Applying Self and Peer Assessment in Chinese Tertiary Education English Classroom

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Abstract

This study explores the application of self and peer assessment in the context of Chinese tertiary level English classrooms. As English language learning continues to gain significance in China, educators are seeking innovative strategies to enhance students' language proficiency and foster autonomous learning. Self and peer assessment techniques have emerged as effective tools in promoting students' active participation, self-reflection, and collaborative learning. This research investigates the benefits, challenges, and best practices associated with implementing self and peer assessment methods in the Chinese tertiary English classroom.

Keywords

Self-assessment, Peer-assessment, Tertiary level education, English classroom, Language learning, Autonomous learning.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Chinese University General English Classrooms and Conflict

English is considered as a compulsory course in each individual university. most of the non-English relevant major students in China are required to complete four English learning units in their first and second academic year. It is necessary to admit that English is taken a significant position in Chinese higher education curriculum. Lin (2002) pints out the new demand in tertiary level English teaching is to improve student's comprehensive ability in the using of English, especially to improve their listening and speaking competence to avoid "mute and deaf English." Therefore, teachers in Chinese universities are more encouraged to increase the teaching portion of listening and speaking rather than stick in grammar and vocabulary development.

However, students and teacher's perception on English as a major conflict in Chinese English classroom is always exist. This conflict directly comes from two aspects: the exam-oriented education system and the graduation criteria. Indeed, one of the key characteristics of exam-oriented education is that student performances are evaluated by summative assessments in various tests and exams. The direct impact from exam-oriented in English teaching and learning is the reduction of oracy competence training – which is considered doing less contribution in passing various exams. On the other hand, students have two straight graduation criteria in their learning: the first criterion is to pass all the four compulsory units, in other word they have to pass the unit final exams; the second criterion is to get a passing grade of College English Test band 4. College English Test band 4 is a national criterion-related norm-referenced English test in China that open to all university students, and get a passing grade of College English Test is a prerequisite to graduate and get bachelor diploma. Therefore, the prior mission for university teachers and students is to pass to pass English tests includes College English Test. In majority teachers and students' perceptions, their mission in English learning and teaching is to figure out a way to development their test skills such as the development in vocabulary

and improve grammatical skills regardless the usage function of English. In fact, not only teaching and learning strategies are impacted by exam-oriented framework and high-stake testing, but also student's development in other skills and their learning motivations. Gordon and Reese (1997) points out teachers focus on training students' ability in passing test will decrease student's thinking ability such as problem solving and critical thinking ability. In fact, in current Chinese English classrooms, students have very rare autonomy and chances to discuss and share their opinions, most of their times are focus on textbook learning and mock-up test practicing. Harlen (2002) indicates summative assessments impact students directly to increase their text anxiety and reduce their self-esteem and learning motivation, and most importantly their desire to be a language learner.

1.2. Can Self and Peer assessment be implemented in Chinese University Classrooms?

Summative assessments in China have both merits and demerits. Summative assessment helps teacher manage their student more easily through various exams and tests according to the prescribed textbooks and teaching guidelines. Furthermore, English curriculums are easy to be designed and adjusted based on one simple and direct goal – pass the test. Nevertheless, overwhelmed summative assessment decrease students learning motivation and keeps them in the loop of "mute and deaf English." Although the priority of students is still to past English test, but implement alternative assessments in English classrooms seems inevitable: Can self and peer assessment be implemented in Chinese English to help them increase their learning motivation and correct their perception to turn themselves from test-passer to a real language learner?

2. Explore Self and Peer Assessment

2.1. Definition of Self and Peer Assessment

The forms of assessments are not only restricted in tests and exams, there are multiple alternative assessments such as classroom-based assessment, portfolio assessment, observation, self-assessment and peer assessment etc. In this section self-assessment and peer-assessment will be mainly discussed.

Self-assessment, as its name mentioned, is a student-centered assessment that focus on themselves. In self-assessing, students are able to collect information about their own performance or their learning progress in learning duration. *"Self-assessment involves a wide variety of mechanisms and techniques through which students describe (i.e., assess) and possibly assign merit or worth to (i.e., evaluate) the qualities of their own learning processes and products"* (Panadero, Brown & Strijbos, 2016 p. 804). In plain language, self-assessment is designed to monitor student's learning and progress regarding their individual needs. Andrade and Valtcheva (2017) states that students are enable to be engaged in following process through self-assessing: find out their own weakness of knowledge in learning; set and adjust an appropriate and realistic goal through their learning period and track their individual learning progress. Self-assessment is a communicative involvement that bridges students and teachers by facilitating students to know their own needs.

Wride (2017) states an effective self-assessment should include following three factors: content, demonstration of outcome and goals, and personal development of the learner. According to Wride (2017), students should firstly be familiar with the concept of self-assessment, then their self-evaluation and self-appraisal should always embed in the circle of content, demonstration of outcome and personal development.

