

University students' attitudes towards peer assessment and reactions to peer feedback on group writing

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Abstract

In educational contexts, students' perceptions about assessment influence the approach they adopt towards learning and studying. Based on this statement, this study aims to examine how university students in the Rwandan context experienced peer assessment of group writing as one way to improve the quality of their learning. The study involved 34 second-year modern languages undergraduate students, divided into 12 writing groups. The data which are largely based on open ended interviews, were collected after the 12 groups had completed peer assessing their fellows' essay and then provided and commented on peer feedback. On the whole, the findings show that students were happy to peer assess but not so much to be peer assessed. Also, half of the participants estimated that their assessments did not match those to be expected by their course instructor even if the same assessment criteria were to be used. Some recommendations are formulated in light of the skills that students might have gained from reciprocal peer assessment and what still needs to be done to fully develop student-focused learning through peer assessment.

Key words: group writing, reciprocal peer assessment, student-centred learning,
Rwanda

Introduction

Researchers in the area of learner-centred pedagogy concur that the use of peer assessment is one of the methods likely to encourage students to develop critical awareness and autonomy, which could lead them to take greater responsibility for their own learning (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999; Coffin et al., 2003; Suzuki, 2009; Topping, Smith, Swanson & Elliot, 2000; Van Zundert, Sluijsmans & Van Merriënboer, 2010; Wu, 2012). Broadly speaking, peer assessment may be said to occur when students comment on or evaluate the quality of their fellow students' work, using a set of agreed criteria, and providing each other with feedback (Dochy, Segers & Sluijsmans, 1999; Topping, 1998, 2009; Van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006a; Van Zundert et al., 2010). So peer assessment entails collaborative and very often reciprocal responsibility between assessor(s) and assessee(s), that is, students act both as givers and receivers of response (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

An overview of research on peer assessment carried out between 1990 and 2007 (Van Zundert et al., 2010) shows that it has tended to focus on four main areas, namely, the correlation between students' and lecturer's ratings, the effects of peer feedback on the quality of student's work; the nature, content and quality of peer feedback; and student attitudes towards peer assessment. The present study also builds upon students' attitudes towards peer assessment. Peer assessment can apply to any academic discipline but for the present study, it has only been used in the context of essay writing which is one of the most commonly used assessment tasks in higher education (McCune, 2004; Norton, 2009). Besides, a writing task was targeted because it is considered as "the key process to induct students into the culture of university thinking" (Venables & Summit, 2003, p.282).

Compared to previous studies investigating the same area (e.g. Bain, 2009; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Van den Berg et al., 2006c; Walker, 2001; Wen & Tsai, 2006), and which have mostly used experimental methods, the present study entirely relies on a qualitative design and seeks to capture the students' views on the relevance they give to peer assessment and the role it ought to play in their learning. According to Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005), students' perceptions about assessment significantly influence their study behaviour and their approaches to learning. Thus, investigating students' attitudes towards peer assessment of group writing could eventually help them to determine how to improve the quality of their learning.

Theoretical framework

Context of the study

The study focuses on the context of Rwanda and reflects current developments in higher education in the matters of teaching, learning and assessment. Like other academic contexts around the world, Rwandan higher education provides for formative and summative forms of assessment (National Council for Higher Education, 2007). However, while both forms of assessment may currently be used in Rwandan higher education, little research has so far been conducted on their methodological, functional and conceptual developments (Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010). Among the few studies reported to date, there is one by Mugisha (2010). In his research, he investigates students' conceptions of assessment and how these influence their study strategies. Given that the focal point of the study was only on the summative mode of assessment, the students requested to also be introduced to alternative forms of assessment, including formative or peer assessment.

A survey was also carried out in one higher learning institution of Rwanda (National University of Rwanda/Centre for Instructional Technology, 2012). The aim of the survey was to collect the students' views on various aspects of their academic life, including teaching, learning and assessment. Of 546 students who participated in the survey, 43% indicated that they were satisfied with the teaching, learning and assessment methods used while close to 30% maintained that they were dissatisfied. Of the suggestions made for improvement, students wished that other forms of assessment be integrated during the semester. Even though no explicit mention of peer assessment was made, its introduction might add relevance and variety to student-centred learning.

