



Vidyodaya Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

VJHSS (2024), Vol. 09, IRCHSS 2023-Special Issue



Use of Peer-Assessment in ESL Writing Classes: Learners' Perception

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Article Info

Article History:

Received 27 Dec 2023

Accepted 23 Feb 2023

Issue Published Online

01 April 2024

Key Words:

Peer-Assessment

Learners' Perception

Conventional Assessment

ESL Writing

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Journal homepage:

<http://journals.sjp.ac.lk/index.php/vjhss>

<http://doi.org/10.31357/fhss/vjhss.v09irchss2023.a01>

VJHSS (2024), Vol. 09
(IRCHSS 2023-Special
Issue), pp. 01-18

ISSN 1391-1937/ISSN
2651-0367 (Online)



Faculty of Humanities and
Social Sciences 2024

ABSTRACT

Although peer-assessment tends to offer various benefits, and teachers and learners hold positive perception about peer-assessment, conventional paper-based assessment remains dominant in most of the educational programmes, including university English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. Hence, more studies are needed to make teachers, course designers and material designers aware of the potential benefits of peer-assessment. Most importantly, it is useful to examine what learners think about peer-assessment. Therefore, the present study, involving eighty three (N=83) first-year students following a compulsory English as a second language (ESL) course and forty-two (N=42) second year students pursuing English as a major at a state university in Sri Lanka, investigated the learners' perception of peer-assessment. The study adopted the mixed methods approach in research. After the participants gained hands on experience in peer-assessment in an ESL writing class, they shared their views regarding their experience through a questionnaire, focus group discussion and reflective essay. The qualitative data were analyzed using deductive content analysis method while the quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel that produced descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the ESL undergraduates generally hold positive perception about peer-assessment. However, limited language proficiency of the learners and friendship biases remain as challenges to implement peer-assessment practices effectively. The generalizability of the findings of the present study is subject to certain limitations as the sample was drawn from one particular state university. Further studies with a larger sample representing several universities are recommended in order to shed light on the potential of peer-assessment.

1. Introduction

Recent developments in the field of language assessment have led to a renewed interest in the learner-centered assessment practices. Teachers also tend to maintain a balance between end semester summative assessment and formative assessment. Learner-centered peer-assessment which is defined as an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners offers various benefits (Topping, 2017). First and foremost, empirical evidence suggests that those learners who are involved in peer-assessment outperform others who receive teacher feedback only (Double, McGrane & Hopfenbeck, 2019). Further, previous research findings suggest that peer-assessment develops learners' cognitive competencies such as critical thinking and higher-level thinking (Falchikov, 2005). Importance of developing cognitive and metacognitive competencies is often emphasized in the educational debate today (Eg: Jalil & Ziq, 2009). Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF) too highlights the importance of developing undergraduates' cognitive skills (University Grants Commission, 2015). Empirical studies suggest that peer-assessment helps learners develop their cognitive competencies such as critical thinking skills, higher order thinking skills, reasoning skills, reflective skills and independent active learning skills (Falchikov, 2005; Peng, 2009; Topping, 2005; Tsai et al., 2001). Also, peer-assessment promotes learning by encouraging learners to take the responsibility to plan, guide, identify their strengths and weaknesses, decide their own learning strategies, target areas for remedial action and develop meta-cognitive skills (Falchikov, 2005; Peng, 2009; Topping, 2005). Segers and Dochy (2001) who conducted a research study to examine different quality aspects of written examination and peer-assessment too agree with this view and argue that the written examination has an acceptable curricular,

