

Promoting Saudi University Students' Experience Through Peer Assessment Practice

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Abstract—Peer assessment (PA) has received growing attention recently due to its great impact on students' autonomy and growth (Bryant & Carless, 2010; Patri, 2002). It requires students to be critical in evaluating their peers' performance, engage in a discussion about their work, and eventually make improvements. This activity helps to create a collaborative learning environment. Despite being of such importance, peer assessment has still been overlooked by many university teachers, who remain hesitant to put it into practice. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate, through the perceptions of undergraduate applied linguistics students, the contribution and efficiency of using PA in enhancing the student's learning experience and skills. The researcher implemented PA practice in the classroom in which 16 university-level Saudi female students were asked to assess other students' tasks and then to write a reflection about their own experience in the PA practice and how it influenced their performance in the course of digital linguistics. The data analysis revealed that students' participation in the PA significantly promotes students' classroom engagement and improves their critical thinking, writing, and analysis skills. The study concludes with suggestions for effectively applying peer evaluation practices in different university courses.

Index Terms—peer assessment, students' reflection, applied linguistics, writing quality, analysis skills

I. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of education, the learning setting is undergoing a profound transformation. Education experts believe that the traditional classroom model must go beyond its conventional borders and must enhance the students' participation for the progress of instruction. Classrooms where students are passively receiving information, often fail to spark intellectual curiosity, foster critical thinking, and ignite a genuine passion for knowledge. Kember (2000) asserted that conventional teaching methods rely heavily on passive learning and rote memory and lack practice for critical thinking. Thus, students need to be physically and mentally present and attentively engaged in their education (Abebe & Deneke, 2015). For this reason, modern pedagogical models emphasize the importance of creating an interactive classroom setting that not only captivates students' attention but also empowers them as active participants in their own learning experience, preparing them for the ever-evolving world where the ability to think critically and to evaluate information are essential skills for success.

Peer assessment (PA), a pedagogical approach in which students evaluate their peers' work, has been highly recognized in education for its potential to promote active engagement in classrooms. In this approach, teachers are not the main players in classroom events, but they share the ground with their students in terms of assessment and involvement (Ko et al., 2015). Such an interactive class environment generates an intellectual dialogue between students and their teachers and promotes collaborative learning among students. This study will explore the efficacy of implementing PA into higher education in Saudi Arabia and how it influences applied linguistics students' skills and learning experiences.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer assessment, also known as peer evaluation, peer review, and peer feedback, plays a major role in education. It can be defined as a "communication technique through which learners engage in discussions about performance and standards" (Liu & Carless, 2006, p. 280). More specifically, it is the students' participation in qualitative evaluation through providing oral or written feedback on their peers' performance and in quantitative evaluation through providing peer grading (Topping, 1998, 2009, 2017). Over the past four decades, scholarly discussions have delved into the influence of peer assessment on students' learning in a wide range of educational levels such as primary (Brakel, 1990), high school (Almahasneh & Abdul-Hamid, 2019), undergraduate (Ion et al., 2016) and post-graduate (Simpson & Clifton, 2016). In general, it has been argued that peer assessment is commonly used as a successful educational tool across various learning levels. Some studies have reported the positive impact of PA on students' motivation and engagement (McGarr & Clifford, 2013; Xu et al., 2022). Other studies have revealed the efficiency of using peer assessment in increasing responsibility for students and improving their learning experience (Papinczak et al., 2007). The significance of PA has also been recognized in identifying the student's strengths and weaknesses (Baniabdelrahman, 2010).

The literature has discussed the application of peer assessment strategy in different contexts from different aspects, including a specific course or subject, modes of teaching (offline or online), the formative or summative manner, the learning outcome or objective, and the type of work being assessed. For instance, a questionnaire-based study by Loureiro and Gomes (2013) examined the perceptions of 16 university students in Portugal about the contribution of online PA practices to higher education. The results revealed a lack of PA training among students as well as a positive impact of these activities on student motivation and cognitive, metacognitive, and digital skills. Moreover, a mixed-methods study in the UK done by Bloxham and West (2004) investigated how PA activities influenced the performance of 43 university-level students in sociology and found that the students developed self-regulation skills through their engagement in these activities.

