
PEER ASSESSMENT AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Lulzime KamberiUniversity of Tetovo – Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia l.kamberi12@gmail.com**Majlinda Nuhii**University of Tetovo – Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia majlindanuhii@gmail.com

Abstract: Autonomous second language learning (SLL) is a topic of focus in every educational setting and almost universally supported by institutions and scholars in the whole world. One aspect of autonomous learning is peer evaluation (Harmer, 2001; Benson, 2001; Cottrall, 1999; Everhard&Murphy) Seeking to make students more autonomous learners and take more responsibility for their learning, as well as assess the effect of peer assessment, on language acquisition, peer assessment has been introduced to student of the final semester of their studies. This paper reports initial results from a study into the effectiveness of peer assessment in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom instruction, in a methodology course, conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2017/2018, at the Department of English Language and Literature, at the University of Tetovo, Macedonia. Applying frequency statistics, Fraenkel&Wallen, (2003), the study has analyzed peer assessment; in contrast to teacher assessment of student presentations. Content analysis (Leedy & Ormord, 2005) to identify themes biases and meaning, the study investigated the validity and reliability of peer assessment. Convenience sampling among students enrolled in the seventh semester identified a non-random sample of 20 students representing 41% of the possible cohort. The findings of the study revealed that students were not prepared to assess each other and rather acted on their personal feelings towards their peers. In conclusion, it is argued that research designs involving an extended period of time and with a larger sample will be needed to confirm these results.

Keywords: autonomous learning, ELT, peer assessment, tertiary education

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is undoubtedly one of the most challenging aspects teachers of all subjects face in their everyday teaching. How to assess, what to assess and if it is done properly, are some questions teachers keep asking themselves all the time, no matter of their experience. But what exactly is assessment according to research?

There are various definitions on assessment provided by various scholars and contexts. We will summarize a few. Suskie (2009) has devoted a whole chapter to defining assessment by looking at it from several angles. Among others, she has summarized the following approaches to fair assessment:

1. Establish clear, measurable learning outcomes of student learning
2. Ensuring that students have ample opportunities to achieve those outcomes
3. Systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches our expectations.
4. Using the resulting information to improve student learning.

The *Council of Europe and Language Education* with its 1954 convention, signed by 49 states back then, also supports autonomous learning and learner independence. It is signed by all European countries as well as several other countries from the whole world. The Council of Europe has established the Center for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe in Graz, Austria. The center itself offers various trainings for professionals, among others the *Innovative methodologies and assessment in language learning*, project. This project works on various fields of assessment of languages, with its aim to foster learner autonomy. The aims main stress is self-assessment per se. For example it tries to make a distinction by dividing evaluation and assessment with a focus on learning outcomes of study programs.

Evaluation is carried out to understand how things and systems work (e.g. the evaluation of an education system or of a given curriculum). Evaluation should be considered in terms of seeing the “bigger picture.”

Testing is a set of tasks, which looks at certain types of human behaviours - in the case of language testing, these are abilities, capabilities, competences etc.

Assessment is concerned with exams or sets of exams and is considered for the short term, in order to produce results at a specific moment. Assessment reflects what has been examined and it can take place through a series of

Brookhart (2010) on the other hand has mainly focused on formative assessment, by arguing pros and cons of each type of assessment, e.g. Formative and summative assessment. Among others he states, that the best formative assessment includes students and teachers. Further she claims that self-assessment and peer assessment are the first steps towards independent learning and learner autonomy since students develop their metalinguistic competence.

Peer assessment is also discussed by Brooks and Ammons (2003), in Carless (2010) describing a study with 330 undergraduate business course students who evaluated their peers on a monthly bases. Participants assessed each other anonymously guided by some previously agreed criteria.

Oral presentations have also been mentioned as one form assessment and evaluation in higher education programs.

All the above mentioned studies have related assessment to learner autonomy. But what is learner autonomy in its sense? One of the most prominent scholars who has dealt with learner autonomy is Benson (2001, 2006; 2013). In his state-of-the-art article he has summarized various studies on learner autonomy starting from the 1920s. He has summarized studies of over several years related to learner autonomy in language teaching and learning.

According to Benson (2001) learners should be given more autonomy, especially in higher education institutions they should be considered as active learners and decision makers. Some definitions on learner autonomy are given on the table below.

Table 1. Defining learner autonomy

	Definition	
1.	the ability to take charge of ones' own learning	Holec in Benson, 2001
2.	I prefer to define autonomy as the capacity to take control of ones learning, largely because the contrast of „control“ appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of „charge“ or „responsibility“	Benson, 2006
3.	Evaluation and assessment are central themes in language education. They are concerned not just with quality testing but with formative assessment, self-assessment and autonomous learning	Council of Europe (2018)
4.	The situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions	Dickinson (1987:11)

As can be inferred from the table above, one important aspect of this autonomy is peer assessment and self-assessment. This paper is analyzing peer assessment at the University of Tetovo and will be summarized in the upcoming sections (see section 2 and 3).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 THE FOUNDATION FOR THIS PAPER

In an effort to help my students learn more easily, become more independent learners and life-long learners, peer assessment has been used to asses each other. The aim was to analyze if senior students have achieved the required level to assess each other's presentations. Further, the study intends to analyze the reliability and validity of this type of assessment, by comparing it to the teacher assessment for the same task.

2.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on my professional teaching interest and informed by the emerging findings reported in review above, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

1. What is the effect of peer assessment?
2. To what extent is peer assessment valid and reliable?

2.3 THE STUDY

The preliminary study reported in this paper was undertaken with 20 (n=20) students representing 41% of the possible cohort. Following a written peer assessment reporting on their peer grades, students were invited to discuss their decisions in a second, confirmatory stage of the study.

