



Influence of Peer-Assessment on Speaking Skills

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Speaking has been one of the greatest challenges students and teachers face in EFL classes. Students have to deal with grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency and on top of all, the anxiety of speaking in front of their peers. It is a demanding task, both intellectual and emotionally. On November 2021, a group of A2 volunteer students struggling with keeping oral exchanges in English came together to assemble a class. The main goal was to enhance their speaking skills using mostly common expressions, adverbs of frequency and intelligible pronunciation while working on basic grammar structures. A new strategy was needed to achieve the aforementioned goal and peer-assessment has proven to be a powerful tool in language teaching. According to multiple research studies, this type of assessment decreases anxiety levels, enhances communication skills, and promotes autonomy within students.

In consequence, the teacher implemented peer-assessment methodology in order to improve speaking skills and be able to communicate properly among peers or foreign people. The innovation was developed in a two-weeks' time frame. It was an online class with 12 young adult students from Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Before the project began, the students manifested they had several issues when it came to speak English, due to the anxiety caused when they have to use the language, especially with peers. The group also mentioned they feel ashamed each time they have to speak with tourists since they perceive foreigners do not understand them properly as a result of their pronunciation and poor vocabulary. However, they are aware of the importance of learning this global language and the opportunities that would open if they could improve their speaking proficiency.

Literature Review

The present research focuses on the implementation of the peer-assessment methodology and how it influences the oral performance in an EFL class. Related theory and studies are introduced in this section.

Speaking

Speaking is seen as a process which aim is to convey a set of ideas into verbal and non-verbal word symbols (Wenny & Fajar, 2019). Chameron (cited in Wenny & Fajar, 2019) stated that speaking is the use of language to express meaning so others are able to understand the message. However, it is not an easy skill to master, a great amount of practice is necessary, especially when learning a foreign language. People are able to express their ideas and thoughts through verbal language, therefore, the ability to function in a foreign language is characterized in terms of being able to speak, resulting in one of the most important indicators of mastering a language (Fauzan, 2016). A significant number of English learners feel reluctant and unmotivated due to their fear of making mistakes (Fauzan, 2016). According to Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020), there are three types of parameters when it comes to foreign language anxiety, communication apprehension which is feeling the fear around people, test anxiety due to exams, and fear of negative evaluation by the listener. Experts recommend that learners should have many inputs from other skills, such as, reading, listening, and writing aiming to improve the content in order to have a fluent conversation (Wenny & Fajar, 2019).

Peer-Assessment

Peer-assessment (PA) is a collaborative learning arrangement that includes equal-status students assessing their fellow students' level, amount, value, worth, or quality of a product or performance by providing feedback (Rotsaert et al., 2018). In some instances, the assigning of a grade could be included (University of Waikato

Alternative ways to apply peer-assessment.

The process of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of peers' performance can support the student who is providing feedback to familiarize with the evaluation criteria. Through this, knowledge on what constitutes good work and what needs to be avoided can be developed (Rotsaert et al., 2018).

There are several ways peer assessment can be applied and assist students in the speaking process—for instance, the use of a rubric or checklist. Su (2020) described these as scoring tools which point out the expectations for an assignment, meaning it divides the assignment into components and provides detailed descriptions of what the evaluator considers an acceptable or unacceptable level of performance.

Furthermore, peer editing is a valuable resource for PA; students can take turns providing oral feedback on their peers' drafts. UW (2012) suggested group members should write down some comments about the criteria or questions and give these to the writer. However, teachers have to keep in mind that prior to the implementation of peer editing, students should be given examples and participate in coached practices. Consequently, teachers need to make sure the criteria for any piece of PA are clear and fully discussed with students, and if necessary, negotiate with the class within the appropriate circumstances (UW, 2012).

Topping (2009) stated that giving positive feedback could reduce students' anxiety and improve subsequent acceptance of negative feedback. Hence, students should be aware that PA involves them directly in the learning process and should promote a sense of ownership, responsibility, and motivation.

Finally, the influence of PA on language learning is quite promising. However, its effectiveness depends on a range of parameters, including students' attitudes, language levels, and critical thinking skills (Peng, 2010).

Benefits and challenges of using peer-assessment.

Benefits

Peer assessment brings several benefits. First, it helps students become more autonomous, competent and involved by being responsible for any judgment given to their friends based on their knowledge (Musfirah, 2019; White, 2009). This process naturally leads to cognitive improvements, when one student assesses another, it allows him (the student doing the assessment) to understand the objective to be achieved clearly; by giving feedback in his own words, a regulatory effect is created (Colognesi et al., 2020).