Similarly, the study of Kuyyogsuy (2019) conducted a mixed-method study to examine the effects of peer feedback on the English writing ability of 21 undergraduate English learners in Thailand. The participants appreciated the PA experience for improving their writing ability in English, creating a collaborative learning environment, and developing critical thinking skills. In the Saudi context, Alsehibany (2021) conducted a similar mixed-methods study to examine Saudi female students' attitudes towards peer feedback in writing classes. Her study revealed that students showed a positive reaction towards PA practice, and they said it improved their writing quality. Another study on peer assessment is the study of Hasnani and Mubarak (2020). It examined the role of PA on the development of speaking skills among 30 university students learning English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in Indonesia. It argued that peer assessment is effective in enhancing the oral skills of ESP students. Another study in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the study done by Ritonga and his colleagues in 2022 on the impact of PA on enhancing students' reading comprehension, reading motivation, and vocabulary building. In this research, 60 Iranian EFL students took part in pre-tests and post-tests, and the results showed evidence of the advantages of using PA to improve the different learning skills of EFL students. The role of PA in the EFL context has been largely investigated in previous literature to highlight its effectiveness in promoting students' language skills and learning experiences.

On the other hand, some studies have expressed concern about incorporating PA in the classrooms as it creates a challenging experience and uncomfortable atmosphere for students (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Praver et al., 2011). Liu and Carless (2006), for example, surveyed 1740 students and 460 instructors involved in PA and concluded that PA of a summative nature can be questioned in terms of peers' perceived expertise and therefore is deemed to be ineffective. Another issue raised regarding the use of PA is students' reluctance to evaluate peers and to trust their assessment. These issues can be avoided through the instructors' involvement in reviewing the PA report to ensure the peer assessor's objectivity and improve its accuracy (Carnell, 2016). Other studies (e.g., Saito, 2008; Liu & Li, 2014) underscored the importance of training students on providing peer assessment and its impact on improving the quality of feedback and the quality of the final draft of the task being assessed. Despite its well-established recognition as a fruitful strategy to develop students' evaluative competencies and enhance students' engagement, peer assessment has still been disregarded by many teachers and educational institutions. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the implementation of peer assessment as an education tool for applied linguistics students in Saudi Arabia and how it affected their performance in the course of digital linguistics. Notwithstanding, most PA studies have concentrated on the impact of PA on writing and in the EFL/ESP contexts. Besides, the majority have primarily focused on quantitative data analysis. For this reason, the current study aims to contribute to the literature by providing insights based on the students' self-reflection as being involved in PA practice.

III. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

The study examines peer assessment of written linguistic analysis among Saudi undergraduate students and explores to what extent peer assessment plays a role in enhancing students' skills. It mainly attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How does implementing peer assessment affect the learning experience of undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia?
2. To what extent, does peer assessment improve Saudi applied linguistics students' critical, analysis and writing skills?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Study Design

The study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine the role of peer assessment practice in enhancing Saudi students' engagement and academic achievement in undergraduate university programs. The study consisted of three phases of data collection.

B. Study Participants

Sixteen female undergraduate students of applied linguistics took part in this research. They were in the third year of their Bachelor's degree studying at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in Saudi Arabia. The PA activities were implemented in the course of digital linguistics. It is a 12-week elective course offered by the Program of Applied

Linguistics. It allows students to understand, analyze, and grasp the manifestations of language in the digital world. In this course, students learn how to represent, analyze, and disseminate linguistic data online. Since this course needed more engagement from the students, the researcher implemented PA practice to examine its impacts on the student's engagement and performance in the course.

C. Study Instruments

The study followed three phases of data collection:

1. The first phase: students were asked to form groups of 3-4 and to analyze digital data on a chosen topic. After completing this task, the teacher-researcher assessed the students' work based on a specific rubric. In the next class, each group was asked to read the task written by two groups and evaluate their work using the same rubric. The teacher explained to the students the different assessment criteria in the rubric, including task achievement, writing quality, coherence and unity, organization and presentation, and finally creativity and novelty. In their peer assessment, students had to be specific about peer grading and include details about the group's performance on each criterion. After they completed their peer evaluation, the teacher shared with them how she evaluated their work to help them see their performance in the evaluation activity. This activity aimed to train the students to evaluate written tasks and get familiar with using rubrics. Their peer evaluation in this phase was completed as a group activity to make students feel more comfortable and enjoy the activity. Their grade in this task was allocated to all group members based on the teacher's assessment and used as a measurement for students' scores improvement or reduction, in the data analysis.
2. The second phase: the students were asked to work individually on a project that involved analyzing digital content from another digital platform. After submitting their projects, the teacher randomly assigned one peer project to each student to review and assess using a slightly different rubric to meet the project's requirements. Their assessment was based on specific evaluation criteria explained to the students, including task achievement, organization, writing quality, and analysis. It also involved writing a critique of their peer's performance in the form of a short paragraph. Their critical feedback started with an overall evaluation of the work and then moved into the details of the strengths and the weaknesses of the projects. Writing such feedback created an opportunity for students to learn from each other and to enhance their ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in their work and that of others. Each student then handed her feedback to the corresponding student author to read. The students were also allowed to discuss their feedback with each other. To minimize the tension among students, the students were assured that their evaluation in the first and second phases would not affect their score in the tasks but would be used as part of the student's participation.
3. The third phase: the students were asked to write a self-reflection about their own experience in the PA practice and how it influenced their writing quality and critical and analysis skills. This reflection was designed by the researcher with 8 questions used for exploring students' opinions about the integration of PA activities into their classrooms. This phase represents the primary research instrument.