instructional and criterion validity, while peer-assessment encourages deep-level learning and critical thinking. Brown et al. (1996) also claim that peer-assessment encourages deep rather than surface learning. According to Van den Berg et al. (2006), peer-assessment self-regulates learning and consequently develops social, cognitive, and meta-cognitive skills of the learners. Also, peer-assessment encourages learners to critically evaluate their peers' performance. Even according to Nilson (2003), peer-assessment helps learners develop their critical thinking, communication, life-long learning and collaborative skills. Hyland (2009) also claims that learners working together with more knowledgeable peers learn more effectively than individuals working separately. This supports Vygotsky's theory of social interaction (1962) which claims that interaction ensures learning and development. Oliver and Omari (1999) too report that quite powerful interactions that take place between students during peer-assessment develop students' critical thinking skills and capacities to reflect. Similarly, Orsmond et al. (2000) claim that peer-assessment helps learners develop their already present skills of critical analysis and analytical skills. Sivan (2000) conducted action research to examine the benefits of peer-assessment for learners and found that peer-assessment exercises contribute to the development of learners' critical and independent thinking skills. Further, the learners involved in Sivan's (2000) study elaborate how they could develop their critical thinking skills and pointed out that when they criticize peers, they learn how to criticize themselves. Similarly, Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans (1999) and Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) claim that peer-assessment fosters lifelong learning skills such as collaboration, teamwork, critical enquiry, reflection on what is learnt, communication skills and learning to learn. Studies conducted in ESL and EFL contexts too have found similar findings. For instance, Cheng and Warren (2005) conducted a study to examine

the potential benefits of peer-assessment in an EFL context and found that the peer-assessment exercise is beneficial in terms of developing students' higher level cognitive thinking and facilitating a deep approach to language learning (Cheng & Warren, 2005).

Bidirectional nature of interaction that is found in peer-assessment seems to be a key reason for both the provider and receiver of the feedback to develop their cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies. There are arguments that the provider of the feedback benefits more than the receiver of the feedback. For instance, Nicol et al. (2013) and Zhu and Carless (2018) argue that it is the assessor who benefits mostly from peer-assessment because when students are engaged in dialogic interaction, the provider of feedback benefits cognitively and meta-cognitively by sharing knowledge and providing comments (Zhu & Carless, 2018). Further, Liu and Carless (2006) argue that there are benefits of offering feedback and claim that one important way through which we learn is by expressing and articulating to others what we know or understand. Therefore, this process of self-expression by means of peer-feedback ensures improved learning for the provider of the feedback. Similarly, Topping (1998) outlines the pedagogical advantages of peer-assessment in terms of the assessor and suggests that peer-assessment is a reflective experience for the assessor because the assessor learns by assessing. Topping (1998) elaborates this further and points out that assessment involves interrogating the product, performance or output by asking intelligent questions. Accordingly, peer-assessment encourages the assessors to review, summarize, clarify, identify missing knowledge and offer feedback and these are cognitively demanding activities that help assessors deepen their understanding (Topping, 1998). Studies conducted in ESL and EFL contexts too report similar findings. For instance, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) conducted a study in an intensive English institute with ninety-one students in nine

writing classes at two proficiency levels to investigate whether giving feedback or receiving peer-feedback is more beneficial and concluded that the providers made more significant gains in their writing than the receivers who focused solely on how to use peer-feedback.

There is empirical evidence to support the view that peer-assessment promotes learning. According to Falchikov, (2005), Topping (2005) and Peng (2009) peer-assessment encourages learners to take the responsibility to plan, guide, identify their strengths and weaknesses, decide their own learning strategies, target areas for remedial action and develop meta-cognitive skills. Sluijsmans et al. (2002) maintain a similar view. They conducted an experimental study involving ninety-three student teachers and concluded that those who were involved in peer-assessment surpassed the control group learners who were not involved in peer-assessment exercises. Further, Huisman et al. (2019) synthesize the results of 24 quantitative studies reporting on higher education students' academic writing performance after peer-assessment and conclude that engagement in peer-assessment results in larger improvements compared to no-peer-assessment conditions. Similarly, Li et al. (2019) synthesize the findings of 58 studies and compare the improvement in performance of those who have not participated in peer-assessment with those who have participated in peer-assessment. They conclude that those who have participated in peer-assessment display a significant improvement in their performance (Li et al., 2019). Jonsson and Savingby (2007) explain how those who take part in peer-assessment perform better than others who receive only teacher feedback. According to them, peer-assessment helps learners become familiar with the rubrics. However, Gielen (2007) who examined the long-term learning effects of peer-feedback and teacher feedback on writing assignments in secondary education in Belgium found no significant difference in students' progress in

