



Use of Peer-Assessment to Improve Speaking Skills in a Virtual Classroom

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Research Report

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Speaking needs to be practiced constantly, but lack of time in the virtual classes, and low students' confidence, make speaking practice a great challenge. Moreover, speaking is a complex skill which demonstrates the cognitive, and socio-cultural speaker's knowledge.

Communication plays a vital role in getting success in all fields, and education is the one with more repercussions, its results will affect the future of the students for their whole life (Rao, 2019). Communication is also essential to transfer, but in face-to-face classes students find it difficult to connect or interact using the target language. They think that speaking a foreign language with good pronunciation and fluency is a complex task to accomplish.

In turn, one of the problems for the teachers is that the English proficiency levels are not the same for all the learners. Despite being in the same classroom, it is noticeable that there is always a small group of students that understands directions given by the teacher or answers any random questions easily. On the other hand, some learners need to ask their partners constantly about teacher's instructions. There is a variety of English levels that can be easily noticed in a classroom, for instance, some students can reply rapidly to the teacher in the foreign language, others can understand the instructions, but they do not know how to answer in the foreign language, and others who neither understand the instruction given by the teacher nor know how to give a response.

Because of this, some learners are not willing to speak in English due to the embarrassment of making a mistake. When a student speaks incorrectly, it causes other students to make pranks about it. Therefore, they feel scared to say words that could be wrongly pronounced. When students must complete speaking activities from the book,

first, there are learners who try to write down their ideas in their mother tongue and look for the translation on the internet before saying a single word. Even when they have activities in which they are required to create follow up questions.

The principal aim of this research is to determine how peer-assessment enhances speaking in high school students. The city of Machala, El Oro, Ecuador, is the backdrop where this research took place; the attendees were students of a private school, who were in their tenth grade of their basic education.

Literature Review

Peer-Assessment

Peer-assessment requires that students review deeply their peers work looking for mistakes, this examination demands students focus on the expected results. (Vu & Dall'Alba, 2007). According to the curriculum in Ecuador, pair work and group work are essential elements in the English as a foreign language classroom (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). Also, according to Zheng et al. (2019), peer assessment allows students to evaluate their classmates' tasks enabling them to learn in the process. In fact, one of the problems that face modern education is the lack of teacher's time to check and evaluate students' production. With more than 30 students per course, it is very tough for teachers to listen to all the students exercises and correct even the most basic mistakes.

According to McLeod (2019), Vygotsky theory *Zone of Proximal Development* use the interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies. He suggested that teachers could use cooperative learning exercises where less competent children develop with help from more skillful peers. Similarly, Nejad and Mahfoodh (2019) showed strong interest to students managed rubrics and assessing criteria for speaking skill, according to them, this is essential to evade ambiguous results

Ketonen et al. (2020) stated that “Guiding students to reflect on the elements of meaningful feedback by using the peer feedback comments of previous peer-assessment, helped them to become conscious of the qualities of constructive and not constructive feedback.” (pp. 1466-1467). Hence, students must practice speaking and receive peer-assessment to improve their capabilities, and the most they talk, the more confident they can feel.

Logan (2009) indicated that peer assessment provides learners a deeply knowledge of the rubrics and makes them thoughtful to mistakes, also he explained that by applying peer-assessment students’ feeling and attitudes made them become more critical and reflective about their work.

White (2009) enlisted the potential advantages and disadvantages of peer-assessment as following:

Advantages

1. Helps students to become more autonomous, responsible and involved...
2. Gives students a wider range of feedback
3. More closely parallels possible career situations where judgment is made by a group
4. Reduces the marking load on the lecturer
5. Several groups can be run at once as not all groups require the lecturer’s presence

Disadvantages

1. Students may lack the ability to evaluate each other
2. Students may not take it seriously, allowing friendships, or entertainment value to influence their marking

3. Students may not like peer marking because of the possibility of being discriminated against, being misunderstood

4. Without lecturer intervention, students may misinform each other. (p. 6).

This list summarizes the most important aspects that peer-assessment represents to teacher's perspective. As well as advantages are many, there are some disadvantages that are necessary to analyze at the moment of implementing peer-assessment in a class.