V. RESULTS

Results from the data analysis are presented in two themes responding to the two research questions: students' experience of peer assessment and the impact of peer assessment on students' performance and skills.

A. Students' Experience of Peer Assessment

The majority of students valued their participation in peer assessment and described it as "fun", "great", "interesting" and "full of information". Most of them emphasized the role of PA in enhancing their evaluative competence, getting "constructive feedback" and identifying their strengths and weaknesses. For example, one wrote, "It was good and I learned from this experience that I should be very careful when I correct other assignments and to check if they follow the instructions". Another student commented "My experience with peer assessment in the context of analyzing digital content assignments was generally positive. Peer assessment provides an opportunity for students to engage with the work of their peers and to provide constructive feedback that can help to improve the quality of their work". Similarly, one reported PA "helps train the student based on assessment and learning different techniques for spotting mistakes and precision". However, only a few students (i.e., three out of sixteen) described it as "challenging". For example, one of the three students highlighted how being engaged in PA was "hard" at the beginning, and "then after reading over and over, it gets easier". Another one expressed her negative reaction towards her participation in PA activities as she reflected "I did not like the way to correct the assessment to each other". She also raised the issue of reliability in PA activities when she answered the question (what did you learn from being part of peer-evaluation/assessment?). Her answer was: "do not trust the other member, she will betray you. I learned how to evaluate others' work". This was the only negative answer to this question whereas the majority included positive comments like: "It is a skill that requires accuracy and revision", "I learned to give my honest opinion", "it helped me encourage self-reflection and improvement", "evaluating my peers' work made me think critically", and "through this process, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of my work, as well as the work of my peers". Some students claimed how the inclusion of PA helped them learn from "the mistakes that have been repeated and that [they] have

come to know through [their] evaluation of colleagues”. In general, regardless of being challenging for some students, peer assessment was described as being a useful strategy for learning as it mainly develops the students’ evaluative competence and analytical skills.

B. Impact of Peer Assessment on Students’ Skills

Implementing PA activities in the course of digital linguistics has a statistically significant impact on promoting students’ performance in linguistic analysis. The student’s grades for the first and second tasks are presented in the following table:

TABLE 1
GRADES FOR STUDENTS’ FIRST AND SECOND TASK

Students	Task 1 (out of 15)	Task 2 (out of 30)
1	13.5	30
2	12	29
3	13.5	30
4	13	29
5	12	30
6	12	29
7	13.5	30
8	12	29.5
9	10.5	30
10	13	27.5
11	12	27.5
12	10.5	27.5
13	13	28
14	12	28
15	13.5	29
16	12	28
Average	12.38	28.94
Percentage	82.50 %	96.46%

As can be seen from the table, the average percentages of Task 1 and Task 2 are 82.50 % and 96.46%, respectively. All the students who participated in this study increased their overall writing and analysis scores by at least 2 marks. This shows that students’ performance was improved after receiving PA practice. Moreover, the students were asked to reflect on the impact of PA on their writing quality, analysis, and critical thinking. Most of them considered PA practice as an effective strategy for improving their “analytical and critical thinking”, “writing style”, “grammatical accuracy”, “spelling” and critical evaluation. All the participants expressed their agreement on how receiving feedback on their tasks improves their skills and their grades. For instance, one student explained that “the feedback that I received helped me to better understand what was expected of me in terms of analysis and writing, and it gave me specific areas to focus on for improvement”. Another student confirmed that “my grades got better by taking the feedback into consideration”.

The students were also asked about the differences between giving and receiving feedback, and they expressed different opinions about the two experiences involved in peer assessment. One of them claimed:

Giving and receiving feedback from peers are two different experiences. Giving feedback requires one to evaluate the work of others and provide constructive criticism while receiving feedback involves being open to criticism and using it to improve one’s work. Both experiences are valuable for developing skills in communication, critical thinking, and self-improvement, and they can help to improve the overall quality of work in a group setting.

Some students also highlighted the value of participating in both experiences as they “can promote personal and professional growth”. Other students emphasized the efficiency of peer feedback in promoting students’ engagement, communication skills, and teamwork. Some students described the experience of receiving peer feedback as “new” and “hard” especially when the assessor-student lacks evaluative skills and does not give constructive feedback. However, the majority mentioned that giving feedback is much harder because it requires being able to criticize other’s work and take into account the different assessment criteria. Some also expressed the role of PA in fostering a sense of responsibility among students for contributing to their peers’ work.

