



**Influence of Peer-Assessment to Enhance Speaking Skills Performance for EFL**

**Students**

Karla Estefanía Crespo Guttler

Guide: María Rossana Ramírez Ávila

Modality: Research Report

Presented as Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of Magister en Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros con Mención en la Enseñanza de Inglés. CES:

RPC-SE-19-N°.140-2020. Cohort 2021 - 2022. Author's email:

[karla.crespo@casagrande.edu.ec](mailto:karla.crespo@casagrande.edu.ec). Guayaquil, September 27th, 2022.

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Peer evaluation process is an axis that is still not usually explored in the classroom and sometimes it might be seen as a threat rather than a benefit (Levine, 2012). According to the author, this occurs when it is not well applied or there is “insufficient training” (p. 103) in how to apply it. In this sense, students sometimes do not really know how to do peer-assessment, and tend to get carried away by the feelings they have toward their classmates.

It is essential to have clear that assessment consists not only in assigning a grade but also in taking students in to become real protagonists in their academic progress. In order to promote meaningful learning, and achieve classroom goals, it is correct to mention that peer assessment is one of the most useful strategies that can be applied to promote the development of lifelong learning since “Students can learn a lot through peer evaluations and by doing them they also automatically learn how to improve their own speaking” (Usman et al., 2018, p. 324).

One very noticeable problem in the group of students who took part in the present innovation is that they tend to be more receptive rather than productive when referring to their skills. For instance, they were having difficulties with using the language in speaking activities due to a lack of confidence, and this problem occurred even though they belong to a bilingual school and their exit profile is B2 according to the Common European Framework of References (Council of Europe, 2018). In this sense, peer assessment was proposed in order to analyze its impact on the speaking performance of this group of participants.

### Literature Review

One of the biggest struggles for EFL educators is not finding enough significant opportunities to foster speaking skills in the classroom and thus outside of it. In this sense, there are several strategies such as peer assessment that may guide students to develop critical thinking, decision making, time management, among others. Allam (2007) stated that the knowledge, technology, globalization, and the varied learning outcomes motivated teachers to allow students to become involved in the assessment process since it brought big advantages to save teachers' time, facilitate learning, develop students' abilities and also encourage their self-learning. This statement helps to understand that it is a permanent process that could be easily done at any moment through self and peer assessment.

In this sense, Reinholz (2016) declared that peer assessment is “a set of activities through which individuals make judgments about the work of others” (p. 5). And about it, Logan (2009) established that [both self and] peer assessment can positively affect student learning since, through it, they can develop their thinking skills and self-confidence. Therefore, it can be inferred that peer assessment can promote self-sufficiency in students' own performance and foster spaces, where they can feel comfortable when developing new skills.

Additionally, peer assessment can help establish engaging environments where they are the ones who are responsible for their own learning. In this sense, it will become a valid process when students are able to transfer their learning into real-life situations (Slavin, 2017 as cited in Febriyanti, 2019).

Strijbos and Sluijsmans (2010) defined peer assessment as an educational process “which stimulates students to reflect, discuss and collaborate”. (p. 266). Indeed, this is a conscious action that occurs at any moment and that contributes to significant

interaction among students, due to they learn not only to evaluate others but also themselves becoming more critical and analytic whilst developing responsibility and empathy. This aspect was also considered by El-Senousy (2020) who affirmed that peer assessment provides an extra advantage allowing students to evaluate their peers' works and enabling them to identify features and criteria in their own works and the ones they are evaluating; and, fosters a better understanding of the curriculum. To clarify, Msiza et al. (2020) pointed out that peers are individuals with similar characteristics, like the level of study.

Additionally, peer assessment is a delicate process (Syafrizal & Rohmawati, 2017), so it needs to be conscious and respectful because it involves direct comments from classmates. In this sense, the mentioned authors advised avoiding interruptions and not signaling individual errors. Another aspect of peer assessment when describing interactions is anonymity as it can enhance performance and success (Gielen et al., 2011, as cited in Panadero & Alqassab, 2019), though it will depend on the stage of the peer assessment, its purpose and the aim to be achieved.

On the other hand, peer assessment also has some disadvantages. When applying peer assessment, it is common to identify problems related to the reliability of the results given by students. Reliability may be affected by feelings of friendship and sympathy towards their partners. Related to this topic, Bostock (2000) mentioned that in order to obtain accurate and valuable data, peer assessment needs to be improved by the use of clear criteria aligned with the learning objectives to provide a significant process. In a few words, students' contributions will be valuable as long as they are guided and always accompanied by the teacher.