Second, PA encourages students to critically analyze work done by others rather than see a mark. By assessing their peers, it is expected that they learn from their mistakes to avoid doing the same ones (Musfirah, 2019; White, 2009).

Third, there are social benefits. It involves students working together and developing collaboration skills by interacting with each other and discussing their evaluation (Colognesi et al., 2020; Vitra, 2017). In conclusion, multiple benefits within PA could improve the students' learning process and, as a final evaluation that helps the teacher assess the work of their students (Vitra, 2017).

Challenges

One of the main challenges in PA is that students may lack the ability to evaluate each other. They may not have the capacity to assess their friends and apply PA properly (Vitra, 2017; White, 2009). Therefore, students may not take it seriously, allowing friendship or the entertainment value to interfere with their marking (White, 2009).

Both assessors and assesses can experience initial anxiety about the whole PA process (Topping, 2009). Likewise, teachers tend to fear the lack of reliability or validity of PA, and diminish its use. As a result, many students are being deprived of its multiple benefits.

Innovation

This study was applied on a group of volunteer students who had difficulties and struggle using basic tenses, pronunciation, proper vocabulary, adverbs of frequency and common expressions in oral exchanges. The platforms used in class in order to post content, assignments, and updates were Discord and WhatsApp. The classes were taken online in a two-week period, divided in ten synchronous (Mondays through Wednesdays: one hour, and Thursdays: two hours), and four asynchronous hours. The asynchronous activities were sent via Discord at the end of each lesson.

A backward design was used to create the lesson plan. This approach focuses on the learning outcomes and how students will be assessed before considering how to teach the content of the course (Button, 2021). The lessons were divided into three categories: acquisition, transfer and meaning making activities. A checklist was applied to evidence the lesson plan's results.

In addition, the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) was also part of the innovation, students experienced it through three stages. The first one, when the teacher modeled, for instance: the summative task, a daily routine, likes and dislikes, a new option for Ecuadorian lunch at schools and explained the pros and cons of one social media app activities which were modeled before the guided practices that were done in pairs or groups while the teacher monitored, and the third consisted of students taking responsibility and applying what they learnt by themselves without being monitored by the teacher (Webb et al., 2019).

Several activities were planned with the purpose of enhancing vocabulary, grammar and fluency. Slides, games, videos, apps, and worksheets were used to support the activities.

The peer-assessment methodology was introduced to students, starting from the basic concepts, ideas and examples. The students had to record a video in pairs discussing a specific topic while using part of the contents they were revising in class. Each group peer-assessed each other using a checklist in Spanish since they were A2 level speakers and it was crucial that they fully understood what they were assessing. Additionally, feedback was provided by the teacher each time they used the checklist.

The unit was called “Making Friends” and was divided into eight lessons and a summative evaluation. Each lesson consists of topics related to their everyday life, such as, routines, likes and dislikes, movies, food and social media. Also, useful vocabulary and grammar were included, specifically, common expressions, hobbies, food, adjectives, adverbs of frequency, simple present, and question words.

Furthermore, students used a mentor text, which was introduced at the beginning of the unit with two persons having a conversation about music. The purpose of the mentor text was to be handled as a model. They had several activities divided into formative assessment which included interviews, role play, exhibitions, forums, research, games and so on, and the summative assessment, where, in pairs, students had to create their own dialogue and record a video having a two-minute conversation about social media. Soon after the pairs of students completed the activity, they proceed to peer-assess each other using the aforementioned checklist. A checklist is mostly based on dichotomous decisions, such as, yes/no or have/do not have for each criterion (Brookhart, 2018). The checklist used in the innovation had six criteria, regarding the use of: simple present, interrogative words in a conversation, common expressions in a dialogue, proper vocabulary, adverbs of frequency and intelligible pronunciation.

Students had three options in order to peer-assess their partner: yes, no and sometimes.

The final videos, which were part of the formative and summative assessment, were sent to the teacher via mail. Feedback was provided to the students via Discord and WhatsApp.

Research Methodology

In order to bring a real change in teaching, professional learning opportunities should be link to constant practice in sustained and authentic environments, and be developed as part of a community which is permanently practicing and evolving (Fullan, 2010).

“Action research shifts the paradigm of contemporary educational reform by emphasizing inquiry and placing teachers at the center of research-into-practice. By situating teachers as learners, action research offers a systematic and intentional approach to changing teaching. When working as part of a community of practice, action researchers engage in sustained professional learning activities” (McGlenn, 2019, p. 163).

