Research Article

Delving Tertiary EFL Students' Perceptions on Peer Assessment to Improve Critical Thinking in Writing

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to explore how English Department students perceive peer assessment as a means to enhance critical thinking in writing. The research involved forty English students who had previous experience with peer assessment in their writing class. Data collection was achieved through a four-point Likert-Scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data analysis using thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. The findings indicated that the majority of students (92.84%) viewed peer assessment positively, as they believed it raised their awareness and consciousness of writing skills. Moreover, 81.89% of students expressed that peer assessment was beneficial in fostering better critical thinking skills, leading them to approach writing more critically. Students generally regarded their peers as capable of providing valuable feedback on their writing, resulting in improved critical thinking due to the reviews they received or provided. However, a small number of students had negative perceptions of peer assessment for improving critical thinking. Their reluctance stemmed from low motivation to actively participate in the peer assessment process and the belief that their friends evaluated their writing unfairly based on personal relationships.

Keywords

peer assessment; assessment; students' perceptions; critical thinking; writing skills

Introduction

Critical thinking is a vital cognitive skill that enables individuals to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information effectively (Dwyer, Hogan, and Stewart, 2014). In the academic context, students with strong critical thinking abilities can produce well-reasoned and evidence-based arguments in their writing (Hyytinen, Toom, and Shavelson, 2019). Consequently, university educators are continually exploring innovative methods to foster critical thinking among their students. Peer assessment, an instructional approach that encourages students to evaluate their peers' work, has gained popularity as a means to enhance critical thinking skills.

There have been numerous studies exploring the impact of peer assessment integration into academic writing classes. Vasu, Ling, and Nimehchisalem (2016) revealed that students found the integration of

peer assessment into writing class was extremely advantageous along with teacher feedback and self-assessment. Furthermore, the students witnessed substantial progress in their revision process by effectively using both self-assessment and peer assessment together (Cheong, Luo, Zhu, Lu, and Wei, 2023) and within a virtual writing class context, despite students' negative perception of peer feedback, peer assessment assumes a crucial role in nurturing and augmenting critical thinking skills among students. (Reinholz, 2016). Additionally, Ghazal, Gul, Hanzala, Jessop, and Tharani (2014) agree that participating in peer assessment encourages students to develop greater self-awareness regarding their writing abilities. Therefore, incorporating peer assessment in writing classes serves as clear evidence of enhancing both writing and critical thinking skills.

However, peer feedback was still the least favored assessment method even though pedagogical trends emphasize encouraging students' active participation in improving their peers' writing through giving and receiving feedback. Such results could be attributed to lower reliability of peer assessment compared to teacher feedback due to a proportional bias, particularly among students with lower writing skills (Power & Tanner, 2023), and it also can result in inaccuracies and biased evaluations (Lee, Sugimoto, Zhang, and Cronin, 2013). Accordingly, peer assessment as a means of evaluation in writing class can provide students with less meaningful insights for their writing improvement.

The existing studies have shed light on both the benefits and drawbacks of implementing peer assessment in writing classes. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of studies investigating the enhancement of students' perception regarding critical thinking through the integration of peer assessment in writing classes. Therefore, this research seeks to explore how the incorporation of peer assessment in writing classes can serve as a mechanism to enhance both writing and critical thinking skills. Additionally, this research will delve into identifying effective strategies for implementing peer assessment in writing classes, with the intention of mitigating its potential drawbacks and enabling educators to tailor their instructional approaches to optimize its benefits.

Benefits of Peer Assessment

Peer assessment plays a pivotal role in cultivating and enhancing student critical thinking skills. Reinholz (2016) clarifies that through this process, students are exposed to a variety of writing styles and ideas as they evaluate the work of their peers. Consequently, by encountering diverse perspectives, students are challenged to think beyond their assumptions and develop a more open and analytical mindset. Furthermore, the act of critically analyzing and providing constructive feedback on their peers' writing enables students to sharpen their analytical and evaluative abilities. Kelly, Sadeghieh, and Adeli (2014) peer assessment assists students in identifying strong arguments, weaknesses in reasoning, and areas where improvements can be made. This process empowers students to become more discerning and thoughtful readers and writers, as they become adept at recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of different writing pieces.

