

Classroom Action Research
Using Peer Assessment as a Tool to Improve EFL Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of peer assessment and feedback on secondary school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' speaking skills. By providing a platform for students to evaluate each other's performance, peer assessment can help overcome shyness and fear of making mistakes. The study employed CAR (Classroom Action Research) following Kemmis' cycle process (in McNiff: 1992:27) through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in a spiral model. The evaluation focused on whether peer assessment was effective in developing EFL learners' speaking skills and how peer feedback affected students' speaking performance. The study involved 25 students of A2/B1 level at Nazarbayev Intellectual School in Kazakhstan. Personal observations, questionnaires, and speaking tests were used to collect data. Analysis of speaking results showed an increase from 63 in pre-test to 69 in Cycle 1 and 75 in Cycle 2, illustrating the effectiveness of peer assessment as a learning tool. However, giving feedback to peers was only effective in pair work between Higher- Average or Lower level students, with the latter sometimes struggling to implement constructive feedback to Higher level students. Despite drawbacks, most students had a positive attitude towards peer assessment and receiving feedback from their classmates. This form of assessment can be incredibly advantageous for students, offering a unique opportunity for self-learning and differentiation. Additionally, it provides teachers with a valuable tool for assessing their students' potential and enthusiasm.

Keywords: CAR, Peer Assessment, Speaking Skills Evaluation, Peer Feedback

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Introduction

When working with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student, it is often observed that they face difficulties in overcoming shyness and lack of vocabulary when it comes to speaking. To assist less able students, differentiation in the learning process is often employed, such as providing question cards with keywords for less able students and role-playing as group work to give them a chance to speak freely within their roles and involve all students in the speaking process. However, organizing group and/or peer work for students often presents a challenge. Many students struggle with shyness and lack of confidence when it comes to speaking. Active students with higher levels of English tend to take part and provide their answers during topic-related questions and/or discussions, while other students remain silent. Most EFL students often lack vocabulary or ideas, and they also feel embarrassed to speak in a foreign language. Assessing the performance of a certain student's contribution in pair or group work becomes difficult under such circumstances. The current study aims to address the following research questions: "Is peer assessment effective in developing EFL students' speaking skills?" and "How does peer feedback affect students' speaking performance?"

Literature Review

According to Topping (2009), the utilization of peer assessment as an assessment method in the field of education has risen in recent decades. This approach emphasizes collaborative learning with peers and is based on effective learning while being supervised by the instructor. Scholars such as van Zundert et al. (2010), Black and Wiliam (1998a), and Topping (1998) agree that assessment shapes much of the learning that students do, and changing the assessment method can change the way students learn and the content they learn. Nowadays, many scholars justify the use of self and peer assessment as it can lead to greater ownership of learning and motivation for learners. In the realm of EFL teaching, assessment is believed to be crucial in developing students' ability to evaluate their performance and improve it. According to John Cowan (2005), assessment is considered the driving force behind students' learning. Peer assessment can help learners develop several skills like reflection, critical thinking, and self-awareness while giving them insights into the assessment process. The study aims to investigate whether peer assessment can enhance EFL learners' speaking abilities and whether peer feedback can be as useful as teacher feedback, along with other benefits it may offer.

Topping (2017) defines peer assessment as an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the quality product, of other equal-status learners, which leads to learning further, by giving elaborated feedback to achieve a negotiated agreed outcome. In other words, peer assessment is a valuable pedagogical practice as it enables the learners to take part in assessment by evaluating their peers' learning process and products (Bryan & Clegg, 2019).

Peer assessment incorporating peer feedback leads to more beneficial outcomes as peer feedback provides the strengths and weaknesses along with recommendations for improvement. Furthermore, peer feedback means having a dialogue whereby students share knowledge and understanding with the intention of informing as ongoing learning (Zhu & Carless, 2018).

An important aspect of peer assessment and feedback practices is the link of these activities to Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, which emphasizes the vital role of social

interaction in learning (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009; Topping, 2017). Further, it is claimed that the peer assessment process naturally constructs a favourable teaching environment for peers to work within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). The learner's ZPD refers to the place between where learners are able to perform a task on their own versus with the help of a teacher or parent (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009). The theoretical framework of Vygotsky's social development theory refers to two important aspects of peer assessment and peer feedback: *cognitive development* and learning through social interaction which can be implied as *collaborative learning*.

According to one of the first advocates of peer assessment, cognitive and metacognitive benefits can accrue before, during, or after the peer assessment (Topping, 2009). Learners assess their peers speaking according to speaking criteria, in the process, they can see their own mistakes, strengths and weaknesses.