Rotsaert et al. (2018) concluded that this type of assessment might sometimes be problematic since peers are not experts, and grading would be far from what was

expected. In this sense, Díaz et al. (2021) described that there are some principles like practicality, authenticity, reliability, and fairness that may be part of it and that without appropriate training, an authentic assessment would not be possible. Besides this, of course, there are also some other aspects that may appear in learners such as tiredness, personality, and learning styles (Coombe, 2018).

Cadena-Aguilar and Álvarez-Ayure (2021) noticed that this type of assessment can result in positive effects like real commitment and analysis on the learning process as long as it has “prior and proper coaching where not only do students get acquainted with assessment instruments and criteria but also become involved in their construction” (p. 71) and this process must go along with adequate training on its application providing students a safe learning environment.

Referring to peer assessment, one of the aspects of the language that can benefit the most from it is speaking. About this topic, Rao (2019), expressed that when learning a second language, speaking is the most important skill; and of course, it might be difficult for learners to come up with spoken ideas in different situations. Similarly, it was stated that:

Becoming communicatively competent is particularly difficult for foreign language learners as it is influenced by a number of factors including affective factors. Among the several affective factors which affect foreign language learning especially speaking, anxiety emerges to be the crucial one that has a devastating effect on the oral performances of students. (Hanifa, 2018, p. 230)

Considering this, students need to be aware of how to manage their emotions to cope with the stress produced during oral performances (Bata & Castro, 2021), since some people might experience a blockade when speaking due to pressure (Smith, 2019). This situation was also presented by Young (1990) who affirmed that “speaking

activities which require ‘on the spot’ and ‘in front of the class’ performance produce the most anxiety from the students’ perspective” (p. 551).

On the other hand, Uztoşun (2021) stated that some students do not feel comfortable when speaking English with strangers, so by creating opportunities to interact in different language contexts, students will acquire more confidence not only in classroom activities but also outside the school. For that purpose, as it was analyzed before, peer assessment might result in a positive tool as it can influence students’ performance leading to critical thinking and self-analysis.

Cheng and Warren (2005) concluded that “if language learners could be trained to confidently and reliably assess the language proficiency of their peers, they would also be able to confidently evaluate their own language skills” (p. 18). A similar result was obtained by Ahangari et al. (2013) who were studying the impact of peer assessment on learners’ oral presentation improvement and indicated that “when assessment criteria are clearly set, peer assessment will enable students to make judgments of their peers comparable to those of the teacher” (p. 7).

### **Innovation**

The innovation consisted of using peer assessment to foster speaking skills, having a group of third-high-school students as participants. The unit title was “Time to spare”. It was implemented as part of a regular learning unit. The lesson plan consisted of activities designed to be taken over during 10 teaching hours (30 minutes each) distributed in two hours during five weeks, in one synchronous and one asynchronous period per week. The five-week lesson plan was socialized to students and parents through the academic platform Moodle.

During this time, the participants had the opportunity to review and learn useful vocabulary, grammar structures, and common expressions to fulfill the activity, and

other tasks for them to practice speaking. For this purpose, the lesson plan was prepared using an innovative instructional design for the unit in order to have a clear outline of the students' learning outcomes, and propose transfer, meaning-making, and speaking skills acquisition activities (see Appendix 1).

To begin, students observed a model text so they could easily identify what was expected from them after the innovation time. Students were required to work over five tasks based on speaking and were trained to provide peer feedback in each synchronous session, after which they also received feedback and comments from the teacher, its purpose was to monitor them to use the checklist and the rubric to assess their peers considering the learning experiences addressed to the unit goals.

The abbreviated performance task was that the participants were divided into pairs. They had to record a 1-minute video using Tik-Tok to exchange opinions about what to do to solve a problem concerning their leisure time when they finish high school.

The speaking checklist (see Appendix 2) was used by students to assess the following aspects: grammar and vocabulary (use of new vocabulary and grammar to solve a problem, and appropriate content related to the situation), pronunciation (intelligibility), and interaction (ability to keep the conversation going). Students also used a rubric (see Appendix 3) for peer-assessing their performance and providing feedback. In this rubric, they were asked to score the same aspects: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, accent, and fluency; and, interaction, having for each a detailed descriptor to help them identify their achievement level.

**Research Methodology**

According to Clark et al. (2020), “Action research is an approach to educational research that is commonly used by educational practitioners and professionals to examine, and ultimately improve, their pedagogy and practice.” (p. 8). In this sense, it is appropriate to infer that action research constitutes a tool to identify the aspects that need to be improved in the classroom to help the teacher achieve the lesson goals.