Peer-assessment to improve speaking

Fauzan (2016) applied a study to third semester students, in his conclusion, he found that "Peer-assessment can improve the speaking ability (...) The result shows that the students gradually could express their thoughts and opinions in debate practice. This activity encouraged the students' creativity to explore the language." (p. 56). The results expressed in this study inspire the use of peer-assessment, not only in the grades results, but also in the process, because students feel more motivated to discover new things on their own.

Moreover, according to Musfirah (2019), peer-assessment was implemented successfully in his research in a Methodist high school, he expressed that the main factor is the teacher guide and the necessity to give clear instructions in the whole process. Likewise, the possibility that students' opinions of what aspects of the rubrics should be assessed, is important according to this author.

In addition, Bazán (2022) expressed that peer-assessment enhances students' speaking through the use of students' experience about the feedback given and received by their peers; and motivates them to continue giving and receiving feedback because of the results obtained. But, she also stated that it is important to promote constant practice opportunities to explore the language for a real purpose.

Technology in Developing Speaking Skills

Technology has grown in the educational field by leaps and bounds, Bahadorfar and Omidvar (2014) expressed that

Technology can stimulate the playfulness of learners and immerse them in a variety of scenarios. Technology gives learners a chance to engage in self-directed actions, opportunities for self-paced interactions, privacy, and a safe environment in which errors get corrected and specific feedback is given (p. 10).

Currently, the use of technology is implicit in the learning process, most of the educational levels use technology to develop the different skills, and speaking is one of the skills that need the advantages of the use of technology in the classroom.

Flipgrid is a digital application for asynchronous videos, the resources can be restricted from thirty seconds to five minutes, the short time given makes students be more focused and summarize better their ideas. The possibility to answer a topic enable teachers to create positive discussions. Also, it is possible to watch the videos several times, this allows students to improve their speaking and practice more (Green & Green, 2018). This tool allows students to interact with the teacher, but also, they can interact with their classmates. Discussions can be developed about any topic and motivates students to use this application.

Backward Design

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) stated that Understanding by Design is an approach to design a program that allows teachers to concentrate in the aspects that their students need, seeking to achieve the learning outcomes. The authors also suggested that the teachers should consider asking themselves “why do my students need to do this activity?”.

Innovation

The innovation consisted of students applying peer-assessment to their speaking activities. They used Flipgrid application to upload their speaking activities; feedback and peer-assessment of their classmates were given through this way too. At the first part of the innovation the teacher focused on two steps. The first step of this innovation was the explanation of the rubrics, and the importance of how to apply it. It was very important that students handle the rubrics to assess their partners correctly. The second step was the explanation of peer-assessment, during the tasks developed, students learnt how to use this method. The innovation raised that students need to understand the correct process, how to give the feedback and how to correct their mistakes after receiving it.

To begin with the study, a pretest was taken to have a starting point, and at the final part, a posttest was also required, comparing the results of the pretest and the posttest, it was possible to determine the influence of the innovation. This innovation was applied in the third unit of the course, that was the moment that connected with this master's program, students started using Flipgrid from the first unit, for that reason they were familiarized with the use of this application.

The innovation lasted 4 weeks, the first week was focused on students' knowledge about peer-assessment based on the rubrics given. The rubrics were adapted superficially with the comments of students after the first class. During the second class of the first week, students worked with the final rubrics and peer-assessed with teacher guidance.

During week two and three students practiced speaking with different exercises in Flipgrid about topics corresponding to their level of study, and with their curriculum material, approved by the coordinator of the institution at the beginning of the academic

period. The fourth week focused on preparing students for their final performance task, that was the posttest, the activities applied are described in Appendix one.

