The Effects of Online Peer Assessment on Students' Writing

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Abstract

In recent years, Online Peer Assessment (OPA) has received significant attention among Language Teaching researchers and practitioners, as this student-centered type of assessment increases students' motivation and autonomy, contributes to the building of knowledge and reflective learning [1], promotes a better understanding of course content, and helps students comprehend assessment criteria. OPA acts as "effective supplement to instructors' feedback, and is considered as one of the most important forms of feedback in language teaching contexts" [2]; it provides a structured learning process for students, enhances collaborative learning, and increases student-student, student-teacher, and student-content interactions [1].

This paper focuses on the use of Online Peer Assessment in Master's degree French Language Teaching seminars at the University of Tehran during the mandatory implementation of virtual learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thirty master's students participated in regular assessment of their peers' course summary in two master's degree seminars. Course summaries were written and assessed online on Google Docs© and shared with the professor, who monitored peers' feedback and corrections. Students' perceptions and attitude toward the effectiveness of peer assessment for developing writing skills were analyzed before and after the seminars through an online questionnaire. Findings indicate that students' attitude changed significantly from a rather negative/hesitant attitude at the beginning, to a rather positive/enthusiastic one at the end of the two-semester period, as they gained more confidence in the act of peer assessment and perceived it as a complementary component of their learning.

Keywords: *Online Peer Assessment, Google Documents, Language Teaching Seminars, Learners' Attitudes*

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, alternative assessment practices have extensively replaced traditional assessment techniques [3], since they are performance-based, learner-centered, and authentic [4]. Among the various types of alternative assessment, peer assessment has become one of the most widely used techniques in language teaching and learning, especially for developing students production ([5]; [6]; [7]; [8]). This student-centered assessment technique makes learners more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, encourages them to be actively involved in the writing process, and increases their capacity for interpretive reasoning, which results in productions that are more logically structured, linguistically richer and more in line with the instructions and guidelines. In addition, peer assessment allows learners to access higher levels of analysis [9] and present more deeply-reflected productions, especially when they are performed through digital tools and platforms.

Online Peer Assessment (OPA) has recently been extensively applied and studied in the field of language teaching and learning ([5];[6];[10]). Often in the form of feedback in dialogues between two or more learners, OPA allows students to propose constructive corrections and suggestions to their peers, and benefit from their classmates' corrections and comments for perfectioning their production, thus engaging in collaborative co-development of their linguistic knowledge and competencies ([10];[11]).

This research, which focuses on the use of OPA for developing pre-service French language teachers' writing and assessment competencies, attempts to understand how students' initial hesitant and uncertain attitude regarding OPA changes, as they engage in online assessment of their peers' written production.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Peer Assessment (OPA)

In recent decades, advances in electronic text editing tools have offered a range of new devices and opportunities for the pedagogy of writing [12]. Collective online peer editing platforms allow learners to offer and receive corrections and suggestions, ask questions, request clarifications and justifications,

and present online resources to enrich or develop their peers' writing. Chen [13], in his analysis of technology-mediated peer assessment, argues that students who provide feedback electronically remain more focused on the assessment task, compared to paper-based assessment; they participate more easily in digital communication without time/space limitations [14], and resort to more complex, more dynamic and lexically-richer productions. In addition, Online Peer Assessment eliminates students' unease regarding negative face-to-face critiques of peers, which can strengthen their motivation to engage in constructive and objective assessment. Furthermore, OPA encourages discussions and interactions among peers, facilitated through online interactive tools such as Google Docs©, and fosters more constructive academic collaboration among learners [15] due to the greater accessibility of assessment platforms (through computers, tablets or mobile phones). Carefully designed, teacher-guided OPA can also develop students' writing skills, as they benefit from online information/resources and their peers' inputs, which allows them to progress at their own pace, thus developing an appropriate self-learning-management system while working on collaborative learning.

3. Method

This study was conducted during two semesters at the department of French Language and Literature at the University of Tehran, Iran, among first-year M.A. students in the Teaching of French. Thirty students participated in this study: 29 female participants and 1 male participant, with an average age of 26 years old.

During two semesters, students presented and assessed fifteen French course summaries, written and corrected on Google Docs©. The course summaries, written in French, consisted of a brief summary of the main issues discussed in class, as well as a personal reflection regarding what students learned in class and how they can use it in their future teaching career.

The data consisted of a questionnaire, composed of 22 questions and built on the basis of a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), which focused on learners' attitudes toward the pedagogical benefits of OPA for developing students' writing competency and cognitive skills. The objective was to understand whether learners' attitude changed by the end of the seminars, after having received two training sessions regarding effective OPA guidelines and strategies, as well as having assessed fifteen course summaries.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the questionnaire was calculated at 0.91, which confirms the internal consistency of the questions and represents the reliability of the research instrument.

Statistical analysis was used to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaires. Given that learners' responses consisted of two responses for each question— before and after the seminars, we used Wilcoxon's Signed Ranks test, a non-parametric test that indicates whether there is a change of responses by considering the effects of the intervention, while the two modes before and after are linked.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results of Wilcoxon's Signed-Rank test are presented in the following table. The significant level (the p-value) in this analysis is considered to be 0.05.

Question	P value		Question	P value
1	0.003		12	0.000
2	0.000		13	0.000
3	0.033		14	0.001
4	0.001		15	0.900
5	0.010		16	0.005
6	0.000		17	0.000
7	0.014		18	0.002
8	0.000		19	0.001
9	0.005		20	0.002
10	0.000		21	0.001
11	0.002		22	0.002

Table 1: Students' Attitudes Regarding OPA

As indicated in this table, the value of p is lower than the significance level (p-value <0.05) for all questions (except question n 15); the difference in means is therefore statistically significant, indicating that learners had a more positive attitude towards the benefits of OPA for developing their writing skills

at the end of the two seminars. Learners generally believed that OPA was beneficial for the development of writing skills (questions 1-8), in particular given its electronic nature (question 13-14, 16-17). OPA, according to students, helped develop their knowledge and skills in the French language (questions 9-12, 19, 23), as well as critical thinking, self-direction and self-learning (questions 20-22), as confirmed by other research [16] [17]. It also gave them a sense of power and authority (question 18), which was rather gratifying to them and served as an engine for actively participating in quality assessment of their peers.

Furthermore, in general, students expressed a more positive attitude regarding making corrections, rather than receiving them: assessing their peers' writing was more beneficial to them, since, being observed by the professor, their main concern was proposing the "right corrections" on the work of their peers, which encouraged them to check or learn about various linguistic elements on the Internet, and discuss their peers' errors with them through dialogic comments on the side of the writing, which contributed to continuous episodes of collaborative learning [18] and knowledge construction and application.

4. Conclusion

When implementing a new teaching/learning technique in a language classroom, the first step is to ascertain that students' have a positive comprehension and appreciation of the technique. In this study, the use of OPA was initially considered by students as a complex activity, which was reserved solely for the professor, as students did not feel confident and competent in evaluating the work of their fellow classmates. However, as they engaged in active assessment of their peers' writing, not only did they develop various lower-level (linguistic elements such as vocabulary and grammar) and higher-level (application, critical thinking and creativity) cognitive skills, but they also participated more actively in the process of writing. Assuming the role of assessors motivated students to perform the assessment activity in the most efficient and adequate way, since making corrections gave them a sense of authority, and thus encouraged them to use online and peer resources to fill the gaps they noticed in their language knowledge and competencies in order to make adequate corrections. This sense of authority motivated students and encouraged collaborative learning, which are important elements in any learner-centered learning scenario.

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