



Group peer assessment of oral English performance in a Taiwanese elementary school

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ABSTRACT

While studies of peer assessment (PA) of both written and oral performance are more common in higher education settings, particularly in first-language contexts, PA's potential for familiarizing elementary-level students with assessment criteria, empowering them to gain ownership of their learning, and developing their motivation and collaborative skills is less well understood. This study investigated the implementation of group PA of oral performance in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classes in Taiwan. A mixed methodology research design integrated analysis of teacher- and peer-assessment ratings for each presenting group, post-assessment survey data, and an instructor interview, documenting the perceptions of and attitudes toward PA of 130 upper elementary students (ages 10–12) and their instructor. The results show that the ratings by fifth and sixth graders, but not fourth graders, were significantly correlated with those of the instructor. Practical and research implications for future implementation of PA of oral performance are discussed.

1. Introduction

To cultivate learners' real-life English communication skills, approaches that prioritize oral interaction and sociocultural competence over writing skills have been gaining popularity over traditional grammar based approaches in East Asian countries (Butler, 2011; Knapp, Seidlhofer, & Widdowson, 2009). Given the importance of linking assessment to instruction, the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) has encouraged teachers to replace traditional paper-and-pencil summative assessment with formative evaluation. The new Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) curricula call for classroom-based assessment that involves authentic tasks and interactions in pairs and small groups (Butler & Zeng, 2014; Harding, 2014), for example, group role play, which can reinforce students' content learning as well as provide a way to assess learning outcomes, and peer assessment (PA) (Ye, 2001), in which students evaluate learning outcomes of their peers (Topping, 1998).

However, as a test-centered culture like many Asian societies (Vongpumivitch, 2012), Taiwan relies heavily on summative and standardized tests, not only in classroom teaching but also for gate-keeping purposes and critical admissions decisions. Currently, local English language pedagogical research centers largely on standardized tests and their washback on educational practices (e.g. Huang, Hung, & Plakans, 2016; Pan & Newfields, 2011; Shih, 2010; Wu, 2012). Among the few studies focusing on student-based formative evaluation, Huang (2016) examined the effects of self-assessment on speaking, and Tsai

and Chuang (2013) investigated those of PA on writing via a web-based program. However, these studies were conducted in universities, leaving open the question of how to implement such strategies at earlier levels, where traditional approaches are fairly entrenched. PA therefore must be introduced carefully in Taiwan's elementary schools, where teacher-centered classrooms remain the norm. The communicative shift towards student-centered classrooms, in which learners participate actively and engage in collaborative dialogue, might be viewed as undermining teachers' authority (Carless, 2007; Lantolf, 2000). In particular, teachers must be persuaded to give up their status as sole assessors of students' learning.

This situation calls for an investigation into how PA can be practiced as an alternative assessment approach of communicative activities in this sociocultural context, and how instructors and learners perceive this novel approach. Because students work in groups to perform role plays, in this study, group PA was implemented, so the combination provided opportunities for collaborative discussion and decision making. To explore the implementation and outcomes of group PA, Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory was adopted as the theoretical framework (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Palinscar, 2005). A mixed methodology that integrates analyses of ratings of teacher assessment (TA) and PA, post-assessment student survey data, and an instructor interview (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) was employed to document the process and triangulate the research results. This study bridges the gap of PA literature by documenting the implementation process as well as problematizing the

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collaborative activities to uncover tensions and conflicts that need to be addressed for future practice.

2. Benefits and challenges of peer assessment practice

Overall, PA has been studied primarily in higher education (e.g., De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2012; Falchikov, 2001; Hughes & Large, 1993; Langan et al., 2005, 2008). In English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) settings, PA research has focused on writing in tertiary schools (e.g., Tsai & Chuang, 2013; Suzuki, 2009; Min, 2006). Research on group PA of oral skills in EFL settings at the elementary level is limited. Therefore, the following is a discussion of the general characteristics of PA and its implementation in a variety of settings, leading to the rationale for the present study.

2.1. Definition of PA

In line with social constructivism's focus on social interaction as a vehicle for acquiring new knowledge and skills (Vygotsky, 1978), Strijbos and Sluijsmans (2010) defined PA as "an educational arrangement where students judge a peer's performance quantitatively and/or qualitatively and which stimulates students to reflect, discuss and collaborate" (p. 265). Thus, PA fulfills the double duty of assessment and learning (Boud, 2000). Furthermore, the present study extends the current PA literature to include between-group PA, in which students evaluate their classmates' performances via discussing and giving group ratings and comments. The process engages students in high level cognitive and discursive processes such as questioning, negotiating, and articulating their thoughts (Kollar & Fischer, 2010).