Research Methodology

The method of this study was action research which, according to Barcelona (2020), it "Is a cyclical process that may be used to improve instructional practice, assessment tools, and student outcomes with focus on specific problems which usually take place in the natural setting of a classroom, laboratory or school" (p. 517). Thus, this action research was applied to tenth grade learners, it was explained to them the peer-assessment process, and the benefits in their speaking skill. This research intended to answer:

1. Does peer-assessment enhance speaking skills in tenth grade students?
2. What are students' point of view of the application of peer-assessment to improve their speaking skills?

Participants

This research was applied to students of tenth grade in a private institution in the city of Machala, El Oro province, Ecuador. There were 15 students, 9 girls and 6 boys, they were 14 and 15 years old with an A2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards. All participants completed the pretest and posttest.

Instruments

Pre and posttest

The pretest and posttest consisted of a video of two minutes length where students had an interview, they had to answer questions about their neighborhood and their family. Students did this exercise in pairs, each person introduced themselves. The

interviewer asked the questions, and the interviewee answered it, and then they switched roles.

After the posttest, a survey was applied to the experimental group. This survey answers the second research question: What are students' point of view of the application of peer-assessment to improve their speaking skills? All participants were free to answer based on their experience when they were peer-assessing. This survey is expected to define students' perspectives on peer-assessment. The survey was conformed by 10 questions about the process, it had 4 multiple choice questions, 4 rating questions, and 2 open-ended questions. The questions were about peer-assessment, their feelings about the process, and the results.

Rubrics for Speaking

Grigoryan (2021) expressed that rubrics are aligned with outcomes-based approaches to education. Likewise, Cobeña and Garcia (2018), stated that "Teachers should motivate learners to see the rubrics as an instrument to improve their speaking weaknesses rather than as an attack instrument (...), the rubric development should focus on the creation of a practical scoring mechanism." (p. 37).

The rubrics in this innovation were applied by the teacher, students were trained to accomplish the rubrics criteria, and peer-assess each other achieving the best scores possible in each item of the rubric. The rubric was graded on 3 different scales: grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation and interaction. Each grade has 5 levels; level one (low level), level two (between level one and level three), level three (intermediate level), level four (between level three and level five), and level 5 (high level). The task was over 10 points. In the Appendix two is available the complete rubric, which was examined by an expert in the field at Universidad Casa Grande.

Other tool used to answer the second question was the field notes taken by the teacher during the process. These notes described the benefits and setbacks of peer-assessment to improve speaking skills.

Data Analysis

The pretest and posttest were used to make a quantitative study, it was analyzed the difference between them. The pretest showed the level of the student previous the innovation; the posttest showed the results after implementing the peer-assessment in a virtual class. Also, it was applied a paired-sample *t*-test in Microsoft Excel using the Analytics Tools Pack, to measure the impact of the innovation. As well, it was analyzed the mean, minimum, maximum, mode and standard deviation. Maravelakis (2019) said “The first step in any statistical analysis is the use of descriptive statistics to present the data and try to identify any kind of trends, relationships or abnormal behavior” (p. 89).

The survey was used to answer the second research question, the results were obtained through different kind of questions: multiple-choice questions, rating questions, and the open-ended questions; these questions searched for students’ feelings with the use of peer-assessment. Field notes were used to support the results obtained.

Ethical Considerations

During the development of this research, some ethical considerations were observed. The age of the students was taken into consideration, likewise, the institution where the innovation took place; for these reasons, approval and consents were obtained by students’ parents and from the principal of the educational institution. The parents of the 15 students agreed with the innovation and signed the consent letter (Appendix three). Also, the principal of the high school institution approved the implementation (Appendix four).

Students received the information about the innovation and decided to participate actively. It was clarified that their personal information was confidential, and their names were to be protected. Finally, it was specified to the students the importance of their honesty, this was highlighted before and during the whole process.