Avison et al. (1999) declared that “Action research combines theory and practice (and researchers and practitioners) through change and reflection in an immediate problematic situation within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.” (p. 94). This is evident in the present paper considering that action research is an ongoing process that may have the participation of both researchers or teachers and practitioners or students working together on the determined proposed activities, to get to a problem diagnosis that finally may lead to action intervention, and reflective learning.

In order to conduct action research and obtain an answer to the questions, both quantitative and qualitative data were considered. Quantitative data was first analyzed through a checklist and then a speaking assessment rubric determining the aspects that were going to be evaluated on the pre-test which was applied before the intervention and the post-test applied after it. Additionally, qualitative data was obtained through an open-ended-question survey and some notes taken by the teacher during the implementation.

**Research Question:**

To what extent does the implementation of peer assessment influence the informal conversation speaking skills performance among third-high-school students in private schools in Guayaquil?

What were students’ limitations on peer assessment during the implementation?



## **Participants**

The participants recruited for the research were a group of Third-high-school students at a private and bilingual school in Guayaquil, Ecuador, which offers the English program since second grade, with an exit-level profile of B2. The school is located in an urban area in the south of the city. The students were between the ages of 17 and 18 years old and belong to an average socioeconomic level. The population was formed by 51 students who had decided to participate with the consent of their parents, where 67% were girls and 33% were boys. All the students participated during the pre-test and the post-test and so they did in the peer-assessment process.

## **Instruments**

According to Brookhart and Chen (2014), “rubrics are an efficient, clear, and easily understood way to focus learning goals, criteria, and performance descriptions” (p. 23). For that reason, a rubric was designed to have students to quantitatively assess their peers’ performance in order to obtain the pre-test and the post-test results, so that the first research question can be answered: To what extent does the implementation of peer assessment influence the informal conversation speaking skills performance among third-high-school students in private schools in Guayaquil?

This rubric was designed to assess the following criteria: [1] vocabulary, [2] grammar, [3] pronunciation, accent and fluency; and, [4] interaction, which were divided considering some aspects of the students’ performance. Its purpose was to measure how students’ skills developed and improved through the use of the rubric. The scores for each indicator were divided into excellent (1.50 points), good (1 point), needs improvement (0.50 points), and if the student did not meet the required criteria (0).

If the participants showed good language control, a good range of well-chosen vocabulary according to the topic (problem-solving), showed accuracy and a variety of

grammatical structures, the words were well pronounced the whole time, as well as spoke clearly and distinctly all the time, without hesitation; besides staying on the task to communicate effectively, always responded appropriately and tried to develop fluent interaction, they were graded over 1.50 points. Additionally, they were also graded for maintaining good body language to transmit the message in an appropriate way.

Along with, if students showed adequate language control but a vocabulary range was lacking, evident frequent grammatical errors that do not interfere with meaning, used little variety in structures, failed to pronounce some words with no interference in understanding meaning, spoke clearly most of the time, their accent did not interfere in the message transmission, some hesitation and unevenness caused by rephrasing were evident, sometimes failed to respond appropriately or clearly, and forgets to maintain good body language, they were graded over 1 point.

On the other hand, they received a low score of 0.50 if they showed weak language control, the vocabulary used was not related to the topic, and frequent grammatical errors occurred even in simple structures, the meaning and pronunciation were difficult to understand, mumbles and hesitation were frequent, the speech was slow and inaudible, and was not able to keep a good body language.

In order to provide a qualitative analysis of the rubric, and answer the second research question: What were students' limitations on peer assessment during the implementation? an open-ended-question survey was implemented to know students' impressions about the instrument and its application. Besides that, some annotations about students' performance and their behavior were also taken into consideration.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to verify the impact of peer assessment a paired-sample *t*-test was completed which allows a comparison of pre-test and post-test between a single

student's scores to be completed. The analysis was done in Microsoft Excel using the Analytics Tools Pack.

Grades from pre and post-test were uploaded in a spreadsheet. Descriptive statistics were run: mean, mode, median, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation data were obtained. Inferential statistics (*t*-test) were analyzed. The *p*-value was also calculated.