2.2. Benefits of PA

2.2.1. As an alternative assessment

Studies affirming the reliability and potential learning benefits of PA as an alternative assessment in L2 contexts have primarily involved adult learners (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Topping, 2003; van Zundert, Sluijsmans, & van Merriënboer, 2010). In a study of Taiwanese EFL university students in an oral training course, who received PA training and decided on evaluation criteria with the instructor, Chen (2006, p. 7) found that PA and TA were highly correlated ($r = 0.87$). The students reported that the practice helped them as performers to develop speaking skills and think critically, and as assessors to gain confidence in evaluation and commentary. Nevertheless, some proposed a lower ratio for student ratings in their final grades, implying a lack of trust in their fellow students' assessment and a preference for the authority of the instructor in grading. Learners' reliance on instructor as the sole assessor and lower confidence in assessing may make them reluctant to render strong judgements of peers. Shimura (2006) implemented PA at a Tokyo university, in which each student's short presentation was assessed by three peers, who were only briefly introduced to the practice of PA. The students' and instructor's mean scores were not significantly different, but the instructor's standard deviation was much larger, suggesting that students are less willing to assign extremely high or low scores.

Such evidence of student reticence while evaluating peers underscores the need for careful planning and preparation before implementing PA (Cheng & Warren, 2005), including setting clearly itemized criteria (Chen, 2006) and sufficiently training student assessors (Saito, 2008) to assure they take into account a balance of criteria rather than focus excessively on interactional features such as gestures and facial expressions (Shimura, 2006). PA along with peer feedback has also been found to increase student-teacher agreement. Patri (2002) examined practice of PA in small working groups in a Hong Kong university. Each group member's oral presentation was assessed by the other members, who gave ratings either with or without accompanying verbal feedback. The results showed higher agreement between PA and

TA in the groups with verbal feedback, leading to the conclusion that formulating and delivering verbal feedback enhanced students assessing ability.

2.2.2. As support for interaction and collaboration

In addition to providing a source of assessment and feedback to sharpen students' oral performance skills, PA can develop collaborative and teamwork skills (Riley, 1995). In a study of Dutch secondary school students, van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema (2010) investigated how participation in PA affected interpersonal variables. Survey results indicated changes in psychological safety, value diversity, and trust in the peer as an assessor, showing that the students perceived it to be safe to take interpersonal risks in a group and could more easily accommodate different opinions among group members to reach a consensus. The findings stressed positive effects of PA practice on developing some interpersonal variables important for group work. However, the reasons underlying why PA contributed to making a change in the variables required further investigation.

Another value of PA-related collaboration is that objectivity can be developed in group discussion. Peng (2010) investigated high-intermediate and low-intermediate classes in a Taiwanese university that practiced both group-to-group PA of oral presentations and within-group PA to assess each member's contributions to the group's work. The results showed an increase in favorable attitudes toward PA and strong reliability of PA scores at both proficiency levels. The students reported that PA helped increase their participation and their motivation for learning, and the group discussion helped them to be more objective in group-to-group PA, which decreased their tendency to over-mark, a common issue raised in previous studies (Sluijsmans, Dochy, & Moerkerke, 1998). However, student ratings in within-group PA were much higher than in group-to-group PA, perhaps due to a friendship effect.

2.3. Challenges of PA

Despite positive reactions to doing PA, collaboration may also involve issues. Hung, Samuelson, and Chen (2016) explored relationships between peer-, self- (SA), and teacher assessments of sixth graders' (age 12) English oral presentations in Taiwan. After each student's presentation, the student did SA while the other students did PA in groups. The comparisons of ratings indicated strong correlation between PA and TA and moderate correlation between SA and TA. The researchers argued that playing the role of the teacher motivated the student assessors to assess fairly and improved their own presentations by reflecting on their classmates' performances in group discussions. However, some learners were still concerned that grades assigned by peers were not fair and a few group members dominated the grading process.

The issues of lack of proficiency and violating friendship norms have been found to be the downside of PA. In a case study of four Hong Kong secondary EFL students who were considered weak in English and less confident in themselves, Mok (2010) found that assessing others frustrated the students because they felt that peers were not qualified to evaluate each other. They also reported that the evaluation form, which provided smiley, neutral, or sad faces for each category, did not facilitate cognitive engagement as specific criteria for feedback might. In a study of Japanese university students' perceptions of PA in an EFL public speaking course, White (2009) also found that although students recognized the advantages of PA, some found it uncomfortable. The students rehearsed providing PA for mini-presentations and then conducted PA during the mid-term and final presentations. The results showed that, while the majority of the students considered PA to be fair and helpful in planning and delivering their own presentations, some voiced concerns about inconsistent application of criteria, and some were concerned about lowering their peers' grades.

Bryant and Carless (2010) found that Hong Kong elementary students still viewed their teachers as the only trustworthy assessors in a

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