This study applied qualitative and quantitative instruments to explore if peerassessment within a conversation improves their speaking skills by asking the following research questions: “To what extent the implementation of peer-assessment will influence speaking skills among A2 level students?” (quantitative) and “What are the students’ perspectives about using peer-assessment checklist to review their classmates’ performance?” (qualitative).

Participants

Participants were volunteers from Guayaquil, Ecuador. Students were between the ages of 18-25 years old. Participants share the English A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The students took

a diagnostic test following the guidelines provided by the CEFR. The class had 14 students who were invited to participate in the research. Three of the students were absent on several classes and did not complete the pretest or posttest and were excluded from the analysis (Note that students participating in this study were present on voluntary basis and the class had no assessment component. This factor could have been the reason for the drop in class size). The final sample size was 12 students who completed both the pretest and the posttest and participated on the peer-assessment intervention. Six students were female and five were male.

Instruments

The instruments used for the quantitative part of the study were a pre and posttest. These instruments were used to measure the efficacy of a program by using a pretest baseline assessment at the beginning and then re-administer the same assessment at the end (Chang & Little, 2018). These instruments answered the research question: To what extent the implementation of peer-assessment will influence speaking skills among A2 level students?

The pretest was administered at the beginning of the unit, here each pair of students had to record themselves together talking about music for two minutes, there was one group of students with three members due to the total amount of participants. This dialogue was based on the mentor text provided by the teacher. In order to evaluate students, the teacher used a rubric which considered language use, interactive communication, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation as its criteria.

Bearman and Ajjawi (2019) affirmed that a rubric is often associated with transparency, as a tool which outlines the expectations for students work, focusing mainly on parameters that denote attainment of standards or describe aspirational quality. In the same way, a rubric can teach as well as evaluate (Andrade & Du, 2005 cited in Matshedisho, 2019).

Finally, for the posttest, the final task consisted on producing a dialogue between two friends discussing social media pros and cons for two minutes. Students had to use common expressions, simple present, adjectives, adverbs of frequency, and the vocabulary review in class.

To answer the second research question: What are the students' perspectives about using peer-assessment checklist to review their classmates' performance? a survey was conducted to the whole class. The students answered two questions focused in their personal experience using peer-assessment for the first time to review each other's performance. Additionally, the questions supported a reflection on their progress comparing their pre and posttests.

Data Analysis

The following data was obtained by using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. To report the action research question: To what extent the implementation of peerassessment will influence speaking skills among A2 level students? The teacher calculated the mean, maximum, minimum, standard deviation, and the *p*-value from the students' results on the pre and posttest.

To answer the second research question about the students' perspectives on the application of peer-assessment to review their classmates' performance, a survey was used to obtain the results. Two categories were applied: peer-assessment and speaking.

Ethical Considerations

In action research studies, ethics depends on parameters, such as not doing harm, not breaching confidentiality, not distorting data, informed consent, honesty, and the right to withdraw (Williamson & Posser, 2002). It is essential to formalized a set of ethical principles and criteria in order to raise awareness among the scientific

community. In addition, the consistency in reporting ethical issues, would be of great value to the readers (Davison et al., 2020).

The participants, who were all adults, were asked to be part of the study voluntarily. The students were informed about the procedure and methodology of the research study and they were fully aware that the data collected was meant to be used for academic purposes only.

Results

In order to answer the first research question “To what extent the implementation of peer-assessment will influence speaking skills among A2 level students?” the following table show the results. The activities were graded over 5 points.

Table 1. Pre and posttest results

	N	Min	Max	M	SD	p-value
Pretest	12	1.25	3	2.3	0.84	0.00
Posttest	12	2	4.5	3.23	0.79	

By comparing the results from the pre and posttest, it shows an improvement for the Minimum, Maximum and the Mean values. The standard deviation decreases by 5 decimals and the *p*-value is 0 proving the implementation of peer-assessment influenced and improved the speaking skills of students.

In terms of the second research question: What are the students’ perspectives about using a peer-assessment checklist to review their classmates’ performance? The data showed positive results. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest score) a 73% of the class chose 5, while the remaining 27% selected a 4, regarding on how useful was the checklist in the class activities

Furthermore, students answered a second question about how using peerassessment influenced their speaking skills. Some of the extracts are presented next (the answers were translated for the purpose of the research study):

“Peer-assessment helped us identify each other’s errors. Additionally, is a faster and more fluid assessment method.” (P1)

“It helped me feel less embarrassed when I talked in English with other people”. (P2)

“I think it was an excellent method to motivate and encourage us to improve our speaking skills”. (P3)

In conclusion, the implementation of peer-assessment in their class activities was well received by students and had positive results reducing their anxiety and fear of speaking the language with peers due to they felt more comfortable discussing their performance with their peers while they talk about everyday topics as well.