In the final question, the students were asked about if they would suggest implementing PA in other courses. Two students claimed that the use of PA depends on the course and the tasks, and it should not be implemented in “midterms or papers that have a lot of grades. This is because it takes so much time and effort”. Another two students did not recommend using PA in other courses, arguing that “this affects the teacher’s decision to take the appropriate grade for the student”. From their answers, it was clear that they were worried about their grades despite being reminded that their grades would not be affected by their peer feedback. However, the majority agreed on its usefulness for other courses. To give an example of their answers, one student wrote:

I believe that implementing peer assessment in other courses would be valuable for developing skills in communication, critical thinking, and self-improvement. It can help to improve the overall quality of work and provide students with an opportunity to engage with the work of their peers and receive constructive feedback.

Overall, most students were appreciative of the peer feedback and confirmed the major impact it had on the improvement of their performance and skills.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support the idea that peer assessment can be a useful educational tool for raising student achievement, especially in programs requiring high critical and evaluative skills such as the Applied Linguistics Program. The study presents significant statistical evidence of the students' increased performance in analyzing digital content as a result of being engaged in PA activities. Their active PA engagement, based on the students' self-reflection, plays an imperative role in developing critical thinking, evaluative competence, and analytical skills. This fact is mentioned by several studies that pointed out the effectiveness of using PA activities in the classroom (e.g., Alsehibany, 2021; Hasnani & Mubarak, 2020). Such activities, as reported by students, have a positive impact on their writing quality and academic achievement.

The results indicate that despite being challenging, the interactive nature of PA practice ensures that students are mutually involved in the process of negotiation, communication, and evaluation. Taking part in both giving and receiving feedback creates a sustainable learning environment. It also fosters a sense of responsibility and commitment among students. Peer evaluation, as the results showed, gives the students more capacity to learn from each other and to control their education with the help of their peers. It also gives the teachers more time to maximize the students' learning by enhancing their judging role in the classroom. As a teacher, the integration of peer evaluation gave me more time to work on planning lessons and designing learning activities. The findings of the current study are in line with Shen et al. (2020) who suggested the significance of PA in promoting the students' autonomy and reducing the teachers' role as the only source of knowledge and assessment.

While the findings generally yielded students' acknowledgment of peer feedback on enhancing their learning experience, the findings also raised concern for a few students regarding its difficulty, accuracy, and reliability. Thus, as argued by the students and other researchers (e.g., Liu & Li, 2014), the use of PA can be promoted through training students about providing feedback and peer grading. The use of rubrics for PA helped provide clear guidance for the assessment criteria and grade distribution. This is supported by Singh and Tan (2017) who examined students' perceptions of structured feedback and showed that the students believed that receiving guidelines is highly efficient. Moreover, the teachers' engagement and supervision during the PA practice are essential for its success, not only to eliminate the interference of students' interpersonal relationships but also to improve its accuracy and implementation. The teachers, as Zhao (2018) believed, also need to know how to implement PA activities in the classrooms and how they should be organized for maximum impact.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study confirmed the role of peer feedback in promoting the learning experience of Saudi undergraduate students in the Applied Linguistics Program. The findings demonstrated that the student's academic achievement and class engagement enhanced in the course of digital linguistics due to the implementation of PA. The study also asserted that PA provides students with a great opportunity to develop their critical thinking, evaluative competence, and writing quality. By participating in PA, students can improve their communication skills as they need to articulate their thoughts clearly when providing feedback. This enhances their ability to express ideas effectively and engage in constructive discussions. They also learn to justify their opinions and evaluations based on objective criteria. By using PA, teachers can create a collaborative learning environment where students do not rely merely on them but they will share the responsibility of providing feedback in the classrooms. This study raises several implications for teachers and researchers. Teachers should train their students to provide peer feedback as it expands the students' knowledge and prepares them for the demands of today's world. They should carefully consider the benefits and challenges of using PA in their specific context and create strategies to mitigate difficulties while maximizing learning outcomes. Educators should also make use of rubrics when integrating PA practice to facilitate the students' experience. Providing clear and detailed assessment criteria helps students understand the quality and depth of assessments expected. Educators are highly encouraged to supervise the PA activities to ensure their accuracy and efficiency. Future studies may investigate faculty perspectives on the challenges and benefits of adapting PA in Saudi Arabia to provide a more holistic view of its impact. Other studies can explore the feasibility and reliability of PA activities in different contexts. Further investigation can also focus on the long-term impact of PA on student performance in different courses. To conclude, PA is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and its success depends on how it is designed and implemented to fit the distinctive dynamics of each classroom environment.

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