Results

Quantitative results

Pretest Scores

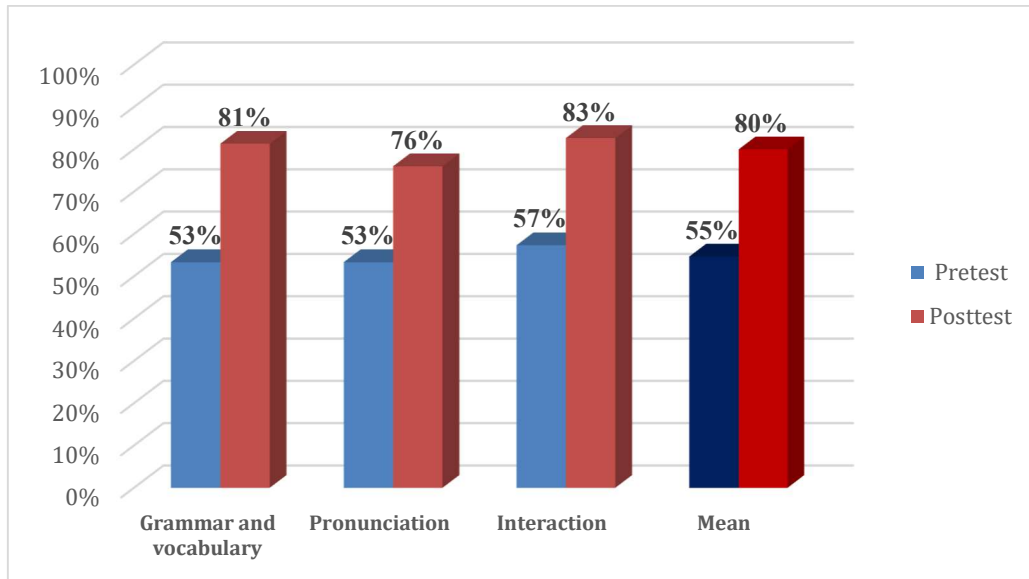
The result of the pretest showed a mean of 0.55 out of 1. Grammar and vocabulary, and pronunciation were the scale where students presented lower grades, a mean of 53%, and Interaction was slightly higher with a mean of 57%. The minimum grade obtained at each of the scales was 40%, the maximum grade in grammar and vocabulary was 80%, whereas the maximum grade of pronunciation and interaction was 60%. The grades of the different scales were very similar.

Posttest Scores

The results after applying the innovation were positive, the three scales enhanced their pretest scores. Grammar and vocabulary had the biggest increase, the mean of the 15 results of grammar and vocabulary had a rise of 53%. Pronunciation increased 43% higher in relation to the pretest score. In interaction the students obtained the best grades, in the posttest the mean was 44% higher than in the pretest. The minimum grade was 67% and the maximum 93%.

Figure 1

Pretest and Posttest scores



Statistical comparison of pretest and posttest

The *t-test: Paired two sample for means* was used to answer the research question: Does peer-assessment enhance speaking skills in tenth grade students? To do this it was established a null hypothesis “There is no difference between the use of peer-assessment by using a rubric, against teaching speaking using teacher assessment.” And the alternative hypothesis was: “The use of peer-assessment improves speaking skills.” The value of the null hypothesis is 0.

The *t-test: Paired two sample for means* presented the following results

Table 1

T-test: Paired two sample for means.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	P(T<=t) two-tail
Pretest	55%	0,05	p <.001
Posttest	80%	0,07	

According to these results, *p* is smaller than 0.001 that means that the null hypothesis was rejected, accepting the alternative hypothesis, the use of peer-assessment improves speaking skills.

Qualitative Results

Results of the field notes indicated that the innovation faced an important aspect, certainly, the use of peer-assessment with the support of rubrics improve speaking skills, but students need to be prepared to apply it correctly. Also, the field notes registered that the innovation did not receive the approval of all the students at the beginning, several students found difficult the peer-assessment process and the use of the rubrics to evaluate their classmates. In line with the development of the innovation, the results persuaded reluctant learners to do their best and apply peer-assessment correctly. At the end, the innovation convinced to the students and started practicing to enhances other skills, not only speaking.