The major difference between self-assessment and peer-assessment is the assessor. Self-assessment is assessed by individual assessor on their own performance. Peer-assessment is a

collaborative assessment in classroom that allows students to evaluate their peers' performance and have their performance evaluated by peers. The key factor in peer-assessment that students provide feedbacks to their peers' performance, which always alongside with peers' opinion of how to make an improvement. Spiller (2012) emphasizes peer-assessment is an extension from teacher-centered to student-centered mode, which creates an active engagement for students to improve their learning, learner responsibility and metacognitive skills in a dialogical, collaborative learning environment.

2.2. Theoretical Framework of Self and Peer Assessment

The theoretical foundation of self-assessment derives from the principle of autonomy; and the theory of cooperative learning underpins peer-assessment (Brown, 2004). Grander (1999) mentions the term "Self-assessment" and "learner autonomy" is coexist in the learning environment and serve for confidence building, demonstrating of learning gain and encouraging learning motivation. Little (2007) identifies the term "learner autonomy" is to allow students to take charge in their learning progress and to be responsible for their own performance in learning progress. Indeed, compare with summative and formative assessments, self-assessment offers flexibilities for student to be a real autonomous learner in classroom. Holec (1981) indicates through self-assessing, a self-learning and self-regulated model can be demonstrated in a "in a systematic, deliberate way." Self-regulated learning is another key notion that theoretically supports self-assessment. Nicol and Macfarlane (2006) identifies self-regulated learning as an active constructive process that helps learners to set their goals for learning, also regulate and monitor their own motivation, cognition and behavior. The development of self-assessment is also based on the notice of student's metacognition; metacognition is considered as the awareness or analysis of individual learning or thinking process (Siegesmund, 2017). Metacognitive skills are crucial for each individual learner to increase their thinking abilities in their learning progress and it just not only impact in classroom but also their lifelong learning.

Peer-assessment emphasizes on cooperative learning for learners. Slavin (1990) in discussing peer-assessment mentions it is characterized by cooperative learning through social interaction, individual accountability and positive interdependence. Similar with self-assessing, peer-assessment also encourages learners to construct their sustainable lifelong learning skills. Topping (2009) also emphasizes under cooperative learning students are enable to identify their own strength and weakness, increase mutual motivation, target areas for remedial action and develop metacognitive skills. To enhance lifelong learning skills for students contains following characteristics: students should be facilitated to improve their peer-assisted, self-directed learning through the improvement of reflective practice and critical self-awareness (Boud 1999). Salder (2006) also indicates through peer-assessment students are capable to "internalize" the feedback or revision given by their peers which can be applied in future learning and performance.

Theoretically, both self-assessment and peer-assessment have more focus on student-centered than teacher-centered, which is crucial for students to have autonomous and cooperative learning experience in classroom duration. Classroom and cooperative learning experience also facilitate the self-regulated learning and development of metacognition for students' future learning.

2.3. Categories of Self and Peer Assessment

Brown (2004) lists following types of self and peer assessment for different circumstances: (1) Direct assessment of performance; (2) indirect assessment of performance; (3) metacognitive assessment; (4) assessments of socio-affective factors and (5) student self-generated tests. In direct assessment, learners typically monitor his/her own production or performance; and learners assess the evaluation in a short duration, generally immediately after their learning

process or at the end of class. Direct assessment can be presented in various ways: oral presentation, check list, short quiz or journal. The distinction between direct assessment and indirect assessment is the competence-performance distinction (Brown, 2004). Direct assessment is limited in time and can only focus on relevant short performance, but indirect assessment can provide a long-term encompassment for days or even a term of unit through Likert-scales by marking agree or disagree of learner's setting goals. Metacognitive assessment has more focus on goa setting than evaluating learner's performance or their competence. Ozturk (2017) explains helping learners to prepare their goal setting is beneficial to enhance their intrinsic motivation in order to boost their learning by accomplish their pre-set goals. The form of metacognitive assessment can be various: journal, questionnaires, cooperative activities, checklists, choice of list of selections etc. Socio-affective assessment starts from students' psychological aspect rather than subject-matters or skills or competence. This assessment generates learners' personal preference, feeling and attitudes on multiple areas such as they like a certain classroom activity or not. Sanchez-Elez (2014) explains the core of student self-generated tests is to make students feeling they are a part of evaluation process by including their questions in tests or exams.

These aforementioned five types of self and peer assessment can be applied into classroom according to different scenarios, and indeed these assessments consider multi-aspect development of each individual learner.

2.4. Pros and Cons of Self and Peer Assessment

The discussion of this section will mainly focus on the advantages and disadvantages of self and peer assessment.

