



The impact of training adolescent EFL learners on their perceptions of peer assessment of writing

[Η επίδραση της εκπαίδευσης των εφήβων σπουδαστών αγγλικής γλώσσας στις αντιλήψεις τους σχετικά με την έτερο-αξιολόγηση του γραπτού λόγου]

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Peer assessment (PA) has been increasingly used as an alternative method of engaging learners in the development of their own learning. However, very little research has been conducted in the Cypriot and Greek educational systems. This paper describes part of a research project conducted in a Cypriot State EFL Institute. Forty adolescent 'English as a Foreign Language (EFL)' students were involved in PA of writing in an attempt to improve their writing performance and attitudes towards the assessment of writing. Learners received training since they had no PA experience prior to the study. The students' attitudes were canvassed both prior to the PA training and at the end of it by means of a PA questionnaire. The findings showed that students' response to PA was: (a) negative before the training, and b) positive after the training. This study concludes that PA is an innovative method and students have to be given time, training and support to adapt to it, in order to perform to the best of their ability and exploit its full potential.

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Η ετερο-αξιολόγηση χρησιμοποιείται όλο και περισσότερο σαν εναλλακτική μέθοδος της εμπλοκής των μαθητών στην ανάπτυξη της μάθησης τους. Πολύ λίγη έρευνα όμως έχει διεξαχθεί στο Κυπριακό και Ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα. Το παρόν άρθρο περιγράφει μέρος ενός ερευνητικού προγράμματος που πραγματοποιήθηκε σε ένα Κυπριακό Κρατικό Ινστιτούτο εκμάθησης της Αγγλικής ως ξένη γλώσσα. Σαράντα έφηβοι σπουδαστές της Αγγλικής ως ξένη γλώσσα πήραν μέρος στην διαδικασία έτερο-αξιολόγησης γραπτού λόγου σε μια προσπάθεια να βελτιωθεί η απόδοση τους και η στάση τους απέναντι στην αξιολόγηση του γραπτού λόγου. Οι μαθητές εκπαιδεύτηκαν εφόσον δεν είχαν σχετική εμπειρία πριν από την εμπλοκή τους στην διαδικασία της έτερο-αξιολόγησης. Διερευνήθηκαν οι στάσεις των μαθητών πριν και στο τέλος της εκπαίδευσης τους στην διαδικασία της έτερο-αξιολόγησης με την χρήση ενός σχετικού ερωτηματολογίου. Τα αποτελέσματα έδειξαν ότι η ανταπόκριση των μαθητών στην έτερο-αξιολόγηση ήταν: α) αρνητική πριν την εκπαίδευση τους, και β) θετική μετά την εκπαίδευση. Αυτή η μελέτη

καταλήγει στο συμπέρασμα ότι η έτερο-αξιολόγηση είναι μια καινοτόμος μέθοδος και πρέπει να δοθεί χρόνος, εκπαίδευση και υποστήριξη για να προσαρμοστούν οι μαθητές σ' αυτήν, να μπορέσουν να βελτιώσουν ικανοποιητικά την απόδοσή τους και να επωφεληθούν από αυτήν στο μέγιστο βαθμό.

Key words: peer assessment, alternative, writing, secondary education, attitudes, training.

Introduction and literature review

Due to the growing focus on learner autonomy in learning and assessment (Falchikov, 1986; Lynch, 1988), peer assessment (PA) has received a lot of attention in recent years. Nevertheless, this method is novel to most English language teachers and students in Cyprus and Greece where traditional assessment is still dominant. According to McDowell (1995), PA is one form of innovation which aims to improve the quality of learning and empower students in contrast to more traditional methods which can leave learners feeling disengaged from the overall assessment process. Moreover, PA: (a) encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and development, (b) treats assessment as part of learning so that mistakes are seen as opportunities rather than failures, and (c) practises the transferable skills needed for life-long learning particularly related to evaluation skills (Donaldson & Topping, 1996).

Numerous studies evaluate the perceptions and attitudes of the learners towards the PA process. Many researchers report that learners have a positive attitude towards the evaluation of the written work of their peers (Race, Brown & Smith, 2005; Wen & Tsai, 2006). PA increases students' interest in the English language lesson by encouraging self-regulated learning (Ten Berge & Hofstee, 2004). Ballantyne, Hughes, and Mylonas (2002) point out that students commonly report that assessing the work of their peers: (a) can be personally motivating, (b) aid knowledge and understanding of subject content, and (c) help their learning. Peer feedback, a basic feature of PA, has an impact on affect, e.g. increases motivation through the sense of personal responsibility, reduces writing anxiety and improves self-confidence (Topping, 2000). Finally, Brown, Race and Smith (1997) report that resistance by students to informal peer feedback is rare.

