

Peer assessment of perception and attitudes in public speaking English classes

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ABSTRACT: Peer assessment recently has been often used as an alternative assessment method, particularly in higher education, such as college English writing classes and public speaking English classes. Through collecting data from 115 juniors of English majors at Southwest Petroleum University, who have attended the public speaking English course in this semester, a 16-item questionnaire was adopted to investigate their attitudes toward peer assessment (PA) in public speaking English classes. Results reveal that participating students hold positive attitudes toward the use of PA activities, but there remain some problems or doubts, such as the percentage of peer assessment being counted towards the total course grade, the validity and reliability of PA, and so on. Certain solutions are discussed in this article. In the conclusion section, the author proposes future study on whether PA exerts positive influences on enhancing students' competence in English public speaking.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, peer assessment (PA) has been adopted widely in language courses, such as writing and public speaking. The use of peer assessment (PA) as an alternative form of evaluation method has not only profoundly changed the role of assessment itself but also aroused researchers' interest in different aspects of peer assessment, such as students' attitude towards peer assessment, the validity of peer assessment, comparison of validity of teacher assessment and peer assessment.

Most of the research mentioned above is about PA in college English writing classes [1-3], which have revealed that PA could increase student-student and student-teacher interactions, and enhance a learner's understanding of other students' ideas during learning [4-7]. For students' attitude toward PA in English writing classes, it was discovered that more than half of the students in Taiwan regarded peer assessment as favourable, useful and interesting [8]. It was also found that over 60 per cent of the students thought peer feedback was useful or very useful [9]. Besides, the empirical study by Shao revealed that 67 per cent of students held the opinion that peer assessment was helpful [3].

In addition to English writing, English public speaking is another important form of language output, in which students in China greatly desire to excel, by becoming effective English public speakers. This can be achieved with students' active participation in the learning process. For English public speaking classes, of which the pedagogical model is experiential rather than contemplative, active rather than passive, personal rather than impersonal and course assessment is formative rather than summative, assessments often involve students' participation [10]. However, the research on peer assessment in English public speaking classes is seldom conducted; especially, the empirical study related to students' perception and attitudes towards peer assessment has never been carried out. The aim of this study was to examine English majors' perception and attitudes toward peer assessment in English public speaking classes, and to listen to the students' views about course assessment, so as to improve the practice for students of differing abilities.

RELATED LITERATURE

Definitions of Peer Assessment

Peer assessment recently has been often used as an alternative assessment method, particularly in higher education. Peer assessment can be defined as the process, whereby groups of individuals rate their peers, and this process may involve various types of activity, such as peer feedback, peer mediation and peer learning [5]. Falchikov further distinguishes these related terms about PA: *In peer assessment, members of a class grade the work or performance of their peers using relevant criteria... In peer feedback, students engage in reflective criticism of the work or performance of other*

students using previously identified criteria and supply feedback to them... In peer learning, students learn with and from each other, normally within the same class or cohort... [11].

Steps of Peer Assessment in English Public Speaking Class

Much research and studies have been done to put forward procedures for peer assessment [1][5]. By referring to these procedures, four steps of peer assessment are tailored for the English public speaking class, in which each student is to write four or five speeches, such as impromptu speech, introductory speech, informative speech and persuasive speech during one semester and deliver them to the class.

What comes first is training, during which the teacher should first emphasise the advantages of peer assessment and arouse students' awareness that doing peer assessment is not for teacher's time-saving, but it is the process of helping them to become a critical public speaker. In this way, students probably would become more co-operative with the teacher. Then, teachers and students co-work on, and discuss, the assessment criteria based on the previous knowledge about public speaking in English learned in this course. During this step, it is crucial for teachers to clarify the assessment criteria and teachers may model an example, first by assessing a sample speech. When students have understood the steps and criteria of peer assessment, they may try assessing another sample speech. It is imperative to emphasise that students must be fair and responsible for their assessment to avoid any irrational assessing.

The second step is grouping. Since the students are familiar to the author, the grouping is done by her to have a group of four or five by keeping a balance of gender, competence in English public speaking and students' level of English. It is better to keep fixed groups for some time instead of changing them from time to time because getting accustomed to sharing ideas in another person's way takes time.

