

Using peer assessment in the language classroom

Keywords

assessment, activities, grading, higher education

Educators often speak of creating student-centered classes that increase student involvement, responsibility, and motivation. Peer assessment, if thoughtfully implemented, can help promote these goals while supplementing and increasing the reliability of traditional forms of teacher assessment. This article first outlines reasons why and how peer assessment can be used in a foreign language learning context. Then it explains when and how to use peer assessment successfully in foreign language classrooms. Finally, it introduces six tips to consider when using peer assessment.

学生の授業参加を促し、責任感や動機を高める学習者中心のクラス作りは、しばしば教師たちの話題となる。相互評価を正しく行えば、従来の教師評価の信用性を高めると同時に、学習者中心のクラスを実現することも可能となる。本論では、まず外国語学習でなぜ、どのように相互評価が行われるかを概説する。次に、いつ、どのように効果的に相互評価を行うべきかを説明する。最後に、相互評価の際に留意すべき6点を紹介する。

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What is peer assessment?

Often, educators speak of creating student-centered classes that increase student involvement, responsibility, and motivation. Peer assessment, if thoughtfully implemented, can help promote these goals while supplementing and increasing the reliability of traditional forms of teacher assessment. Peer assessment can be defined 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” (Topping, 1998, p. 250). Although there has been a lot of research indicating that peer assessment is an effective and reliable form of evaluation in both business and first language pedagogy, little attention has been given to promoting its use in the second language classroom. This article will outline reasons why and how and some of the issues related to using peer assessment in a foreign language learning context.

Why use peer assessment?

There are several reasons why peer assessment should be implemented in language classrooms. First, it offers more reliability and fairness. Because peers have closer contact with each other, they often observe more than an instructor (Morahan-Martin, 1996). Having multiple sources of observation from peers enables students to receive a more impartial grade than one given by a sole evaluator. It can also offer a complementary or alternative way of rewarding those students who assume a larger role in collaborative tasks. By integrating teacher and student results, the opportunity for students to attain a

score relatively equal to their share of the work increases.

Second, peer assessment helps students become conscious and independent learners. Peer assessment allows students to feel a greater sense of responsibility when supervising others (Saito & Fujita, 2004). Traditionally, students are used to receiving a grade from one sole authority (instructor) in the classroom. With peer assessment, grading becomes a participatory and collaborative activity. Additionally, by being included in the grading system, students become more aware of themselves as learners. Peer assessment provides an opportunity for students to become familiarized with the grading criteria. Students are able to identify the purpose of the task and understand what is expected of them by assessing others. Therefore, by participating in the process of peer assessment, students can increase their awareness of themselves as learners and further their understanding of the expectations of the instructor and the course.

Finally, peer assessment provides alternative perspectives that can be useful for both instructors and students. Instructors can benefit from the feedback provided by students because this may reveal different aspects of each student's performance they may not have previously noticed. Furthermore, peer assessment also makes it possible for students to receive more specific feedback on their performance.

When to use peer assessment

Group work

Peer assessment is ideal for groups because it can supplement the group score and provide a more accurate and complete picture of each student's contribution during the task process. Additionally, if students are aware of the grading instrument prior to assessment, it can promote cooperative learning (Kwan & Leung, 1996, in Matsuno, 2009) and improve individual performance (Topping, 1998).

Writing

Peer review has become a common form of assessment in second language writing courses (Cheng & Warren, 2005) due to the overwhelming task of instructors providing extensive and

detailed corrective feedback. Peer reviews offer a practical alternative to finding errors commonly made by writers while also exposing reviewers to more language and raising awareness of what is expected in their own writing. With continued and routine use, peer assessment can be integrated as part of the writing process.

Homework

Providing feedback for daily homework can often be a necessary nuisance to teachers who want students to practice learning language outside of the classroom but don't have the time necessary to provide corrective feedback for each student. Often, teachers dictate answers to the class and students check their own or a partner's work. Although this is an efficient method, it offers learners little feedback and understanding of the mistakes made. In order to provide a richer learning experience, students can check homework in groups. First, they compare and check answers and try to reconcile differences in answers. If students cannot resolve the differences or simply do not understand the problem, they can request assistance from the instructor. Additionally, groups can determine an assessment score for each student and record these scores on a group homework log to be collected, checked, and recorded by the instructor.

Oral presentations & speeches

Presentations and speeches provide an opportunity for quick, on-the-spot assessment of students. However, because these are often in real time, the teacher is forced into multiple roles ranging from classroom manager, time keeper, stage hand, audience, *and* evaluator. Trying to balance these roles can greatly reduce the teacher's main objective of assessing students. With the help of student evaluators, the speaker or presenter is more likely to receive more involved feedback and a more accurate score. Furthermore, giving students the responsibility to assess one another helps keep the audience members engaged and attentive.

In-class group activities/discussions

In order to address large classroom sizes and time constraints, instructors often must observe

and assess multiple pairs or groups simultaneously during a graded activity. Peer assessment can assist the instructor by complementing the instructor's more general observations with more specific feedback. During graded discussions, peer observers can count the number of times a student contributed to the conversation/discussion, used target language, or identified use of conversation/discussion strategies such as follow-up questions or rejoinders. Additionally, ranking peers could be used following in-class group activities to identify students who contributed the most during the activity. Extra points could be awarded to the top students in each group.