After the survey was conducted, students' impressions were transcribed. Then, peer assessment and speaking were determined as categories in order to analyze participants' limitations, challenges, benefits, and improvements.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting action research there are certainly ethical considerations to analyze. In this sense, Abrar and Sidik (2019) stated that research has a particular challenge "related to the issues of ethical considerations and research methods that the researchers have to commit when conducting research. These are two essential research components and integrally linked to one another because they determine the quality and integrity of the research being conducted." (p. 184). Another author, Stokes (2020) wrote that "any research project undertaken in a classroom with children generates ethical encounters in its iteration, which merit reflection and analysis." (p. 11). In this sense, it is necessary to pay special attention to concerns connected to the involvement, impacts, and outcomes of all the people taking part in the research. This is important since most ethical issues may arise from the processes for collecting and presenting data, and the people involved.

Taking that the participants in this innovation are minors, one of the ethical issues to consider is permission from parents and school authorities to conduct the research, through which confidentiality and anonymity must be guaranteed. In this

sense, a meeting was organized in order to explain to them the purpose of the study, and later an e-mail with a survey in Google Form was sent with the objective of obtaining their authorization.

Another subject to consider is the accurate presentation of the data gathered. As McNiff (2016) stated, “when concrete ‘results’ are not reported, the work might be considered inadequate” (p. 206), for that reason all the instruments and tools applied in the innovation as well as the results obtained can be found in the Appendix section.

## Results

The first research question “To what extent does the implementation of peer assessment influence the informal conversation speaking skills performance among third-high-school students in private schools in Guayaquil?”, will be analyzed considering the results obtained (Grades, Appendix 4) from the quantitative data:

**Table 1.**

*Descriptive statistics per criteria*

CRITERIA	Sample	PRE TEST				POST TEST				p.value
		Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Vocabulary	51	0.50	1.50	0.87	0.34	0.50	1.50	1.31	0.28	0.00
Grammar	51	0.50	1.50	0.85	0.36	1.00	1.50	1.39	0.21	0.00
Pronunciation, Accent & Fluency	51	0.50	2.00	1.11	0.47	2.00	4.00	3.27	0.58	0.00
Interaction	51	0.50	3.00	1.27	0.64	1.50	3.00	2.70	0.41	0.00

Table 1 indicates the scores obtained by the students on each aspect of the rubric during the application of the pre-test and post-test. It can be observed that there is a considerable increase in the means on all the criteria, starting from “Vocabulary” with an increase of 0.44, “Grammar” with 0.54, “Pronunciation, Accent & Fluency” with 2.16; and, “Interaction” with 1.27.

Results indicate that the standard deviation has decreased significantly in all aspects during the post-test. Additionally, the  $p$ -value resulted in 0 which means that the null hypothesis is false and that the results are significantly important since the lower the  $p$ -value is, the more reliable the study results are.

**Table 2.**

*Descriptive statistics of total pre-test and post-test scores.*

CRITERIA	Sample	PRE TEST				POST TEST				p.value
		Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Total score	51	2.50	7.00	4.11	0.99	5.00	10.00	8.68	0.86	0.00

As can be seen in Table 2, student pre-test scores on the rubric resulted in a mean of 4.11. While the total range of the rubric was 0 to 10, students' ranges on the pre-test were between 2.50 and 7. On the other hand, students' post-test scores on the rubric resulted in a mean of 8.68. On the contrary, students' range on the post-test was between 5 and 10. It can also be concluded that the standard deviation has decreased from the pre-test to the post-test, and the  $p$ -value remained at 0. To conclude, it can be drawn from the results that the proposed hypothesis supports the use of rubrics for peer assessment and its influence on informal conversation speaking skills performance positively.

In order to answer the second research question "What were students' limitations on peer assessment during the implementation?", the data gathered from the survey was considered. The teacher's notes also collected information about students' impressions towards the rubric implementation. To exemplify students 5 and 24 said: "Very useful...", "It helped me improve my speaking". Others (student 33) indicated that some of their peers did not accept their comments. However, it could also be noticed that some students were guided by the feelings of sympathy and friendship they felt

towards their partners at the moment of assigning a grade and giving feedback, this could be observed, for instance, in students 2 and 19 who mentioned: “I didn’t feel confident giving her [partner] a low score” and “I know she [partner] got mad”.

These impressions were provided after the pre-test when students were not so familiarized with the rubric and had not been trained on its correct application yet. However, with time their opinions changed. For instance, student 12 mentioned: “Using a rubric also helped me to improve my own performance”, and participant 49 said: “It helped me to be more honest and self-critical”.