In a similar development, the Government of Rwanda has introduced some form of staff performance evaluation (Office of the Prime Minister, 2010), which in many ways resembles one-way peer assessment (Topping, 2009). To the best of my knowledge, no research has been carried out on how the concerned staff feel about it and what they learn from it. All these research gaps on peer assessment in the Rwandan context constitute some of the motivating factors for this study.

Peer assessment and the development of student-centred learning

Throughout the research literature on peer assessment, there have been two opposed views as regards its learning benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, the proponents of peer assessment argue that it is an important tool in the implementation of a more participatory and collaborative culture of learning (Kollar & Fischer, 2010). Besides, involving students in the assessment of their peers can be an opportunity to familiarize themselves with and gain better understanding of the issues of criteria elaboration and negotiation, group discussion, task management and decision-making, which are all part of the assessment process (Haines, 2004; Luckett & Sutherland, 2000, Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010). Applied to writing, peer assessment may enable students to critically evaluate the quality, purpose and relevance of their own and their peers' writing in connection with such aspects as organization, argument building, sentence structure and coherence (Coffin et al., 2003; Speck, 2000). More importantly, all the abovementioned skills that students are likely to acquire from peer assessment are also needed in various professional contexts. Thus, involving students in peer assessment is preparing them for the world of work and helping them to develop lifelong learning skills (Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirschner & Strijbos, 2005).

On the other hand, the opinions against peer assessment suggest that it is neither fair, nor reliable. According to Speck (2000), students do not have the necessary skills and adequate level of confidence to evaluate their peers' writing, or else they just peer assess while keeping in mind that the final decision should emanate from the course instructor (Coffin et al., 2003). Another challenge of peer assessment is the assumed lack of fairness in grade allocation: When a collaborative piece of writing has been evaluated and a group grade has been allocated, the latter cannot reflect students' differing contributions to the work done (Coffin et al., 2003).

While comparing the benefits and drawbacks of peer assessment, the benefits seem to outweigh the drawbacks as various studies reported in Van Zundert et al.'s (2010) research review conclude. As regards the lack of confidence often manifested by student peer assessors, a number of studies (e.g. Liu & Tsai, 2005; Stanier, 1997; Wen & Tsai, 2006; Wen, Tsai & Chang, 2006) also report that with the lecturer's support, training and experience, students can fairly and responsibly assess their peers. A study by Matsuno (2009) on the comparison between 91 student peer assessors and four teachers in a Japanese university writing class demonstrated that student peer assessors were more internally consistent and produced fewer bias interactions than teacher raters.

Back in time, a research review of 48 quantitative studies compiled by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000), focusing on student peer assessment in higher education and spanning the period 1959 to 1999, shows that peer assessments were generally found to resemble more closely teacher assessments. Similarly, a study conducted by Topping et al. (2000) on the peer assessment of academic report writing in one British university showed that there was a very similar balance between the positive and negative statements made by student peer assessors and their lecturers. All these findings could again serve to confirm the validity and reliability of peer assessment.

Students' attitudes towards peer assessment of group writing

Various studies which focus on students' attitudes towards peer assessment confirm that those attitudes are likely to change with experience. A study conducted by Van den Berg et al. (2006c) on seven different course designs of academic writing in a Dutch university indicates that most students appreciated the method of peer assessment. In this regard, they mentioned that reading and assessing fellow students' work was a useful activity to rely on in the future. At the same time, they asserted that they valued the peer feedback as it helped them revise their work and recommended that peer oral feedback also be given more consideration in all peer assessment practices.