Methodology

To ensure the validity of the action research, a triangulation approach was employed with a variety of research instruments and techniques that could provide different views of the case. Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were used, which encompassed three distinct data collection tools:

- Personal observations;
- Survey: speaking tests with assessment criteria;
- Survey questionnaire.

Survey participants:

25 students of NIS in Kazakhstan with English language levels A2 / B1.

Procedure

This study adopted a spiral model of Kemmis's classroom action research (2007). In general, the spiral model of classroom action research (CAR) describes a continuous process that includes two iterations where each cycle goes through the process of gathering information, planning, implementing actions, observing and reflecting on actions and then designing actions in the next cycle, which were based on facts and findings from the previous cycle (Figure 1). In planning stage, the researcher planned the implementation of question cards and peer assessment, prepared topic-related vocabulary, designed a lesson plan, made assessment sheet and determined criteria of success. In the implementation stage the researcher applied the strategy by pairing students randomly and in observation stage the researcher collected the data. In the reflecting stage, the researcher evaluated the result of the implementation of the strategy and drew the conclusion whether the strategy was success or not by comparing to the criteria of success.

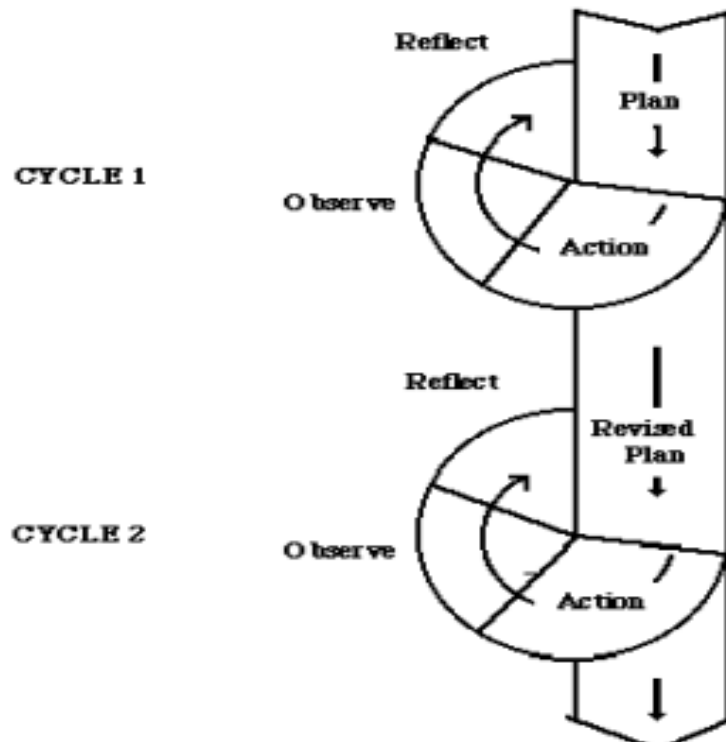


Figure 1: Kemmis' cycle action research process

Findings and Discussion

The research lasted for 2 months of the last academic year 2022-2023 and divided into three main stages. In the first stage students were merely observed during speaking activities for 4 lessons, the researcher was trying to find out how free and fluently students can render their ideas when answering topic-related questions. By the end of the observations, it was possible to assess the participation of only the most active students but not all the students.

For the **first Cycle** (Cycle 1, Figure 1) a special assessment form with assessment criteria arising from the content of the lessons was designed. It required students to use topic-related vocabulary, and grammar learned during the unit. Students were randomly divided into pairs, they were given assessment forms and question cards. Each pair of students had to listen to each other and assess their speaking. At first, it was hard for students to assess their peer's speaking as most of them found it difficult to digest pronounced sentences and assess. Weaker students could not understand criteria in full or could not assess grammar part because of poor knowledge. But stronger students could assess their peers and comment on their assessment results.

Analyzing the outcomes of the 1st Cycle the following improvements of the peer assessment practice was made:

- Ensure lower level students have some topic-related vocabulary in question cards
- Ensure students understand assessment criteria by designing the criteria themselves
- Give more time to prepare their answers (2 min instead of 1)
- Put students in pairs of Higher – Average, Average – Lower level

The **second Cycle** (Cycle 2, Figure 1) was applied in 4 meetings; two meetings for teaching learning process, vocabulary and grammar, and designing assessment criteria related to the

learned materials. Students were encouraged to design assessment criteria to understand how and what to assess. Students were also given feedback by the Teacher to learn giving feedback.