Six tips for using peer assessment

Peer assessment is by no means a perfect approach to evaluating students. There have been several problems identified, including students who lack exposure or expertise in relation to the expected outcomes, bias, leniency, and acceptance as a fair part of assessment (Melvin, 1988; Morahan-Martin, 1996). However, if instructors plan carefully, they can successfully avoid many of these problems by addressing the following issues in peer assessment:

1. Criteria & objectives

Instructors should carefully explain exactly what is being assessed and make sure students clearly understand the criteria and objectives. Patri's study (2002) showed that clear assessment criteria helped enable peers to make judgments

comparable to those of the teacher. This can be done in a number of ways, including providing bilingual criteria or examples and models of what a successful or unsuccessful attempt looks like. In some instances, students took part in selecting the criteria and increasing their involvement and responsibility in the assessment process (Duke & Sanchez, 1994, in Cheng & Warren, 2005).

2. Assessment tools

The assessment tool should be user-friendly and time-efficient. Along with students having a clear understanding of the grading criteria, it is similarly important that the assessment tool be as clear and simple as possible without sacrificing educational goals. Common peer assessment tools include numerical scales, descriptors, or letter grades. For example, four- and six-point Likert scales are often employed to score performance criteria. Using numerical scales can avoid the ambiguity between terms such as *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, or *poor*. However, numbers can be easily substituted with descriptors. This can help peer raters think about the quality of the work instead of negotiating numbers. Also, descriptors lacking numerical data can reduce the impression that the peer rater has a direct impact on their peer's grade. Additionally, teachers can provide bands of specific descriptors students can select and use as common feedback language. Specific written feedback should generally be positive, constructive, and ideally be in the L2, using language familiar to the students. Depending on their level, L1 feedback

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may be used to ensure comprehension of the critique. One idea to keep open-ended feedback constructive and in English would be to give students sentence starters such as *I like...*, *I want to know...*, *You can make it better by...*. These help students stay focused and constructive about their comments (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996).

3. Training

In order for students to be effective raters, they need to be trained on how to use the assessment tool and have a clear idea of what constitutes a high or low score. Ideally, prior to using the assessment tool, students should observe and evaluate good and bad models for the assessment task. Allowing students to analyze the difference between these models not only gives them excellent practice as raters, but also provides them with a reference and a goal for their own work. Models can be teacher-generated or anonymous authentic student work from previous courses.

4. Bias

Saito and Fujita (2004) identify several studies that indicate problems with bias in peer reviews of writing. Common forms of bias can occur because of friendship or fear of future retribution. In one-to-one reviews, bias can be reduced by conducting anonymous peer reviews where the identity of the author and the reviewer is withheld. The instructor should take precautions not to identify the evaluators and remove names from assessment forms. One-to-one peer assessments are generally more appropriate for providing qualitative feedback and comments for formative tasks where students are taking part in a process of revision. For summative tasks where students are presenting their final product for assessment, including more than one assessor can further reduce bias and help instructors acquire a more accurate score. Kane and Lawler (1978) cited Winch and Anderson's finding to establish an ideal number of ten raters to maintain interrater reliability and help reduce bias.

5. Repetition

Several studies (Saito & Fujita, 2004; Chen & Warren, 2005; Rothschild & Klingenberg, 1990,

in Saito, 2008) indicated that students initially feel uncomfortable with peer assessment but generally attain a positive attitude toward it. However, after training, practice, and a few actual attempts, students gradually become more comfortable rating their peers. Students may often feel the teacher has the sole authority to make judgments about language ability and feel reluctant to rate their peers. Numerous opportunities to engage in peer assessment can instill a sense of confidence and acceptance among students. Additionally, these repeated opportunities allow students to become more familiar with the rubric and criteria and provide insight into editing and improving their own performance.

6. Impact

Even though peer assessment has proved to have high reliability and validity, research suggests instructors should not rely too much on peer assessment to avoid errors of judgment and issues of student acceptability (Kane & Lawler, 1978; Melvin, 1988; Morahan-Martin, 1996). For students who are used to a traditional evaluation system with one evaluator, peer assessment may seem unfamiliar and untrustworthy. Therefore, it is important peer assessment be used only as a small part of the final grade and should be combined with several peer scores and an instructor score. Instructors can simply use peer assessment results to validate and support their own scores. Alternatively, peer rating can be used to provide additional feedback but have no bearing on the actual score.

Conclusion

Although peer assessment has not yet been fully integrated in the language classroom, it can provide an alternate and valid assessment tool that can be easily and effectively implemented into any language curriculum, course, classroom, or activity. If used properly, peer assessment can offer several advantages to traditional assessment forms and enable teachers to maintain a broader perspective and more accurate assessment of their students. Likewise, students benefit from assessing each other through increased feedback, understanding of expectations and requirements, a sense of shared responsibility, and increased self-awareness as language learners.

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