About teacher’s notes during the pre-test and post-test, it can also be seen as a significant improvement in their speaking skill and a mindset change among students since at the beginning, they were reluctant and unconfident about applying the rubric, and then they started showing more self-confidence and good attitude towards the activities. Participants recognized it was difficult for them when they started, even though they were also aware of the importance and benefits that the innovation would provide to them. In conclusion, it can be affirmed that the implementation of the rubric for speaking peer assessment resulted in great outcomes and new perspectives from the students which, if applied in a long term, may bring significant changes in their way of perceiving others' and self-development.

### **Discussion**

Regarding the first research question, the results obtained after the pre-test and the post-test showed that the implementation of peer assessment influences positively informal speaking skills performance among students. Young (1990) mentioned that students that had problems with speaking show discomfort and nervousness, and this could be observed at the beginning of the implementation when students were not

comfortable expressing their opinions or ideas, and on the contrary, felt anxiety about speaking in English in front of the whole classroom. However, as Logan (2009) stated, after the application of this innovation, it could be observed that peer assessment has some positive effects, especially on students' thinking skills and self-confidence; and, as analyzed by Syafrizal and Rohmawati (2017), participants also showed high commitment and profound analysis of their peers' and own performance. Additionally, it was also noticeable that before using the rubric for peer-assessing, students were guided by their feeling of sympathy and friendship at the moment of giving feedback to their partners.

Apart from this, such as Bostock (2000) stated that the learning objectives and the evaluation criteria must be clear, it was evident during the innovation that as students had understood and identified these aspects, it was easier for them to know what their expected performance was. In this sense, as Slavin (2017, as cited in Febriyanti, 2019) also established, the process through which students could identify how to succeed in the task by always being accompanied by the teacher, resulted in students' developing the ability to transfer their speaking learning skills from the classroom to real-life-similar situations, as they did through the task proposed.

For the second research question "What were students' limitations on peer assessment during the implementation?", this study revealed that students did not have clear what they had to do or how to do it, and they felt committed not only to do a good job but also to be "good friends". Despite this, using a rubric meant a great tool for the students since they could easily identify what was expected of them, and Cheng and Warren (2005) established rubrics determine learning goals, criteria, and performance descriptors in an effective way to guide students to succeed in the task of peer-assessing.

### Conclusions

Speaking is one of the most difficult skills to develop when learning a new foreign and second language. This is related to the feelings of anxiety that may arise from the idea of committing mistakes or not being clearly understood when trying to transmit a message. This was an evident situation for students participating in the present innovation, who in spite of having a B2-level-exit profile, they were still struggling to maintain an informal conversation in the classroom.

After identifying the problem, an innovation was planned and implemented through a lesson plan, applying peer assessment with a rubric where learning goals, criteria, and descriptors to consider were detailed. This resulted in a great change since students became more confident about their own performance. Something that could also be observed was that students were committed to the activities proposed and their performance improved enormously.

This aligns with the theories about peer assessment favoring the acquisition of skills and learning strategies that can be extended to real-life situations which facilitates continuous learning throughout life. In addition, the implementation of peer assessment fostered in students a sense of integrity, since they learned how to grade honestly and respectfully, providing comments addresses to their peers' performance including positive aspects and aspects that needed improvement. Participation in this type of assessment is highly valued by the students.

Rubrics sometimes may be difficult to apply since they require a lot of effort from the teacher to assist the students to identify how they can reach the descriptors and fulfill the assignment. Besides that, this task also requires students to take an honest and critical look at their own work. In this sense, the mindset changes are not only for



students but also for teachers who must always accompany their pupils for continuous support.

To summarize, the benefits of applying peer assessment to improve speaking skills performance in EFL classrooms have overcome the difficulties and problems identified before and during the implementation. Peer assessment was a strategy to also encourage self-assessment and it had a positive effect on students' development.

### **Limitations**

Future activities related to peer assessment need to be given with clear instructions as well as exemplification since students tend to grade with difficulties especially if they feel strong proximity to their partners. It is relevant to make students become aware of their skills through the use of activities that are noteworthy for them. As seen in this present research, the more engaged students are with the topics the more participation to be obtained.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that future research may be carried out with a significant sample of participants to have valuable data and get precise results. Another aspect to consider is to be aware that some participants might be clear about the instructions. For this purpose, it is necessary that teachers ask questions randomly to students about the task to perform and try to summarize the most important aspects. Additionally, it is also important to establish easily-to-identify and reachable goals. Criteria and descriptors in the rubric must be related to the topic to be assessed.

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Appendix 1

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Instrument (checklist)

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Instrument (rubric)

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Grades

Available upon request.

**Appendix 6**

**E-portfolio link**

Available upon request.