peer grading. A reluctance on the students' part, questions as to whether students should be involved in the process, and doubts as to the validity of their grading have all been cited as problems with the process. Secondly, many studies have focused on the understanding of criteria and feedback elements as the most beneficial features of PA in terms of learning (Davies, 2006; McDowell, 1995; Orsmond, 2000; Peng, 2008). Indeed, in their analysis of 48 PA studies, Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) make several recommendations for practitioners implementing a PA process including, "peer assessment can successfully focus on the provision of feedback and may also be used in the absence of marking" (p. 318). This move away from the actual assessment element could allow teachers to use PA solely as a learning tool.

If we take the example of creating and giving a presentation in an English class in a Japanese high school, the key benefits of the formative element of PA can be easily implemented. A traditional formative assessment procedure would involve students preparing individually for their presentations and being graded based on pre-determined criteria that they may or may not have an awareness or understanding of. The first step to introducing elements of PA would be to involve the students in the creation of the assessment criteria. This can be achieved in various ways. For example, students could be put into small groups to discuss pre-determined criteria created by their teacher. They could report back to the class about their understanding of each criterion. After eliciting each group's ideas, a class definition of each criterion could be formulated along with examples of what constitutes successful attainment of that criterion. Alternatively, students can be given more responsibility by creating the criteria themselves. Rather than being given pre-determined criteria, students could be asked to brainstorm what would make a successful presentation. After eliciting their ideas, they could then rank the ideas in terms of importance. Discussion could continue until agreement upon a set of criteria has

been established. In both cases, students will have a greater understanding of what they will be graded on, what elements make up each criterion and information on what they need to do to successfully meet the overall criteria.

In relation to the feedback element of the PA process, once the criteria has been established and agreed upon, time could be allotted for students to practice their presentations in small groups. Students could give feedback to their group members in relation to the criteria. This would allow each member to adapt and improve his or her presentation before it is graded. By implementing this part of the PA process, students can identify where they are going right or wrong and make amendments to their work accordingly.

Conclusion

It is important for students to understand what constitutes a good piece of work. If they are not involved in the assessment process, they can become passive towards it (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2008). PA may be difficult to implement in the Japanese high school English classroom in its full form. Involvement in the creation of grading criteria, or at least discussion of it, together with the chance to give and receive feedback, however, are elements that can be adapted for use in high schools with little disruption to the learning process and without putting unnecessary pressure on students to be involved in the actual assessment of their peers.

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