Nevertheless, there are studies which indicate the opposite. Student writers may not always trust their peers when the same comment from a teacher will be taken into account (Strijbos, Narciss. & Dunnebie, 2010). In some studies, students became defensive and expressed discomfort (Papinczak, Young & Groves, 2007) and uneasiness about acting like a teacher (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 1997). Topping, Smith, Swanson and Elliot (2000) found that most students considered the PA process as time consuming and socially uncomfortable although it was effective in improving their learning. Other researchers actually found increased opposition to PA after student exposure to it (Rushton, Ramsey & Rada, 1993). Finally, students felt uncomfortable in awarding grades seeing it as "risky and unfair" and simply preferred to give feedback (Boud, 2000).

In conclusion, the literature has shown mixed findings regarding learners' attitudes towards PA especially when these received no prior training in PA (Sluijsmans, Moerkerke, Merrienboer & Dochy, 2001). Moreover, most research in PA was conducted with adult learners (Jones & Fletcher, 2002). It would, therefore, be interesting to explore adolescent EFL learners' attitudes towards PA of writing before and after training learners in PA

methods. The aim is to identify whether preparing learners for using PA in their classrooms can have an impact on students' attitudes towards PA.

Rationale for the current study and research questions

According to previous research (Meletiadou, 2011), Cypriot adolescent EFL learners have a negative attitude towards writing and the assessment of writing (Meletiadou, 2011). Peer assessment is one of the most popular tools for 'assessment for learning' currently adopted in education (Falchikov, 2004; Topping, Walker & Rondriguez, 2008). However, very little research has been done in the area of PA performed by adolescent learners (Tsivitanidou, Zacharia & Hovardas 2011). There is also a need for more research into this new method of assessment in relation to the impact of training students in PA methods on their attitudes (Cheng & Warren, 1997). In an attempt to explore the potential of using PA to support adolescent student achievement in EFL writing and to improve students' attitudes towards writing and the assessment of writing, a study was conducted in order to find answers to the following research questions: (1) What are adolescent EFL learners' perceptions of PA of writing? (2) Does training adolescent EFL learners prior to implementing PA of writing improve their attitudes towards PA of writing?

Subjects

The study involved two groups of 20 adolescent learners who had attended EFL classes for the past five years at a local State Institute in Cyprus. All students were provided with training in PA before using it in class. The learners had to write three essays (an informal letter, a descriptive and a narrative essay) in two drafts according to the demands of their curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2010). Both groups received teacher feedback, while Group A (student/assesseees) also received peer feedback from group B (student/assessors) using an analytic rating scale. The teacher, who was also the researcher of this study, was a qualified EFL teacher with several years of experience and a postgraduate degree in 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)'.

Instruments

The researcher employed two instruments in order to address the research questions. These were: a) a PA questionnaire and b) a PA form.

The PA questionnaire

Students' attitudes were monitored before and after the PA training by means of a questionnaire (Table 1) adapted by Cheng and Warren (1997) and developed for lower secondary EFL students.

All statements required learners to respond using a five-point Likert type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree. This questionnaire aimed to elicit students' reaction to PA before and after having experienced it. The questionnaires were administered during class time immediately before and after completing the training so that the students could easily recall and express their opinions. The aim was to detect any differences in students' attitudes towards PA after they received training in this 'alternative' assessment method.

Taking into consideration the students' language level, the statements were presented both in Greek and English. The language and the wording of the statements were also intended to

be simple so as to correspond to students’ age and cognitive abilities. Besides that, the questionnaire was anonymous so as to encourage students to respond as sincerely and freely as possible.

<i>Peer Assessment Questionnaire</i>		SD	D	DK	A	SA
1	Students should take part in assessing their peers.	1	2	3	4	5
2	An adolescent student can provide reliable marks to his/her peer.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I feel comfortable when I assess my peers.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I think I can make a fair and responsible assessment of my peers.	1	2	3	4	5
SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, DK: Don’t know, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.						