Two meetings were designed to do peer speaking and assessment by the criteria as well as meeting time limits. Preparation time was prolonged up to 2 minutes, as weaker students had to prepare for speaking as well as for assessment and giving feedback.

The adjustment of the implementation brought a positive effect. It helped weaker students to gain more confidence in speaking and in giving feedback to their peers. Observations of Cycle 2 revealed the following progress in speaking:

- Students seemed to be more relaxed while speaking to their peers (in contrast to Teacher-student assessment);
- Peer evaluation allowed students to get acquainted with some assessment criteria and the process itself.
- Putting students into pairs with proximately different levels was more effective, as weaker students were able to listen to stronger level students, gain some topic related words and phrases, learn correct pronunciation and more able learners could help to correct their grammar;
- Apart from assessing each other's speaking students learned giving feedback and explaining their assessment. At first it was only Higher level students who could give feedbacks, but by the end of research all students were able to assess their peers' speaking and give detailed feedbacks.

Before treatment (Pre-test) and after each Cycle (Cycle 1 and Cycle 2) of speaking and peer assessment students' results were added up and divided into the number of students to receive the average score. The observed groups of students showed below progress:

Pre-test results – mean score 63

Cycle 1 – mean score 69

Cycle 2 – mean score 75

Based on the research findings the answer to the **Research question 1** if peer assessment was effective in developing EFL students' speaking skills, is positive. In both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 have shown the gradual growth of mean score for speaking. The peer assessment corrected the students' mistakes and improved their speaking. The benefit of this activity is to enable students to overcome language barrier and gain confidence in speaking as well as to understand assessment criteria and assess their peers speaking. In learning speaking confidence is a pivotal aspect. The peer assessment enables to enhance the students' confidence as well as their motivation. Studies showed some advantages of peer assessment as well as disadvantages.

Advantages of using peer assessment in speaking:

- ✓ Students feel more relaxed while speaking to peers, therefore gain confidence in speaking;
- ✓ Take responsibility for and manage their own learning;
- ✓ Learn to assess and give others constructive feedback, and improve assessment skills;
- ✓ Enhance students learning through knowledge diffusion and exchange ideas;
- ✓ Motivated to engage with course materials more deeply.
- ✓ Become aware of self progress, strengths and weaknesses.

Disadvantages of using peer assessment in speaking:

- ✓ Students will have a tendency to award everyone the same score.
- ✓ Students will not be able to assess their peers due to low language level.
- ✓ Students may be reluctant to make judgements regarding their peers.

Research question 2 "How does peer feedback affect students' speaking performance?"

By raising above issue as a research question peer-assessment is viewed as another way of challenging students' dependence on the teacher for feedback and guidance in their learning. It emphasizes learner autonomy and cooperation. It is based on the assumption that students can learn as much from each other as they can from the teacher (Ashraf & Mahdinezhad, 2015).

The observation of the survey on the process of giving feedback has revealed that giving feedback to peers was mostly effective in pair work between Higher– Average and Average – Lower level students, with the latter sometimes struggling to implement constructive feedback to Higher level students.

Survey Questionnaire Results

Students answered the survey questionnaire to define student's opinions about using peer assessment and peer feedback to improve their speaking:

- 20 of 25 students answered that peer assessment helps to develop their speaking.
- Parts of assessment that were difficult for them: assessing peer's speaking – 14, giving feedback – 11.