Assessing comes next. In public speaking classes, every delivery of students' speeches either in group or class is videofilmed and the video uploaded to QQ (instant messaging software service) for students to further appreciate and, it is added to students' e-portfolio to record their process of learning. Therefore, assessing is done in classes or after classes for such small classes, with 30 students in each class.

What follows next is the reflection of students on the basis of peer assessment. For example, what comments has he/her received from their peers? Will he/she improve his/her English public speaking following their comments? What has he/she learned in the peer assessment? Besides, teacher's scores and comments are still desired on the speech delivered. Finally, the teacher should summarise the defects found in PA regarding the specific speech topics delivered.

THE STUDY

Subjects

The participants in this study were 115 students of English 2010 of the School of Foreign Languages at Southwest Petroleum University, who had attended the English public speaking classes and participated in PA for two impromptu speeches and one introductory speech in this semester.

Instrument

To understand what English majors think about PA, and any peer-involved assessment activities in public speaking English classes, the author developed a 16-item, five-point Likert scale questionnaire based on previous studies by other researchers [12]. The response was ranked from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Another item (i.e. Item 16) was intended to find out students' views on the proportion of the total grade that should be contributed by PA and the options were: PA scores should: a) not be counted; b) counted as a small portion of the total course grade; c) counted as a half of the total course grade; d) counted as a large portion of the total course grade; and e) counted as 100% of total course grade.

Data Collection and Discussion

For this study, 115 questionnaires were handed out to investigate English majors' perception and attitudes toward PA in English public speaking classes and 109 valid questionnaires were collected. Based on characteristics they shared, all the items can be classified into two subscales except Item 16 (perceived importance of PA score), and they are named as Positive Attitude Subscale (PAS), and Negative Attitude Subscale (NAS) [12].

The PAS contains 10 items related to students' positive attitudes toward PA in general. These items gauged students' perception of the helpfulness of PA in learning, in enhancing classroom interactions, and the fairness of PA. As for the students' perception of the helpfulness of PA in learning English public speaking, there are six (6) items included and they are:

Item 1: PA is helpful to my learning of English public speaking.

Item 2: PA activities can improve my skills in non-verbal communication.

- Item 3: PA activities help me understand what other classmates think.
- Item 4: I think PA provided me with useful feedback about my own performance.
- Item 5: PA activities motivate me to learn English public speaking.
- Item 7: PA helps me develop a sense of participation.

The percentage of students' responses in the helpfulness of PA in English public speaking is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of students' responses in the helpfulness of PA.

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
1		10%	2%	10%	78%
2		2%		13%	85%
3		2%		16%	82%
4	6%	16%	8%	15%	55%
5		1%	1%	26%	72%
7		3%	4%	28%	65%

Table 1 shows that most students regard peer assessment as helpful, of which the percentage is similar to the results of previous research in writing classes. Chung discovered more than half of the students in Taiwan regarded peer assessment as favourable, useful and interesting [8]. Yang found that over 60% of the students thought peer feedback was useful or very useful [9]. Besides, the empirical study by Shao revealed that 67% of students held the opinion that peer assessment was helpful [3].

For public speaking classes, the percentage supporting peer assessment is much higher, that is 88%, because in addition to language proficiency, non-verbal communication is also crucial in judging a speech, on which students think their peers can make sound judgment and offer insightful suggestions.

By doing peer assessment, students are able to observe the speech delivery of their peers, which is like a mirror, reflecting their own defects in non-verbal aspects, such as eye-contact and body language. They also have chances to explore the target language as they respond to their peers' speeches and discuss such issues as appropriate word choice and grammatical structures. It is effective for helping speakers to learn from peer feedback and comment from different perspectives [13].

Sluijsmans et al have reviewed research articles regarding PA and have concluded that the process of PA engages learners in judgement making. Besides rating or marking, PA is also a part of learning experiences [7]. It provides the learners a context where they can observe the role of their teachers and understand the nature of assessment [14]. Peer interaction can help students communicate their ideas and enhance the development of their (second or target language) learning in general [15].

As to students' responses in PA enhancing interaction in English public speaking, there are the following three items:

- Item 6: PA activities increase the interaction between my teacher and me.
- Item 8: PA activities increase the interaction between my classmates and me.
- Item 11: Students should participate in the development of criteria for PA activities.