As a key principle, concept of autonomy underpins the design and usage of self-assessment. In the learning environment with self-assessing, learners are capable the sense of participation by evaluating their own performance by their own because they actually have control on their own evaluation. Learners who capable to learn in an autonomous environment will help them to be a better role to participate in a democratic society in future. Besides, learners will have opportunities to enhance their continuous learning, especially lifelong learning by the development of both cognitive abilities and metacognitive skills through self-assessing. Learners are getting an active engagement and being more motivated to deal with their works. Leach (2012) also indicates self-assessment can alleviate learner' anxiety and reduce the teacher-student conflict by offering a lucid grading process. Furthermore, self-assessment helps learners to have a better understanding on content and their own strength and weakness, in order to help them to set and adjust proper learning goals.

Nevertheless, there are some demerits of self-assessment in classrooms. Some learners may reluctant to have self-assessing because they think they are lack of relevant skills and abilities to evaluate their own work. And some might think teachers should take the responsibility to mark their work; letting them to have self-assessment is just an increasement of their work. Some might get confused about the concept of "Self" and their role in self-assessment. It is possible that students cheat on self-assessment in order to get better result or praise from teacher and peer students, therefore the reliability of self-assessment could be low in some cases.

Peer-assessment offers cooperative learning environment that helps learners to learn from others in a natural process. Spiller (2012) mentions learners are capable to gain a sophisticated comprehension of the gaps in cooperative learning and enhance a better grasp of their learning process. Peer-assessment aligns and supports learners to have peer learning and collaboration by motivating them to partake with the sense of ownership, typically when they actually feel they are participated. Through cooperative learning, students are capable to communicate with their peers and discuss their performance or works. It also increases their capacity of making

judgements and intellectual choices. Furthermore, learners' writing skills can also be improved when they read their peer's work, such as editing, reading and clarification. One important advantage of peer-assessment is learners can compare their own work and other's work by giving and receiving feedback.

However, the shortcomings of peer-assessment are also obvious to find in implementation. The major shortcoming is the reliability of grades, which could possibly affect due to the peer pressures and friendships. In other word, an individual might mark higher/lower scores to other learner's work based on the impression of the learner. Besides, learners might in collusion with each other to increase their grades together. Another issue in peer-assessment is some learners might reluctant to give peer feedbacks due to lack of ability or feeling embarrassed. Fairness is also a key disadvantage in peer-assessment: although grading criteria is comprehensible, but learners' own competence, standard or judgement are the factors to impact the grades to peers (Bijami, 2013).

3. Implement Self and Peer Assessment in Chinese University English Classrooms

In order to discuss the necessity to implement self and peer assessment in Chinese university English classrooms, teacher's role and classroom environment should be clarified. In China, most of the university English classes are teacher-centered. Teachers used prescribed textbook to teach and evaluate students by quizzes, tests or exams. Students have rare chance to express of their own opinions, which includes their learning progress, weakness, confusions and most importantly – their learning goals. Besides, they learn English only because they need to pass the tests, which reduces their learning interests and motivations. Most of students are not capable to enhance their cognitive skills through English classroom, especially what they need to do is just memorize vocabularies and repeat grammar practice.

Although the exam-oriented system could not be changed in recent years, but implementing self and peer assessment can bring tremendous benefits for university students in China. There is not doubt that self and peer assessment is offering more opportunities than summative assessments. Self and peer assessment can stimulate student's learning interest and motivation by setting their own personal goals, and it helps reduce the conflict between teachers and students by giving students classroom autonomy to increase their self-esteem. Through cooperative learning, students can have a better understanding about strength, weakness of individual and others. Most importantly, metacognitive and cognitive abilities are what exactly Chinese students cry out for.

Therefore, it is worth to implement self and peer assessment in Chinese university English classroom. Using self and peer assessment to replace summative is unpractical. However, these two assessments can be taken a small portion of entire assessing system, but contribute huge effort.

4. Conclusion

This study firstly describes the circumstance of English classroom in China. From the description can see teachers takes charge in classroom and adopt summative assessment for student evaluations. In following chapters, a critical analysis of self and peer assessment is discussed for the context. The result is obvious that in China's tertiary English classrooms, self and peer assessment are needed. However, challenges such as potential bias, lack of assessment literacy, and time management issues are identified. To overcome these challenges, the study highlights best practices, including clear assessment criteria, training students in assessment

skills, establishing a supportive classroom environment, and providing constructive feedback guidelines.

The implications of this study contribute to the existing literature on English language teaching in China by advocating for the integration of self and peer assessment as valuable pedagogical tools. Educators can leverage these strategies to promote active learning, develop students' language proficiency, and cultivate a culture of autonomy and collaboration in the English classroom.The implementation of self and peer assessment is not optimistic. Students and teachers are not familiar with classroom autonomy due to various perception in previous learning/teaching activities. Although there are many difficulties in actual implementation, it is still worth for the sake of student's lifelong learning.

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