Another study carried out by Wen and Tsai (2006) on Taiwanese students' perceptions of and attitudes towards general and online peer assessment also concludes that students generally held positive attitudes towards peer assessment activities. More precisely, students asserted that those activities helped them to learn by enhancing classroom interactions. In turn, these interactions helped them to understand each other's ideas and how to act accordingly. While investigating British students' perceptions of group work and peer assessment, Walker (2001) found out that, after participating in a small group project, the students were much more positive towards peer assessment. In short, the studies on students' attitudes towards peer assessment of writing show that with training and guidance, those attitudes can change from negative to positive.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine how undergraduate university students experience peer assessment of group writing as one way to improve the quality of their learning. To achieve this aim, four questions are

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investigated: (1) How do students experience assessing their fellow students? (2) How do they experience being assessed by fellow students? (3) What differences do students perceive between peer assessment and assessment by the lecturer? (4) How do students see the nature and weighting of the criteria used in peer assessment?

Material and methods

The following section gives some details on where the research was conducted, who was involved and ethical considerations. The section also elaborates on how the study was designed, the type of data gathered and how they were analyzed.

Settings, participants and ethical considerations

The study was carried out in the National University of Rwanda³² in 2009 and involved 34 second-year undergraduate students (31 males and 3 females). All students were enrolled in the discipline of Modern Languages and their participation in the research was entirely voluntary. Other ethical protocols in connection with the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were also observed by using Roman numerals to refer to groups (from group I to XII), letters F for females and M for males, followed by numbers (from 1 to 34).

Design of the study

The peer assessment of group essay writing was organized in class as part of the research that students were invited to participate in. The research component was introduced in the middle of the Written English II module which is normally offered to second-year undergraduate students in the discipline of Modern Languages. Of the 200 hours that the module comprises as student time, only 10 were devoted to research. The 10 hours were divided into five non-consecutive classroom research sessions, each comprising two hours.

Before students were involved in the research, preliminary contacts had been made between the researcher and the course instructor on the type of research envisaged and how it was going to be

³² From September 2013, the National University of Rwanda has merged with other public higher learning institutions to make up the University of Rwanda, with six different Colleges. Under the new structure, the discipline of Modern Languages is located in the College of Arts and Social Sciences.

conducted. To obtain the desired outcome, it was agreed that students were going to work in groups of three on a 400-word argumentative essay and that at the end, groups would exchange their scripts and assess each other, based on pre-established assessment criteria. To make sure that the essay writing and peer assessment tasks were implemented as planned, all writing and peer assessment sessions were carried out in one classroom in the presence of the usual course instructor. His role was to guide and assist students whenever it was deemed necessary. The researcher also attended the sessions to make sure that the design of the research was properly respected. After completing the essay writing, the researcher requested the groups to exchange their scripts, assess them, provide feedback and grades and stand ready to explain the outcome of their assessment considerations in class. This oral reporting led the groups of student assessors and student assesseees to briefly comment on how they had arrived at a certain grade and experienced the feedback remarks respectively. All essays were graded out of 100 which is common in the context of study. The assessment criteria and the weighting discussed and agreed upon between the course instructor and the students before the task was set were:

- Essay development (i.e. convincing arguments and evidence): 40%
- Essay structure/organization, cohesion and coherence: 25%
- Language and style (i.e. spelling and grammar): 20%
- Focus (the collectively agreed focus of the essay was on gender and equality in Rwanda): 15%

Data gathering and analysis procedures

The data were collected by means of in-depth, open-ended interviews (see Appendix I for interview guide) conducted separately in English after all participating groups of students had presented their feedback first in writing and then orally. The interview questions focused on how students felt while assessing and being assessed by their peers, perceived differences between their assessment and their lecturer's and their views on the nature and weighting given to the assessment criteria. All interviews were audio-recorded using Olympus VN-1100 digital voice recorder, each interview lasting 20 minutes on average.

The data were analyzed thematically according to Bryman's (2012) methods of qualitative data analysis. To achieve this, all audio-recorded interview responses were first transcribed and organized according to the original order of interview questions and across the groups of respondents. Then, the data were read, *Rwanda Journal, Series A: Arts and Humanities, Volume 1 (1), 2016*

re-read, closely examined, and compared with the students' oral feedback comments. At this level, some information expressed or implied by the students as well as other instances of contrastive thinking in their responses started to emerge. These were used to make up categories and sub-categories. Finally, by relating these categories and sub-categories to the aim of the study, research questions and existing literature on peer assessment of writing, the categories were reduced to the four most central and most meaningful themes. To explain and illustrate these themes, some passages from the students' responses were selected and quoted verbatim.