Moreover, engaging in peer assessment prompts students to become more self-aware of their writing skills. Ghazal, Gul, Hanzala, Jessop, and Tharani (2014) explain that when providing feedback to their peers, students must consider various aspects of writing, such as clarity, coherence, evidence, and logical structure which results in fostering self-reflection and encouraging students to critically evaluate their writing with a more discerning eye. Huisman, Saab, Van Driel, and Van Den Broek (2018) clarify that when students receive feedback from their peers, students also gain valuable insights into how their work is perceived by others and learn to adapt their writing to meet specific criteria and expectations. Accordingly, this interactive process of giving and receiving feedback creates a dynamic learning environment where students can engage in meaningful discussions, debates, and collaborative learning experiences.

Furthermore, peer assessment nurtures a culture of constructive criticism and respect among students. Thomas, Chie, Abraham, Jalarajan, and Beh (2014) demonstrate that peer assessment could encourage

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students to provide feedback in a considerate and constructive manner, creating a supportive atmosphere for growth and improvement. Li, Xiong, Hunter, Guo, and Tywoniw (2020) indicate that when students learn to give and receive feedback respectfully, they develop stronger interpersonal skills and open-mindedness, which are vital components of critical thinking. Through active participation in the peer assessment process, students develop the ability to analyze arguments and writing with a more discerning eye, questioning assumptions, and examining evidence more critically.

Ultimately, peer assessment not only benefits individual students but also contributes to the overall learning community. Ndoye (2017) states that peer assessment fosters a sense of responsibility for collective growth and learning, as students realize the significance of their role in helping others improve. This collaborative learning environment nurtures a culture of continuous improvement, where students actively engage in the learning process and become more invested in their development as writers and critical thinkers (Bean and Melzer, 2021). As a result, peer assessment emerges as a valuable tool for educators to foster critical thinking skills and empower students to become more confident, articulate, and reflective writers.

Drawback of Peer Assessment

Despite its benefits, several disadvantages were found in the application of peer assessment in writing, and some researchers also reported that students had negative perceptions of this particular assessment within various contexts. One of the discernible drawbacks associated with peer assessment pertains to the potential discrepancies in the quality and depth of the feedback provided. As emphasized by Lladó, Soley, Sansbelló, Pujolras, Planella, Roura-Pascual, Martínez, and Moreno (2013), students' reluctance to engage in peer assessment can be attributed to a prevailing lack of confidence in their knowledge and abilities. Consequently, this hesitancy may lead to challenges in delivering insightful and meaningful comments. In some instances, students may resort to offering superficial or overly positive feedback, which may, regrettably, fall short of providing genuine and constructive support for the recipients' improvement (Lladó et al., 2013). Addressing these issues is paramount to optimizing the efficacy of peer assessment as an integral pedagogical strategy for promoting comprehensive learning outcomes and fostering critical thinking skills (Double, McGrane, and Hopfenbeck, 2020).

Another drawback of peer assessment is the potential for biased or unreliable feedback. Teplitskiy, Acuna, Elamrani-Raoult, Körding, and Evans (2018) argue that since peers are not experts in evaluating others' work, their judgments might be influenced by personal biases, friendship dynamics, or competition. This could lead to inaccuracies and unfair evaluations, which may not provide students with meaningful insights for improvement. Moreover, some students may feel uncomfortable or hesitant about critiquing their peers' work, fearing potential conflicts or concerns about damaging relationships, which could result in superficial or overly positive feedback (Pham, Lin, Trinh, and Bui, 2020).
Furthermore, peer assessment can exhibit a dearth of consistency and standardization in its implementation. Suen (2014) highlights that heterogeneity among students may lead to variations in the criteria used to evaluate assignments, consequently yielding discrepancies in the grading process. This lack of uniformity has the potential to engender confusion among students and may undermine the overall credibility of the assessment procedure.