Table 1. Peer assessment questionnaire

The first statement referred to the issue of students’ participation in PA. Research has shown that adolescent students often feel that they should take part in PA (Meletiadou, 2011). PA also helps students reflect upon their writing performance (Brown, 1998) and learners benefit both by providing (peer assessors) and/or receiving PA (peer assessees) (Topping, 2010). Students realize their strengths and weaknesses, become better-organized (Brown & Hudson, 1998) and follow up with actions to improve their work (Boud, 1995).

The second statement referred to the issue of the reliability of adolescent student-generated marks. It aimed at validating researchers’ claim that PA is only suitable for adult learners because it is very demanding (Brown & Dove, 1991) and that adolescent students cannot provide reliable marks (Chang, Tseng, Chou & Chen, 2011). The third statement was related to students’ feelings when they assess their peers. Research has shown that students may feel frustrated or reluctant when they assess their peers (Sluijsmans et al., 2001). Finally, the fourth statement raised the issue of fairness of PA. It also investigated the capacity of peer assessment to make students feel responsible for their own and others’ learning since they were asked to assume the role of the teacher (Papinczak et al., 2007).

The PA form

The PA form (Table 2) was devised by the student/assessors (Group B) with the help of their teacher during the training sessions.

The PA form was a rather controlled type of rubric in the form of a checklist. Nevertheless, it provided student/assesseees (Group A) with marks and feedback which play an important role to students’ educational development (Black & William, 1998). It was intended to make things easy both to student/assessors and to student/assesseees who could be asked to provide their own comments instead of simply ticking a list in the future.

The form was used to guide student/assesseees in reading and revising their own texts and to guide the peer-response activity. Being simple and ‘procedural’ in nature, it was expected to provide the learners with basic guidelines for giving feedback to peers’ drafts and

consequently approaching their own drafts critically and revising them more effectively (Johns, 1986).

<i>Criteria/Weighting</i>	Excellent- Very Good	Good- Average	Fair-Poor	Very Poor
A. Content				
1. Are the main ideas clear and well-supported with helpful details?				
2. Are the ideas relevant to the topic?				
3. Is the text easy for the reader?				
4. Does the composition fulfill the task fully?				
B. Organization				
5. Is there thorough development through introduction, body and conclusion?				
6. Is there logical sequence of ideas and effective use of transition?				
7. Is there cohesion and are there unified paragraphs?				
8. Does the writer achieve coherence by using simple linking devices?				
C. Vocabulary and Language Usage				
9. Is the vocabulary sophisticated and varied?				
10. Is there effective word choice and usage? Is the meaning clear?				
11. Does the writer use simple/complex constructions effectively?				
12. Are there errors of tense and/or subject/verb agreement?				
13. Are there errors of number (singular /plural) and word order?				
14. Are there errors of articles, pronouns and prepositions?				
D. Mechanics				
15. Are there problems with spelling and handwriting?				
16. Are there errors of punctuation and capitalization?				
Analytic score: Content: /5, Organization: /4, Vocabulary and Language use: /6, Mechanics: /5, Total score: /20.				

Table 2. Peer assessment form

Taking this form into consideration, student/assessors (Group B) had to read the drafts of the other group (Group A) carefully and tick accordingly. They were then able to quickly view the completed form, assign marks to each one of the criteria and calculate the total score.

The training phase

Supporting learners in using PA is of paramount importance because this is an activity in which learners need guidance and time to grow into. Approaching PA step by step helps reduce student concerns, build their self-confidence and gain the necessary experience. Learners need to build up a shared understanding of the nature, the purposes and the requirements of the PA method (Stewart & Cheung, 1989).

In January 2010, the researcher prepared a PA training session for the students. The main purpose of the session was to make decisions about and establish the assessment criteria. It lasted about three class hours and comprised a number of different stages (Table 3).

<i>Groups</i>	Group A	Group B
Propaganda phase	✓	✓
Revision strategies	✓	✓
Revision with peer assessment form	✓	
Model texts	✓	✓
Mock/rating, commenting		✓
Discussion	✓	✓

Table 3. Training sessions for learners

During the ‘propaganda phase’, all learners were taught revision strategies with guided tasks and were involved in a brief discussion regarding PA of writing. Student concerns were also discussed and reasons were provided why peers at the same level can give helpful feedback. The teacher explained to student/assessors (Group B) in particular, that in order to assess something, the most crucial steps were to distinguish what they were going to assess and design a set of criteria in order to do the assessment. The researcher chose to employ explicit student owned criteria because, according to research (Falchikov, 1986), these seem to enhance the overall reliability of PA by increasing the correlation between teacher and student marks. These also had to be as simple as possible in order to correspond to students’ age and cognitive abilities. As a result, learners created a PA form (Table 2) with the help of the teacher, which was used during this study to provide feedback for their essays. Namely:

- Student/assessors (Group B) completed the PA form for all student/assessees’ (Group A) drafts of all essays, and
- The teacher provided a mark and comments to all drafts of all essays keeping in mind the PA form.