The survey results showed that students' enthusiasm improved with the development of the innovation, this provides students more support to achieve their learning outcomes. All the students (15 of 15) were satisfied about peer-assessment. Student A said, "it was an excellent study that gave tools to use all our lives". Student B commented, "peer-assessment is difficult to apply, but it is good". According to the qualitative results, peer assessment improves speaking and make students be more involved in their learning process, and more confident about their speaking skill.

Discussion

Productive skills require more effort from learners, Vygotsky theory *Zone of Proximal Development* stated that interaction with peers is an effective way of developing skills and strategies, and to motivate students, this as stated by McLeod (2019). As could be observed in this innovation, the students dealt with the problems of the productive skills, but with the use of peer-assessment, through the use of Flipgrid, enhanced their results importantly.

The posttest scores showed that the grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and interaction increased by more than 40%; interaction obtained a mean of 83%, proving

that students' confidence also improved. This was also demonstrated by Fauzan (2016), who found in his research that debates motivates students to explore the language, and practice their speaking skill, reinforcing their opinions.

The use of the rubrics also was acclaimed by the students in the survey, they expressed that rubrics gave them the tools to accomplish the teacher's requests. The clarity about what they had to do was relevant to understand the correct use of the rubrics. Also, this is aligned with Musfirah (2019), he expressed that the main factor is the teacher guide and the necessity to give clear instructions in the whole process.

Prior to this research, peer-assessment was not used in the learning process of this high school, the collaboration between learners did not go beyond in students' learning process. Teacher's feedback was the unique possibility for the students to correct themselves and improve their skills. With the results obtained, students are inclined to use peer-assessment regularly in their classes.

Bazán (2022) said that peer-assessment encouraged students to apply this technique because it uses students' experience about feedback and motivates them to give and receive feedback from their partners to improve their work. This is also demonstrated with this innovation.

To sum up, peer-assessment enhanced and motivated learners to use English smoothly, Logan (2009) also supported this statement, in his research he found that peer assessment gives learners a better understanding of assessment conditions and leads to a deeply learning, also he explained that applying peer-assessment students' feeling and attitudes made them become more critical and reflective about their work.

Conclusions

The grades obtained, the field notes and the results of the survey showed that students feel motivated and more receptive to accept peer-assessment if they had been

explained about the rubrics adequately. The improvement obtained by the students during the process of this innovation proves that peer-assessment improves speaking. It made students improved and realized the importance of take part in their learning process.

Lack of time to practice in the synchronous classes could be mitigated by the use of peer-assessment. Students understood that communicating meant only to have their audience understanding their message, and this could be practiced in collaboration with their peers. Using a technological tool students feel motivated, they can use their technological devices to study, check their peer's production and after receiving their peer-feedback, improve their speaking, students practice their speaking only to have the opportunity to participate actively in the discussions through Flipgrid.

Limitations

Although the study showed positive results, setbacks were settled during this innovation. One of the most important was time, the two hours synchronous with the students and one asynchronous per week were not enough in some cases to obtain better results. Some students required more time to fulfill the requirements, that involved that they used more hours in the asynchronous classes to record their videos, but its commitment with the innovation made that this lack of time did not affect much.

Another aspect that limited students' progression was the necessity to apply peer-assessment and rubrics simultaneously. Students had not applied rubrics before, and its concept was not clear, they were confused because they had not applied them before.

Recommendations

The implementation of peer-assessment would be better if students do not have to apply rubrics for the first time too. It would be better if they learn how to apply

rubrics, and then get introduced to peer-assessment. Another aspect that could help to implement peer-assessment is to give more time to measure the impact of the innovation, if it is measured during the whole cycle, it would be possible that students reinforce the knowledge and get better results.

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Appendix 1

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Consent Letter - Parents

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Consent Letter - Institution

Available upon request.