Results

Four main themes were extracted from the data, namely students' attitudes towards assessing and being assessed by their fellow classmates, their views on the nature and weighting of the assessment criteria, and perceived differences between students' and lecturer's assessment practices.

Students' attitudes towards assessing their fellow classmates

All students mentioned that it was their first time to be involved in their peers' assessment. When asked how they felt while assessing their fellows, two categories emerged, namely those who claimed they felt confident and competent for the task and those who felt quite hesitant and thus, not competent. In the first category, the majority of students claimed that they carried out peer assessment in a serious but fair and responsible manner. In their opinion, this attitude was stimulated by the fact that they were guided by clear assessment criteria, and the feeling that peer assessment was something new to experiment with and probably to learn from and use in the future. Some of these opinions were expressed as:

Peer assessment is good because it helped us to evaluate our marking skills. ... It could also be helpful when we are regularly exposed to this kind of exercise because it can enrich our experience [in marking]. (VIII: M19)

The assessment criteria helped us because when we leave university and are employed somewhere they will help us to make decisions. It was also a good experience to compare what we had done with what our fellows had done. This added to our confidence in peer assessment. (VIII: M18)

In the same direction, another student argued that all students should be acquainted with peer assessment as part of student learning responsibility which will be transferred in various other contexts outside school:

When we were marking our fellows we took it seriously as we would do anywhere else. After all, these are our classmates, we are learning together, so we felt we had the responsibility to help them improve whenever they had not done well. (X: M25)

Concerning the students who felt hesitant about peer assessment, the main reason advanced was that they found it quite difficult to pass a judgement to their fellow classmates whom they considered as friends:

Marking our fellow students was a good exercise but, you know, it was difficult for us to give them low marks. While marking, we kept saying ‘after all, these are our friends’. (IV: M8)

To be frank, we were somehow not sure of what to do. You see, marking your classmates is not that easy ... Strictly speaking, we didn’t want to be hard on our classmates. (VI: M13)

In a radical tone, another student referred any assessment-related responsibility to the lecturer, arguing that students can never be serious with their fellow classmates:

...When a student is assessing another student, it is difficult to adopt a serious attitude. It was actually my first time to assess my classmates... That’s normally the job of the lecturer. (VII: M16)

As seen from the above quotes, the task of assessing the peers was experienced quite differently by the students. While most of them admit that it was a good exercise, some saw it as something to learn from and possibly use in the future while others clearly mentioned that it is not possible to assess fellow students without some degree of bias.

Students' attitudes towards being assessed by their fellow classmates

The attitudes manifested by students towards being peer assessed were evenly divided, with half of the group saying that they trusted their classmates' abilities to assess fairly while the other half did not trust their fellows. Another observation is that on either side, there were extremes: Members from one group showed that they were very happy to be peer assessed while in another group they were very unhappy. It was also possible to find disagreements of attitudes within one group. In this case, the overall impression was considered.

On the side of those who trusted their peers assessing them, some had this to say:

...In addition to the group that has evaluated us, another classmate looked at our essay and said that it is wonderful. (VII: M16)

We received the remarks on the way we have done our paragraphing and organization of ideas and we agree with the assessors. Actually, this happened because we didn't take enough time to revise our final draft. (XI: M28)

Another remark is that we didn't provide relevant and convincing examples and this is true. (XI: M27)

As the statements above read, the positive attitudes towards peer assessment were mostly backed by the way students evaluated and trusted their own writing abilities. This enabled them to acknowledge the feedback as made by their fellows. As for the very satisfied group, members mentioned that the feedback they obtained was better than what was expected. In this regard, one member pointed out that:

All the remarks were understandable and relevant. Next time, I will try to do the same to my fellows. (XII: M31)

On the side of those who were not happy with being peer assessed, two main reasons were advanced in their responses, namely, same level of knowledge (i.e. lack of confidence in students assessing their

fellow students) and failure to properly understand and stick to the agreed assessment criteria on the part of the assessors. To illustrate this, some respondents had this to say:

We are at the same level as the group that has marked us. We used some vocabulary and because they don't know the meaning they thought it was a mistake! (III: M5)

...They [peer assessors] wrote that there was no cohesion and coherence [in our essay] and I disagree. ... I wish they had clearly pointed out our mistakes and what we should have done. (I: F1)

On top of being treated as not confident, peer assessors were also accused of not taking enough time to read their peers' essay and stick to the agreed assessment criteria:

Considering our work with what other groups have done, we get the impression that our examiners (peer assessors) didn't stick to the assessment criteria. If you look at our essay you hardly see any serious remark [mentioned] except some vaguely stated grammatical mistakes. (IX: M22)

I know we were organized and we worked hard. But when I asked one of our examiners what happened, he responded that our essay was too long, so they [group] didn't get enough time to read and assess it. (IX: M23)

In general terms, students' attitudes towards peer assessing and being peer assessed were divided. Some firmly believed they were adequately up to the task while others still underestimated the abilities of students to assess their peers.

Nature and weighting of the assessment criteria

In the course of the interviews, students were asked again to articulate their views on the nature and weighting that were given to the assessment criteria. In their responses, students mentioned that the assessment criteria used were clear and relevant and their weighting fair and appropriate. Twenty-one students out of 34 went ahead to say they would replicate the same model in the future. However, for five

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students out of 34, essay organization and development were not clear. For one pair, there was a question of expressing a personal point of view that was not necessarily shared by another member (given that they were working on an argumentative essay). Concerning the weighting of the assessment criteria, six students out of 34 suggested that essay development carry 50% of the total mark in this genre of writing.

Perceived differences between lecturer's and students' assessment

Given that students were not familiar with peer assessment, they were asked to state whether they could see any difference in the outcome between the assessment they carried out and the one usually carried out by their writing course instructor. Some differences outlined by students focused on the rigorous use of the assessment criteria and the grade to obtain. With the exception of one group (three students), all other participants believed that the course instructor would stick to the assessment criteria in a much fairer way than students. When students were asked how they thought this would affect the outcome of the assessment, half of them assumed that the grades allocated by their fellows would be reduced while the remaining half held different opinions. The striking example of these diverging opinions came from one group in which one member believed that the grade they had obtained would be increased, another member thought it would be reduced while the remaining member assumed that it would be the same.

Discussion

The overarching aim of this study was to examine how modern languages undergraduate students in the National University of Rwanda experienced peer assessment of group writing as one of the ways to improve the quality of their learning. Four questions underpinned the study, namely how students experienced assessing and being assessed by fellow students, the perceived differences between students' assessment and the assessment made by the lecturer, and finally, how students viewed the type of the assessment criteria used as well as the weighting given to them.

On the first question, it was noted that students were divided between those who felt confident to peer assess and those who felt hesitant. On the side of those who felt confident, the explanation given was that they were not familiar with peer assessment, hence when it was introduced to them for the first time, they were curious to experiment with it and know how it exactly works. So for them, it was an opportunity to learn the assessment skills. Surprisingly, much as this was recognized as a learning opportunity, most students did not seem to link it with the academic context they were in but rather with their future work after graduation.

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Two explanations could help justify the students' standpoint. The first one is that students were being trained to peer assess and this practice is quite similar to staff performance evaluation carried out every semester in the whole of Rwandan public sector. Thus, given that students were involved in a peer assessment activity for the first time, it probably happened that the main frame of reference they had was this staff performance appraisal system. The second explanation is that when students peer assess, they learn something they may use while still at school but which can also be transformed to fit other contexts. This position is also supported by Topping (2009) who argues that peer assessment happens not just in school but throughout our lives. This implies that involving students in peer assessment at school is an exercise likely to help them develop transferable skills.