Furthermore, student/assessees (Group A) were asked to revise three samples of other students’ drafts (an informal letter, a descriptive essay and a narrative) together with the completed PA forms in groups of three. Students’ revisions were then discussed in class so as to prepare both groups for revising their own drafts. Student/assessors (Group B) were presented with three samples of students’ compositions and were asked to mock rate/comment on them in groups of three using the rating instrument. Their ratings and any significant differences with the teacher’s ratings and comments were discussed in class to clarify any misunderstandings. Sample essays that presented errors in all areas of the PA form (i.e. Mechanics) were used.

Findings

To answer the research questions, the teacher administered the PA questionnaire (Table 1) to all students before and after the training session in PA. The findings are now going to be presented in the same order as the statements of the questionnaire.

Firstly, the learners’ answers to the first statement of the questionnaire revealed that students believed that they should not take part in assessing their peers (Table 4) before the

training sessions. They were rather reluctant (50%) to get actively involved in this demanding procedure without being adequately prepared for it since they were totally inexperienced in PA. Only 25% of the students seemed to be interested in experimenting with this new method and another 25% were rather uncertain. Training the learners in PA had an enormous impact on learners' attitudes towards PA. It helped them realize that they should take part in PA since this is an exciting procedure that promotes learning. As can be seen in Table 4, the majority of the learners seemed to have a positive attitude towards taking part in PA while only a few students (15%) still remained reluctant. Longer training sessions may have convinced even those hesitant learners to take an active part in this innovative method.

<i>Statement 1: Students should take part in assessing their peers.</i>			
Phase / Attitudes	Positive attitude	Neutral	Negative attitude
Pro-training	25%	25%	50%
Post-training	85%	-	15%

Table 4. Peer assessment questionnaire: Statement 1

Regarding the second statement (Table 5), most of the learners believed that adolescent students cannot provide reliable marks to their peers before the training session. They obviously did not know how this could be done. Only 35% of the students thought that they could evaluate their peers' writing skills reliably. Finally, a small part of the students (25%) were unsure. After receiving training, students seemed to have changed their disposition towards PA. They claimed that adolescent students can provide reliable marks to their peers (Table 5). Careful creation of the instruments employed seemed to enable these relatively young students to take part in this procedure quite successfully as was indicated during the training sessions. Moreover, involvement of the learners in the design of the criteria seemed to enhance their interest in PA.

<i>Statement 2: An adolescent student can provide reliable marks to his/her peer.</i>			
Groups/ Attitudes	Positive attitude	Neutral	Negative attitude
Group A	35%	20%	45%
Group A	85%	5%	10%

Table 5. Pro-training PA questionnaire: Statement 2

As can be seen in Table 6, it is obvious that most of the learners (90%) felt quite uncomfortable about assessing their peers because they had no previous experience. They were reluctant to experiment with this new type of assessment and take up the role of the teacher. After participating actively in the PA process during the training sessions, learners changed their attitudes radically (100% positive). This contradicts previous research which claims that learners are often reluctant when they are asked to assess their peers (Kwan & Leung, 1996). Students were obviously afraid to play the role of the teacher without adequate training. Moreover, they were reluctant to provide negative feedback to them in an attempt to avoid conflict. Training and anonymity of the learners in the present study resolved both problems and enhanced students' positive attitude towards PA.

<i>Statement 3: I feel comfortable when I assess my peers.</i>			
Groups/ Attitudes	Positive attitude	Neutral	Negative attitude
All groups	-	10%	90%
All groups	100%	-	-

Table 6. Pro-training PA questionnaire: Statement 3

Furthermore, most of the students were either negative (Table 7: 35%) or uncertain (45%) regarding their ability to assess fairly and responsibly their peers since they had never been involved in providing PA before. Only one fifth of the students were eager to experiment with this approach although they had no previous experience in using any form of alternative assessment. Training radically changed students' attitudes since learners seemed quite confident (80%) that they could fairly and responsibly assess their peers.