To address these drawbacks, it's crucial to implement peer assessment alongside other forms of evaluation and feedback, such as instructor assessments or self-assessment. Seifert and Feliks (2019) explained that this balanced approach can help mitigate potential biases and provide students with a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement. Additionally, clear guidelines and training on how to provide constructive feedback can enhance the quality and consistency of peer assessments.

Method

A qualitative data approach was employed in this study. As Bryman (2018) pointed out, qualitative research focuses on elucidating the opinions, experiences, and emotions of individuals, resulting in subjective data. Consequently, the researchers utilized this approach to explore students' perception of peer assessment's role in enhancing critical thinking and writing skills. The purpose of adopting this qualitative approach was to promote awareness and gain deeper insights into the impact of peer assessment on students' critical thinking abilities.

The researchers selected 40 students from an English Education Department at Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-raniry to investigate students' views on using peer assessment to enhance critical thinking in writing. This decision was motivated by the fact that university students are encouraged to develop critical thinking skills during the courses taken. Additionally, the substantial workload of writing assignments in the university setting makes the English Education Department a fitting choice for this study.

In this study, the writer employed purposive sampling, a method where researchers deliberately select cases that offer the most valuable insights and effectively exhibit the phenomena under investigation (Bryman, 2016; Saputra and Asirah 2022). Among the four units of students, the researcher specifically chose unit 1, comprising 40 students, as the sample. This choice was made because peer assessment was commonly applied to evaluate their writing tasks. Consequently, unit 1 was selected as the research sample.

Furthermore, two techniques of data collection, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview, were used in this study. The questionnaire employed a four-point Likert scale and adapted questions from previous studies to assess students' responses and perceptions of peer assessment and critical thinking. A pilot study was conducted beforehand to ensure the questionnaire's validity. The semi-structured interview allowed for deeper exploration and clarification of students' perspectives on peer assessment and its role in enhancing critical thinking during writing tasks. Saputra (2020) clarifies that using semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to delve deeper understanding of the research participants' attitudes toward social phenomena.

To analyze the questionnaire responses, the researcher employed thematic analysis, a method for identifying and examining patterns (themes) within the data. The thematic analysis allows for organizing and presenting the data set in a detailed and comprehensive manner (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed using the percentage system, applying the following formula to interpret the findings:

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \, x \; 100 \, \%$$

Note:
P   = percentage
f = frequency of respondents
n = number of samples
100   = constant value

The data obtained from the interview technique was subjected to analysis using a combination of descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. Descriptive analysis helped to present a clear and straightforward summary of the data, while thematic analysis allowed for the identification and examination of recurring themes within the responses (Bryman 2016). Through thematic analysis, two main recurring themes emerged, encompassing both positive and negative attitudes toward the integration of peer assessment in writing tasks. This integrated approach provided a comprehensive

understanding of the interview data, enriching the findings with both structured insights and in-depth exploration of key themes.

Results

The use of questionnaire functions to identify students' perceptions toward peer assessment in improving critical thinking in writing. The questionnaire was grouped into two categories, including how peer assessment impacted writing skills and its impact to improve critical thinking skills.

Table 1. Students' Perception of Peer Assessment and Impact on Writing Skills

No	Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	My peer review process helped me increase awareness of my writing skills	0%	0%	80,95%	19,05%
2	The class discussions about the comments written by my peer evaluator caused me to be more conscious of my writing skills	4,76%	9,52%	61,9%	23,8%
	Average	**2,38%**	**4,76%**	**71,42%**	**21,42%**

The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the option 'agree' has the highest percentage at 71.42%, followed by 'strongly agree' with the second-highest percentage at 21.42%. Overall, 92.84% of respondents provided positive answers toward peer assessment in writing. These percentages show that most students agreed that peer assessment contributed to increasing their awareness of writing skills. Additionally, students found the class discussions about their peers' comments beneficial in raising their consciousness about writing skills. Conversely, for the statement "the class discussions about the comments written by my peer evaluator caused me to be more conscious about my writing skills," the lowest average percentage was from the answer 'strongly disagree' (2.38%), and the second lowest was 'disagree' (4.76%). The combined negative response was 7.14%, suggesting that some students did not feel that the class discussions about their peers' comments led to increased awareness of their writing skills.

Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of students have a positive perception of peer assessment in improving their writing skills. Peer assessment was seen as effective in increasing their awareness of writing skills. While most students found the class discussions helpful, a small portion felt that these discussions did not contribute significantly to enhancing their writing skills.

Table 2. Students' Perception of Peer Assessment in Improving Critical Thinking

No	Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	The peer review process helped me to develop better critical thinking skills	4,76%	4,76%	42,85%	47,61%
2	My reviews of my peers' papers were beneficial to me for developing critical thinking skills	4,76%	14,28%	42,85%	38,09%
3	The class discussions about the comments from my peer evaluator caused me to think more critically about writing skills	0%	19,04%	66,66%	14,28%
4	I think that my peers are well-qualified to provide me with critical feedback on my writing	0%	23,8%	66,66%	9,52%

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5	I think that I improved my critical thinking as a result of the reviews that I received or wrote	0%	19,04%	61,9%	19,04%
	Average	**1,9%**	**16,18%**	**56,18%**	**25,71%**

Furthermore, according to the table above, the majority of students had a positive perception of peer assessment in improving critical thinking. They agreed that the peer assessment process was beneficial for developing better critical thinking skills. Additionally, they found the class discussions about their peers' comments helpful in promoting critical thinking about writing. The "agree" option received the highest percentage (56.18%), followed by "strongly agree" as the second highest (25.71%), resulting in an overall positive response rate of 81.89%. This indicates that most students believed that peer assessment improved their critical thinking, as they not only provided feedback to their peers but also received it in return.

However, there were a few students who did not find peer assessment helpful in improving their critical thinking. The "disagree" option received 16.18%, and the "strongly disagree" option received 1.9%, totaling a negative response rate of 18.08%. These students also expressed doubts about their peers' qualifications to provide critical feedback on their writing, resulting in a lack of improvement in their critical thinking skills from the received reviews.

The results from the questionnaire indicated that most students perceived peer assessment as beneficial for improving critical thinking in writing. The subsequent interview was conducted to gain more detailed insights into students' perceptions of peer assessment's impact on critical thinking. Six students were selected for the interviews, three with positive views and three with negative ones. For students with positive views, peer assessment was seen as beneficial in improving critical thinking. They became more self-reflective and critical when reviewing their peers' writing, and identifying strengths and weaknesses in organization and grammar. The feedback from peers helped with revision and improved their writing knowledge. They also found it comfortable to ask their friends for feedback directly. Students with negative views expressed that peer assessment was limited, boring, and sometimes ineffective due to time constraints and a lack of motivation to assess their friends' writing seriously. Some were concerned about fairness in scoring based on personal relationships. Challenges in peer assessment included difficulty in correcting grammatical errors and comprehending peers' writing styles. Some students felt unsure due to a lack of knowledge in assessing writing or were uncomfortable with the review process.

Suggestions for improvement included conducting peer assessment after mastering writing materials and grammatical rules, providing training with specific rubrics, allowing more time for discussion during peer assessment, and encouraging all students to be active and serious in the process. Overall, students showed a positive attitude towards peer assessment, believing it positively influenced critical thinking and writing skills. Although some students initially had negative attitudes, they hoped for a more structured approach to peer assessment in the future.

Discussion

While a minority of students may hold negative perceptions regarding the incorporation of peer assessment in the writing class, the majority of students expressed positive attitudes toward using peer assessment as a means to enhance critical thinking in writing. This was evident from the questionnaire results, wherein all students reported that peer assessment heightened their awareness of writing skills, enabling them to identify strengths and weaknesses through feedback exchange. This finding aligns with the assertion of Reinholz (2016), and Huisman et al (2018) who emphasize that receiving feedback from peers offers valuable insights into how one's work is perceived by others, leading to adjustments in

writing to meet specific criteria and expectations. Consequently, this heightened sense of awareness regarding their mistakes allows students with ideas to improve their writing skills.

