



How students' ability levels influence the relevance and accuracy of their feedback to peers: A case study



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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, teachers play a central role in creating a learning environment that favors the implementation of peer assessment in writing. Nevertheless, students' writing ability and how it factors into students' provision of relevant (content-related) and accurate (language-related) written feedback is not considered. This is due to the fact that most studies about peer assessment were conducted in a tertiary setting and researchers assume university students have attained a basic level of cognitive and linguistic developments that would empower them to make judgments about their peers' work. The present study, which was conducted in a Hong Kong secondary school, investigated this research gap by analyzing first drafts produced by a class of 16 Secondary 1 (Grade 7) students in a writing unit. The first section of the study reports students' writing abilities in terms of content development and linguistic accuracy; findings in the subsequent section suggest that there is a strong and positive relationship between students' writing abilities and the relevance and accuracy of their written feedback. This paper ends with two pedagogical implications for implementing peer assessment: Alignment with pre-writing instruction and the development of marking focuses based on students' abilities.

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1. Introduction

Peer assessment, peer evaluation, peer editing, peer response, or peer review is a method of assessment which capitalizes on the active involvement of students (Caulk, 1994; Duke & Sanchez, 1994; Mok, 2011; Murau, 1993; Omelicheva, 2005; Topping, 1998). Under the premise of assessment *for* learning (Manitoba Education, 2006) and assessment *as* learning (Earl, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), students' learning is facilitated in the process of commenting on each other's work because teachers could elicit information about students' needs to modify their instruction; on the other hand, students become more motivated and self-driven in the learning process because they could construct the assessment criteria for assessing their peers' work (Boud, 1995; Cutler & Price, 1995). Moreover, critical thinking and problem-solving skills involved in this feedback practice are regarded as important skills for students' life-long learning in the 21st century (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

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2. Literature review

Researchers of peer assessment have attributed the role of teachers as the most important factor in bringing about the successful implementation of peer assessment (Thomas, Martin, and Pleasants, 2011). Specifically, they have exerted much effort into investigating how teachers cultivate a learning environment that maximizes the effectiveness of peer assessment (Zariski, 1996). For instance, Falchikov (2007) discusses three strategies that teachers should employ to increase students' readiness for peer assessment: *modeling*, *scaffolding*, and *fading*. The three strategies are essential for incorporating peer assessment into the daily classroom routine. In the modeling stage, students are given examples and instructions of how peer assessment is to be conducted. Having understood the expectations, students receive scaffolded instruction by knowing the assessment tools (for example, assessment rubrics, exemplars) available and how these could be used to make judgments of their peers' work. When first implemented, teachers should provide a clear and relevant set of assessment criteria or rubrics for students; gradually, teachers could allow more flexibility (the fading of responsibility) in the design of marking criteria when students become more apt and experienced in conducting this kind of assessment. Moreover, some studies reveal that peer assessment is more effective if teachers do not tie it to awards in the form of grades because students generally express fear and anxiety when judging their peers' writing summatively (Omelicheva, 2005). Omelicheva's study also reveals that students either underrate or overmark their peers' work. There is also a higher chance for students to internalize the marking criteria and increase their sense of ownership when teachers provide assessment rubrics for students to evaluate each other's performance (Bruce, 2001). Extending the role of teachers in peer assessment, several studies have reported that teachers should organize several cycles of peer assessment to increase the accuracy of feedback given by peers and teachers should moderate the grades given by students to raise their reliability (Cole, Coffey, & Goldman, 1999; Kaufman, Felder, and Fuller, 1999; Ross, Rolheiser, and Hogaboam-Gray, 2000).

When discussing the role of students, Falchikov (2007, p. 132) outlines the expectations for students in the process of peer assessment:

Peer assessment requires students to provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product or a performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining.

Essentially, students are responsible for setting assessment criteria, making judgments and giving suggestions about the quality of the product against the stipulated criteria (Boud, 1995). Since students are held responsible for the feedback they give to their peers, students' ownership and motivation to learn is greatly enhanced (Brown, 2004; Topping, 2003). One reason that contributes to students' increased ownership is that students' voice, which is more often than not ignored in traditional summative assessment, is taken into consideration when judging the quality of a product (Cook-Sather, 2002). Another benefit pertains to the development of transferrable life skills in the assessment process. Transferrable skills, attitude, and values such as 'social and communication skills, negotiation and diplomacy, . . . giving and handling criticism, self-justification and assertion' (Topping, 2003; p. 7) are fostered because students are required to support the claims they make about their peers' work and they practice the skills of communication and handling power relations in the process of presenting and sharing their opinions; when their comments are not accepted by their peers, they learn to negotiate meaning and provide explanations to substantiate their arguments. In their study examining the benefits of peer assessment to givers and receivers of feedback, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) contend that students who give feedback show greater improvement in global aspects of writing than those who receive the feedback because they are trained to evaluate a piece of writing more critically.

Nevertheless, peer assessment is criticized because the feedback given by peers is subjective and students are not motivated to give feedback because of low self-efficacy (Bostock, 2000; Brown, 2004; Mok, 2011). Other studies examining the limitations of peer assessment highlight students' language proficiency and classroom culture as two inhibiting factors. Braine (2003) contends that students who are exposed to a teacher-fronted classroom may feel uneasy to engage in peer assessment activities. Despite its constraints, peer assessment has continued to receive much attention, especially in the tertiary sector, as an effective method to promote self-directed learning, because of its long-term benefits to students. When discussing the role of students and what teachers could do to help them become acute assessors, students' writing ability is not considered as a possible variable that would impede or assist students to give relevant and accurate feedback to peers. The current research direction seems to suggest that students' perception and ability to assess others' work could be changed and developed when there is appropriate teacher intervention. This raises a question, which is the focus of the present exploratory study: Is the writing ability (in terms of levels of content development and linguistic accuracy) of a student/peer assessor a crucial factor in effective (in terms of relevance and accuracy) peer feedback?

3. The study

3.1. Research questions

This exploratory study offers a new perspective to look into an under-explored area of peer assessment research, that is, students' writing ability and its influence on the quality of feedback given. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

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