The results of students' assessment and interviews form a basis for the tentative conclusions derived from this study.

2.4 PARTICIPANTS

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 20 subjects who participated in this study volunteered from the students who were attending my English Language Teaching Methodology course in the English department of the University of Tetovo (n=20). Participants ranged in age from 20 - 22 years old. Females constituted 87% of the sample group (n=48) with the remaining 12% being male (n=3).

2.5. INSTRUMENTS

Seeking to analyze peer assessment of the teacher and student peers, the study consisted of quantitative and qualitative instruments. The quantitative instruments represent student evaluations of presentations based on a grading rubric; whereas the qualitative ones consisted of student semi-structured interviews.

The grading rubric was based on five components which focused on content relevance, vocabulary richness, delivery, question and answer and other. Each component was worth 2 points, which altogether made 10.

2.6 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data derived from the quantitative and qualitative instruments were triangulated by using methodological triangulation based on Brown&Rodgers (2002). This implies that multiple data-gathering procedures like student grades, teacher grades and student interviews were used. Student interviews were analyzed using inferencing based on the assessment mentioned above. The quantitative results, teacher and student assessment, were subsequently compared, by using comparative analysis. The difference between each grade was then compared and analyzed (see table 2 below).

2.7 PROCEDURE

Part of the formative assessment of the university of Tetovo, is a presentation among other which students have to prepare based on a topic of their choice, but relevant to the course content. Each student has to present in front of the peers. Usually, presentations are done on the final classes of the academic year. Every week a certain number of students are assigned to do their presentations. The total number of senior students present on the day of the study, was 20, out of which only 12 were doing their presentations.

The second step towards the study was the description of the grading rubric. Students were provided with grading rubric, based on which they had to grade their peers' presentations.

At the same time, the teacher has the same rubric based on which she grades each student.

Finally, the teacher collects the peer assessment sheets, which are anonymous and compares them to her own, based on which she makes a decision on the percentages students will get out of the total 10%.

Finally, students were informed about both grades they have received and how the final one was calculated.

3. RESULTS

As stated in the previous section 2.5&2. 6, the study used a combined method of data collection and analyzes. Quantitative data were gathered first, in the form of student peer assessment. Those were analyzed using statistical analyses, comparing grades and percentages. Following the quantitative analyses, content analytical procedures were applied to analyze student interviews.

3.1 Peer assessment compared to teacher assessment

As stated previously (see section 2.1 and 2.2) the study aimed to analyze the assessment provided by peers by contrasting it to teacher assessment. It is worth mentioning that there are always nineteen responses and grades for each student, because the one remaining is the student him/herself.

The results of the study have shown that the majority (n=9) of the respondents (45%) have shown no maturity or seriousness towards peer assessment. They have awarded with 10% all students (n=12) who have done the presentation on that day. The rest of the students, 55% have been to a certain point consistent with the teacher assessment. There are six cases with significant differences among the teacher assessment compared to the students' one, S2, S3, S8, S9, S10 and S12. As the statistics show, there is a difference above 1; whereas one case is at the 1 level. On the other hand, the remaining 45 % have shown more readiness to evaluate their peers' presentations in a more constructive manner.

Table 2. Results of the comparison of peer and teacher assessment

Student	Peer assessment average	Teacher assessment	Difference
S1	9.5	10	0.5
S2	9.4	8	1.4
S3	9.2	8	1.2
S4	8.7	8	0.7
S5	9	9	0
S6	9	8	1
S7	8.9	8	0.9
S8	9.1	8	1.1
S9	9.3	8	1.3
S10	9.2	8	1.2
S11	8.9	8	0.9
S12	8.3	7	1.3
Total	9.0	8.1	0.9

S: refers to students

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sample size is recognized as a substantial barrier to meaningful quantitative interpretation of the data from this study to this point. While analysis suggests significant difference between the two study participants, the teacher and students, some minor differences are evident though and these suggest that there may be issues teachers need to think of. One of these could be the top theme of autonomy and independent learning, which probably implies that there is a need of organizing training for students in order to become more autonomous learners. Harmer (2001) in his book towards learner autonomy, among other suggests “learner training’ to help learners become more autonomous learners. He continues by stating that evaluating their own learning could be the first step (p.337). In this way, as Benson has claimed learners will gain „charge“ or „responsibility“ (Benson, p. 47).

On the other hand, qualitative results establish a mixed student attitude toward the peer assessment, claiming that it was not reliable because their colleagues had been driven by feelings instead of mind. This attitudinal difference among students and what the literature claims is derived from the content analysis of students’ interviews, related to peer assessment and autonomous learning. The most significant claim was that respondents believed more on the teacher assessment than their peer ones. This shows that peer assessment, at least in this case study is not a reliable source of evaluation and therefore not a valid instrument.

The difference of the quantitative and qualitative findings with earlier studies suggest that a more finely developed instrument and a larger sample are required. More interestingly, perhaps, the use of self and peer assessment in various grading components throughout the academic year, may offer significant advantages to students and teachers. In either case, it seems clear, a more extended study with a larger sample is required.

In conclusion, future research in this area needs to address the autonomous learning, with this, peer assessment potential for research designs conducted over an extended period of time and with a larger sample to confirm factors potentially affecting reliability and validity of peer assessment. The aspects identified in this paper seem likely to shed light on future pedagogical approaches in Macedonia and in the wider world.

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