Discussion

As shown in the results, peer-assessment proved to influence the speaking skills of students, by improving their oral performance. Similarly, Colognesi et al. (2020) affirmed that the implementation of peer-assessment significantly enhanced oral communication, the organization and coherence of the message in particular. Also, Fauzan (2016) concluded that the debate and peer-assessment can improve speaking ability, students could express their thought and opinions in debate practice, as well as in this study, where debate-like questions about topics of interest were used in each of the lessons.

Overall, peer-assessment is not a common strategy used in Ecuadorian classrooms, which makes it difficult at first for students to comprehend and be comfortable with it. Nevertheless, by applying it, students speaking skills could increase. Wenny and Fajar (2019) found in their study with 77 Indonesian students, that

using peer-assessment has a more positive effect to improve speech than using a lecture's assessment.

In terms of the second research question, the survey reflected that 77% of the students found very useful the implementation of peer assessment in their lessons. Likewise, Rotsaert et al. (2018) research's results showed that students perceived that usefulness of peer assessment was highly positive, they stated that the plurality of opinions is the greatest advantage peer assessment has to offer.

According to the students' perspectives, speaking English made them feel embarrassed or anxious due to lack of intelligible pronunciation or proper vocabulary before the innovation. Consequently, in Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) research at the English language education department at State Islamic of Kudus, Indonesia realized that when teaching English under an EFL context, students do not have the opportunity to practice outside the classroom, leaving them with no chance to obtain culture, knowledge and information from various perspectives, causing them to feel less confident at the moment of speaking the language, Fahmi, a fifth semester student reflected:

“I have not found the class especially contributing me developing my English speaking proficiency. Further, I have less chance to express something English. This makes me unconfident in interacting using English with others. The role of English students' association has not run well. It needs some interesting activities to attract students' motivation in learning English”.

Therefore, the use of peer assessment combine with meaningful and innovative activities are valid strategies to have students interact to one another both inside and outside the classroom setting, increasing their confidence and engaging them to speak.

Conclusions

Feeling comfortable using speaking skills in a new language is quite rare.

Students feel anxious and demotivated. It also takes substantial practice to master it.

Young adults in Guayaquil do not have many opportunities to practice outside a conventional classroom. Despite the aforementioned parameters, students should be able to communicate basic ideas properly in order to have better opportunities, career or personal wise.

The teacher's goal is not to merely improve their grades, but to actually make his/her students to understand and use the language properly. Multiple techniques and methods are being used around the world. Based on the research findings the implementation of peer-assessment in combination with a checklist/rubric proved to be a quite useful technique to improve students' oral skills as well as their confidence to speak publicly in the classroom.

This study offers some implications for teaching speaking and the importance that peer assessment has on students proving to be a valuable assessment method as long as the teacher provides a clear explanation and guidelines before the implementation. Additionally, the survey's results indicate students feel more comfortable and less anxious when receiving feedback from their peers, meaning is more likely for them to speak English and discuss different topics more often throughout the lessons.

Limitations

The search of committed volunteer students was definitely a challenge. The teacher spent nearly two months looking for suitable students, who were willing to commit for ten hours on a two-weeks period. As a result, 14 students were accepted, however, two of them quit the study due to lack of time and interest.

The fact that this was not a formal graded course led to a non-compliance of all of the task required by the teacher. Especially, the asynchronous activities, which were

designed to take about thirty minutes of their time on a daily basis and had important content which could support students in a greater level.

Furthermore, the lessons were taught via Zoom, leading to technical difficulties, particularly at times when students had to record their dialogues as evidence. The logistic of making sure everyone was recording, and following the instructions correctly was quite complex.

Recommendations

An important factor to keep in mind, is the number of students and how committed they are. I would strongly recommend putting together a larger sample of students and ensuring their commitment to the research. Equally important, is to consider more than two weeks for the unit. Having more time would benefit students' progress and more content could be revised. In order to enhance the study, one month per Unit is recommended. Lastly, to count with a backup plan for the technological issues that may present. If possible, teach the unit on a hybrid modality would be fortunate.

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Appendix 1

Lesson plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Checklist

Available upon request.

Appendix 4
Performance Task

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Students' perspective survey

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Portfolio's link

Available upon request.