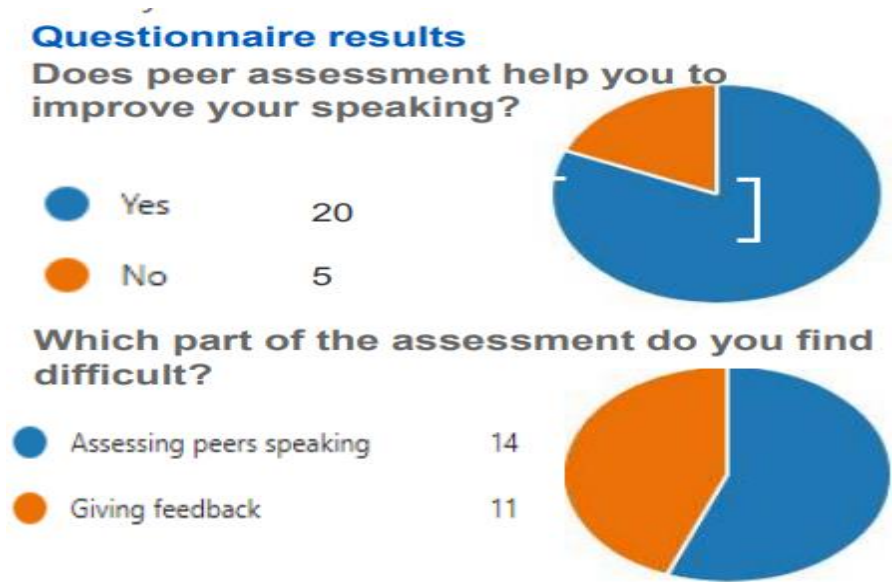


Figure 2: Questionnaire about peer assessment

Based on the results, it can be inferred that the majority of students perceive peer feedback as a valuable tool for their learning and have provided positive responses regarding its usefulness. s per the feedback provided by the students, it appears that they find it equally challenging to assess the speaking of their peers and provide constructive feedback. This task involves a range of complex skills, such as speaking, analyzing errors, and evaluating performance based on predetermined criteria, which require the use of higher-order thinking

abilities. Engaging in such activities may contribute to the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills among students.

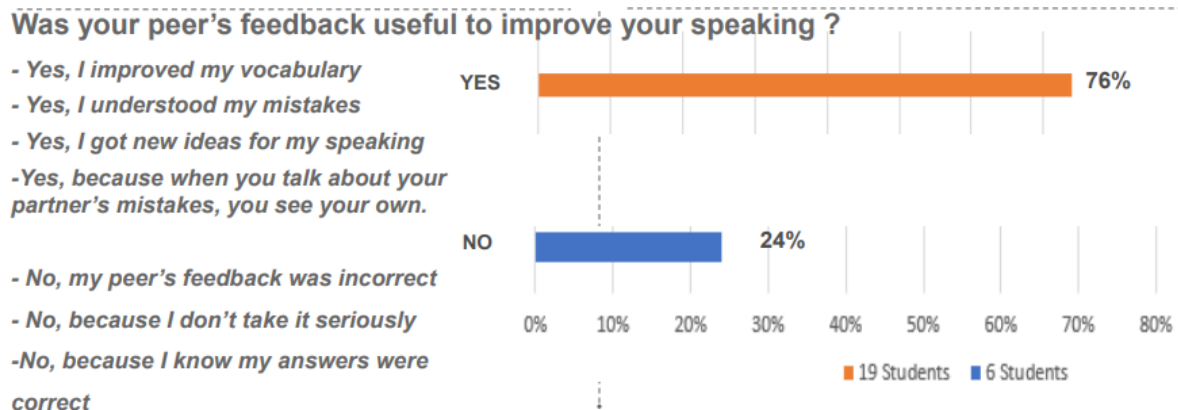


Figure 3: Questionnaire about peer feedback

The students' perception of the impact of peer feedback on their speaking skills was somewhat mixed, with some expressing positive views while others highlighting certain limitations of the peer assessment approach. The feedback provided by students revealed some advantages and drawbacks associated with peer assessment.

As for the answers above, peer assessment helps students to develop their assessment skills and learn to provide constructive feedback to their peers. One of the main advantages is that it promotes students to take responsibility for their own learning, as they have to assess and provide constructive feedback to their peers. This process also enhances their assessment skills and encourages them to engage with the course material on a deeper level. Additionally, knowledge diffusion and the exchange of ideas among students can improve the overall learning experience. Furthermore, peer assessment can raise students' awareness of their own progress, strengths, and weaknesses. However, there are also certain disadvantages of using peer assessment in speaking. For instance, students may have the tendency to rate everyone equally, which can undermine the validity of the assessment. Moreover, students with lower language proficiency may struggle to assess their peers accurately. Consequently, students with higher level of English may remain unsatisfied with their peer's feedback. Finally, some students may be hesitant to provide judgment on their peers or disagree with their assessment, which can negatively impact the effectiveness of the evaluation process.

Conclusion

The evaluation of students' learning progress is a crucial aspect of the educational process. A recent study has revealed that despite its limitations, peer assessment can offer significant benefits to students, such as promoting self-directed learning and motivation. By involving students in the evaluation process, teachers can accurately measure and enhance elements that would have been difficult to achieve otherwise. This approach can also serve as an additional tool for teaching, leveraging students' potential and enthusiasm to improve their performance. Furthermore, the presence of a competitive environment among peers during the assessment may encourage them to engage more actively and be stricter in their evaluations, ultimately leading to more efficient assessment practices. The use of peer assessment also fosters a sense of community among students, as they are invited to participate in an essential aspect of education. Feedback from peers plays a critical role in this type of assessment, allowing teachers to assess individual students with greater accuracy while reducing their workload.

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