The percentage of students' responses in enhancing classroom interaction of PA is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage of students' responses in enhancing classroom interaction of PA.

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
6	3%	8%	4%	15%	70%
8				15%	85%
11	28%	23%	2%	7%	40%

In Table 2, regarding Item 6 and Item 8, 85% of the students agree PA can enhance teacher-student interaction and all the students agree on PA promoting student-student interaction in English public speaking classes. According to constructivism (where learners are actively, rather than passively, involved), the co-operation and devotion of teachers during learning are stressed in the student-centred classes, such as English public speaking, in which learning is interactive and students learn actively with independent critical thinking [16].

Therefore, the peer assessment in English public speaking classes can enhance interaction, which compels students to think actively, triggers effective learning and betters the mutual understanding between students and that between teachers and students.

As for Item 11, 47% of the students think students should participate in the development of criteria for PA activities, but most of the students still regard the teacher as the authority to decide the assessment criteria. In this case, the author chose a moderate way to tackle this problem, that is to offer students the first draft of the assessment form and discuss with them how to revise it based on their prior knowledge about public speaking judging and, then, decide on the final draft of the assessing form.

Regarding students' responses to PA fairness in English public speaking, the most controversial item, that is Item 10 - *I think PA is fair to assess students' performance* - the percentage of responses is analysed in Table 3.

Table 3: Percentage of students' responses in fairness of PA.

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
10	5%	40%		51%	4%

Table 3 shows that almost half of the students doubt the validity and reliability of PA in English public speaking classes, because there is no way to guarantee that every student fully understands the assessment criteria and that it is fair and responsible in peer assessment. The responses to Item 10 correspond to the responses in Item 16, which is about the percentage of PA being counted in the total course grade (see Table 4), that is 63% of the students think the PA score should be counted as a small portion of the total course grade to avoid bias and unfairness.

Table 4: Percentage of students' responses in Item 16.

Response	Percentage
a) PA score not be counted	10%
b) counted as a small portion of the total course grade	63%
c) counted as a half of the total course grade	23%
d) counted as a large portion of the total course grade	4%
e) counted as 100% of total course grade	

Table 5: Percentage of students' responses in items related to negative attitudes toward PA in public speaking English classes.

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
9	30%	17%	1%	25%	27%
12	20%	22%	2%	27%	29%
13	10	15%	20%	11%	34%
14	83%	4%		8%	5%
15	95	5%			

The NAS has five items describing PA in a negative sense. These items described students' perception of who is responsible for assessment, the time-consuming aspect of PA and the biased effect of peer marking are as follows:

- Item 9: I think students should not be responsible for making assessments.
- Item 12: I feel that I would learn more if academic staff marked my work.
- Item 13: I feel better able to assess my own work.
- Item 14: PA is time-consuming.
- Item 15: My marks given to classmates are affected by the marks given to me.

Table 5 shows that for Item 9, 52% of the students think students should not be responsible for assessment, and 54% of the students think they would learn more if academic staff marked their work. This turns out to be similar to the response in Item 11, because they still believe in the authority of the teacher, acting mainly as a teacher-centred learner.

On the other hand, they have just been involved in peer assessment for a few weeks and it may take longer to understand the necessity and benefits of peer assessment. Moreover, the author has to emphasise the importance of PA, its clarity, further explain PA and improve administration of PA. It takes more practice for students to fully understand how to give useful feedback with the teacher's appropriate guidance. For Item 15, the author feels content to see that students have learned to be responsible and fair in peer assessment. Students take this responsibility seriously and appreciate trusting teachers giving them this opportunity to have their say in what they expect of one another in working toward common goals [17].

To sum up, the analysis reveals that participating students have a positive attitude toward PA in English public speaking classes in general, but students have not fully realised the importance and necessity of peer assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has found that English majors generally hold positive attitudes toward PA in public speaking English classes because the advantages of doing peer assessment in a public speaking English class lie all on one side of students' benefits, which means to practise and improve students' abilities. However, students still remain doubtful of the validity, reliability and effect of peer assessment. Hence, future research can helpfully focus on how to assist students in providing useful feedback in the process of PA activities, how to enhance the validity of PA and influences of PA on enhancing students' competence in public speaking in English.

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