<i>Statement 4: I think I can make a fair and responsible assessment of my peers.</i>			
Groups/ Attitudes	Positive attitude	Neutral	Negative attitude
All groups	20%	45%	35%
All groups	80%	20%	-

Table 7. Pro-training PA questionnaire: Statement 4

To sum up, training in PA methods seemed to affect students' attitudes in a very positive way, improving their self-confidence and motivation. This was also confirmed by previous research (Topping, 1998). The very fact that a high percentage of the students thought of it as beneficial (Table 4) means that its use as an assessment tool was perceived as vital.

Discussion

The current study produced some very interesting findings regarding the effect of training on students' attitudes towards PA.

Students' responses in the pro-training questionnaire clearly indicated their reluctance to employ this innovative method without adequate preparation. There are a number of issues related to this attitude. First of all, most adolescent EFL learners in Cypriot State schools and Institutes are used to: (a) summative assessment, (b) a teacher-centred teaching style and (c) a product-approach to writing. Although the curriculum of the Cypriot Ministry of Education encourages the use of alternative methods, these are not actually employed in the EFL classrooms due to complete lack of teacher and student training (Meletiadou, 2011). Consequently, PA is an unfamiliar method and careful training and guidance are required in order to ensure successful implementation as various practitioners have pointed out (Digiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Jacobs et al., 1998; Porto, 2001). The process requires ongoing and repeated practice for students to become competent assessors (Sadler, 1989). Students may have reservations toward PA due to their own perceived inability of assessing their peers (Ellington, Earl & Cowan, 1997). This reservation usually comes from lack of experience or knowledge which might also cause students to feel stressful towards peer evaluation (Topping, 1998). It is unavoidable that students might be anxious when encountering a new assessment method especially when they are relatively young. To solve this, teachers should:

- explain to students that experiencing stress and anxiety is normal;
- make sure that students obtain some degree of satisfaction while their responsibility and power increases;
- become aware of students' past classroom experiences i.e. their total lack of experience in: (a) alternative assessment methods, (b) a process approach to writing, and (c) student-centred teaching styles as was the case in the present case study and their assumptions about language learning and assessment i.e. assessment is the teacher's job, and
- given opportunities for scaffolding by their teachers in the process to build their confidence and ability (Bassano, 1986).

In the present study, students' attitudes towards PA radically changed after the training sessions as was indicated from students' responses in the post training PA questionnaire. Learners felt that due to the training session, they were able to confidently and reliably assess the language proficiency of their peers (Cheng & Waren, 2005). They also had reservations about trusting their peers' comments at first and about their peers' ability to comment on subject areas they did not specialize in. Nevertheless, some time later during the training, they felt: (a) they benefited from peer response, (b) they acquired a reasonable grounding in PA procedures, (c) they were eager to take on the responsibility for their learning, (d) they turned into active participants who perceived that learning and assessing is a shared experience, and (e) they were favourably disposed to participating in PA in the future.

Given the results of the present study, it is reasonable to conclude that PA should be introduced into the curriculum gradually and in a consistent way while involving students in the design and development of the assessment criteria used for PA (Williams, 1992). These also need to be clarified and exemplified. Careful adaptation of the instruments to meet students' level can also allow the learners to participate actively in the assessment procedure.

The findings should also encourage teachers to utilize PA in their own EFL writing classrooms. EFL teachers are obviously concerned with improving their assessment methods, but appear to lack the opportunity, time and means to revise and update their assessment approaches. Therefore, sufficient and relevant assessment in-service training has to be planned and provided by the state.

In summary, the current study was fairly limited due to the small number of participants. Future research should attempt to: (a) train learners for longer periods to improve students' attitudes towards PA even more, (b) provide an in-depth analysis of learners' opinions, experiences and attitudes towards more theoretical issues relevant to PA, and (c) to investigate teachers' attitudes towards PA.

This study concludes that, with careful planning and training, PA is a viable alternative assessment in secondary education.

Conclusion

PA has great potential and is becoming a prominent tool in various subject areas at the secondary level including the field of EFL. It seems as a viable alternative to involve students in the assessment process and promote independence in secondary education. With careful preparation, monitoring and implementation, PA can "yield gains in cognitive, social, affective and transferable skill domains" that are at least as those from teacher assessment (Topping, 1998, p. 269). This study has indicated that providing learners with training in PA methods is a pre-requisite in order to ensure students' active participation and the successful implementation of PA in adolescent EFL writing classes. Finally, Ministries of Education should embrace this practice, include it in their curricula and provide adolescent EFL learners with more opportunities to develop their EFL skills after ensuring students' familiarization with this promising alternative method of learning and assessment.

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