On the side of the students who felt uncomfortable while peer assessing, the argument advanced was that they found it difficult to judge and risk marking down their fellow classmates, whom they also treated as friends. In other words, peer assessment for some students is prone to some levels of bias. While categorizing the origins of bias in peer assessment, Prins et al. (2005) referred to this type of bias as friendship marking or over-marking. Over-marking would perhaps sound too hard for students as they firmly held that the grades they allocated were fair (i.e. neither too high nor too low in students' explanations). To cater for bias in peer assessment, some researchers (e.g. Coffin et al., 2003; Haines, 2004; Lockett & Sutherland, 2000) advice that the assessment criteria be established and discussed with the students before they produce the texts to be peer assessed. As the assessment criteria on their own cannot guarantee fairness and reliability in peer assessment, Speck (2000) and Van den Berg et al. (2006b) advise that peer assessors provide written feedback but also discuss it orally with the peer assessees.

The second question underpinning the present study was to know how students felt while being peer assessed. Just like the responses to the first question, students' attitudes towards being peer assessed were also divided. Only half of the students acknowledged that the remarks and grades they received from their fellows were fair while the rest doubted their fellows' abilities to peer assess. While comparing the students' attitudes towards assessing and being assessed, one would say that students tended to be happy assessing but unhappy being assessed. In Topping's (2009) terms, this would be looked at as one-way peer assessment (as opposed to reciprocal peer assessment). Given the learning benefits which may

accrue from collaborative peer assessment as well as the context and aim of this study, only reciprocal peer assessment would be encouraged among the students.

The third question that drove this study was to know how students perceived the nature of the assessment criteria used as well as the weighting given to them. On the whole, the assessment criteria for the type of essay produced as well as their weighting were judged fair and acceptable. However, some students mentioned that it would have been more reasonable to give more weighting to some issues like arguments and evidence. Given that peer assessment tasks vary in a number of ways, the assessment criteria and their weighting can also vary to fit different contexts and situations.

The fourth and final question asked was related to the perceived differences between students' marking and the marking usually done by the lecturer. On this issue, half of the students believed that their grades would be reduced if the lecturer was to mark their essay scripts while the rest thought that they would either be the same or slightly upgraded. The question was asked in order to see if students would feel empowered to be involved in the process of peer assessment as a means to add variety to the dominant lecturer-controlled assessment in the context of the study. Some experimental studies (e.g. Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Matsuno, 2009; Topping, 2000) comparing students' and lecturer's ratings have found some degree of consistence between student peer assessments and lecturer assessments. Thus, by being prompted to reflect on the meaning of their assessments in comparison with the lecturer's, students were presumably being trained to develop their marking skills, which would eventually lead them to approach peer assessment with more confidence. This in turn might strengthen students' metacognitive ability and improve their self-assessment and hence improve their quality of learning (Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011).

Conclusion

The study on the attitudes towards and experiences of peer assessment of group writing has shown that students can indeed take on peer assessment but under certain conditions. Just like any other collaborative learning activity, peer assessment does not become relevant and effective simply because students work together and stick to specified assessment criteria. Based on the attitudes that students have manifested I would argue that more awareness, continued support, guidance and training are still needed if students are to reap the benefits of peer assessment.

Throughout this research, the learning that students may have gained from peer assessment has been looked at from the perspective of the skills that they could possibly acquire such as marking according to specified criteria, receiving and commenting on the feedback, providing feedback and justifying it, critical reflection, confidence building, active participation and collaboration. However, it has not been possible to demonstrate how students' writing has improved via peer assessment. This could have been established by analyzing and discussing the nature, content and quality of their written and oral feedback from their essays and by examining in what ways they helped improve the quality of their final texts. Also, due to a limited sample, it would be difficult to know if students from other classes, other disciplines and other higher learning institutions would react in the same manner once introduced to peer assessment for the first time. These issues could be elaborated in further studies.

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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How did you feel while marking your classmates?
2. What can you say about the remarks you received from your classmates?
3. How did you see the assessment criteria used?
 - Did they help you in any way?
 - In addition to the criteria agreed on in class, was there anything else to look at?
 - How do you judge the weighting given to those criteria?
4. Let's assume you were marked by a lecturer, could there be any difference between his/her marking and your marking? – If yes, to what extent?