Furthermore, Participation in class discussions focused on peer assessment has been found to be a valuable and impactful element of the learning process, as a majority of students acknowledged that it also heightened their awareness of their writing skills. According to Bean and Melzer (2021), these discussions provided an avenue for students to engage in self-reflection and compare their writing with that of their peers, yielding invaluable insights into their individual strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel, van Merriënboer, and Bastiaens (2002) state that the constructive feedback received during peer assessment served as a reflective tool, enabling students to identify areas requiring improvement and inspiring them to engage in the revision process for enhancement. This iterative practice of revising and refining written work not only led to a discernible improvement in the quality of their writing but also cultivated a sense of continuous growth and development. Furthermore, the receptivity of students towards peer assessments fostered a collaborative learning environment, facilitating active involvement in providing constructive feedback to their peers. Double, McGrane, and Hopfenbeck (2020) highlight that by contributing to their classmates' growth, students further honed their critical analytical and evaluative skills, reinforcing a culture of mutual support and knowledge exchange within the classroom setting. Accordingly, the integration of peer evaluations and class discussions within the writing curriculum has demonstrated considerable efficacy in promoting critical thinking, self-awareness, and writing proficiency, while concurrently cultivating a nurturing and collaborative learning environment.

In addition, a significant number of students acknowledged that peer assessment played a pivotal role in cultivating enhanced critical thinking skills. Li, Xiong, Hunter, Guo, and Tywoniw (2020) state that by actively engaging in the analysis and evaluation of their peers' writing, students developed a heightened sense of responsibility and a more discerning approach to their assessments. Thomas, Chie, Abraham, Jalarajan and Beh (2014) highlight that this process of critically evaluating their peers' work enabled them to identify strengths and weaknesses more effectively, fostering a deeper understanding of the nuances of effective writing. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that minority students expressed dissenting views, perceiving peer assessment as restricted and unjust in its application. These dissenting opinions highlighted the need for further exploration of potential limitations and considerations in implementing peer assessment strategies to ensure a fair and comprehensive evaluation process.

Furthermore, a substantial number of students recognized the advantages of reviewing their peers' writing in fostering the development of critical thinking skills. Ndoye (2017) clarifies that the exercise of identifying both strengths and weaknesses in their peers' written work provided a platform for self-reflection and valuable learning experiences. Fazel (2014) states that by engaging in the evaluation of their peers' writing, students were encouraged to approach the task with a discerning eye, honing their ability to analyze and assess written content critically. This process not only contributed to their growth as writers but also facilitated a deeper understanding of effective writing strategies through the lens of their peers' work.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all students perceive their peers as being qualified to provide critical feedback on their writing. Teplitskiy, Acuna, Elamrani-Raoult, Körding, and Evans (2018) explain that this perception stemmed from negative assumptions regarding their peers' abilities, leading to a diminished motivation to take their friends' assessments seriously. Pham, Lin, Trinh, and Bui (2020) agree that the reluctance to trust their peers' judgment in evaluating their work could be attributed to factors such as a lack of confidence in their peers' writing skills or a belief that their peers may not possess the necessary expertise to provide meaningful feedback. Such reservations may have influenced their willingness to engage actively in the peer assessment process, potentially hindering the full realization of the benefits that peer feedback can offer. Addressing these concerns and providing

guidance on how to provide constructive and valuable feedback to peers could be vital in fostering a more conducive and productive peer assessment environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research underscores the predominantly positive perceptions students hold regarding the role of peer assessment in fostering critical thinking in writing. Engagement in peer assessment activities promotes greater self-awareness, openness to diverse perspectives, and the ability to critically analyze and evaluate both their own and their peers' written work, thereby deepening students' understanding of effective writing strategies. However, a subset of students expressed negative perceptions, primarily influenced by personal assumptions, such as doubts about their peers' writing abilities or the quality of feedback provided, rather than any intrinsic flaws in the peer assessment process. Addressing these concerns through targeted guidance and support is essential to fostering trust and ensuring a more inclusive and equitable peer assessment experience. Overall, the study demonstrates that peer assessment is a valuable pedagogical tool for cultivating critical thinking skills in writing, enhancing students' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging collaborative learning. By creating a conducive environment for meaningful peer feedback, educators can maximize the potential of peer assessment to improve both writing proficiency and critical thinking competencies.

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