essay marks between the condition with peer-feedback and the control condition with teacher feedback. Yet, Gielen et al. (2010) who adopted a quasi-experimental design to examine the effectiveness of peer-feedback using students of grade seven in secondary education in Belgium found that those who received accurate comments outperformed others who did not receive such feedback. Further, there is empirical evidence that peer-assessment promotes learning, enhances learners' personal, intellectual and professional development (Zhu & Carless, 2018) and social competencies such as communication skills, collaborative skills and lifelong learning (Nilson, 2003).

Peer-assessment in ESL writing class appears to be a viable alternative because of several reasons. Writing plays an important role in any ESL classroom. It requires the learners to use punctuation, grammar and vocabulary correctly. Further, writers need to consider the stylistic factors such as choice of words, sentence complexity, text cohesion, content, effective paragraphing and organization of the writing task. Peer-feedback given during the peer-assessment exercise helps learners develop their writing. According to Boud et al. (2014), one important way that many students learn is from their peers and with their peers. Parthasarathy (2014) has conducted a study in India to look for an alternative to teacher feedback and found peer-feedback to be a viable alternative to teacher feedback. Thus, it is clear that peer-feedback is an important variable that can be used to enhance the quality of writing in the ESL writing class. Baker (2016), Berg (1999) and Zhang (1995), also among others, highlight the importance of peer-feedback in the process of writing. Hence, substantive, supportive, immediate, specific and timely feedback helps learners produce a better product as Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Topping (1998) argue.

The term perception is used to refer to views, attitudes, perspectives or beliefs that learners hold with regard to the use of peer-

assessment in a classroom. According to Gardner (1985), learners' attitudes towards the classes and teachers tend to have a significant influence on their achievement and willingness to keep learning. Further, Mantle-Bromley (1995), Sivan (2000), Black et al. (2003), Peng (2009) and Kang'ethe (2014), among others, claim that attitude plays a vital role in learning. Therefore, it is important to examine what learners really think about peer-assessment. Such sensitivity to learner perception is vital to develop a learner-centered assessment method because a learner-centered curriculum, as Nunan (1988) defines, is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, and learners are closely involved in the decision making process regarding the content of the curriculum, and how it is taught and assessed.

Studies have been conducted to examine the learner views and teacher views about peer-assessment. However, findings are inconclusive. Some researchers report that students do not like peer-assessment as it involves rating people who are their competitors (Lin et al., 2001). Also, learners do not like to get involved in peer-assessment due to their perceived low proficiency (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Liu & Carless, 2006; Segers & Dochy, 2001; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Further, cultural reasons including friendship issues seem to discourage learners from being involved in peer-assessment (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000). However, some researchers claim that learners hold positive perception about peer-assessment. For instance, Orsmond et al. (1996) have carried out a study with biology undergraduate students to examine learner perception of peer-assessment as a formative and summative assessment procedure and point out that "...students not only liked carrying out peer-assessment but felt the benefits in terms of developing facets of their learning process and heightening their awareness of their work" (Orsmond et al., 1996, p.239). Falchikov (1995) maintains a similar view and points out that student evaluations of

peer-assessment suggest that they also perceive it to be beneficial. Vickerman (2009) has also conducted a study to examine the sports students' perception about peer-assessment and concluded that learners hold positive perception about peer-assessment. Williams (1992) has conducted a study involving 99 undergraduates of a Business Studies Degree Course and examines the student perception of peer-assessment and finds that most of the students prefer learner-centered peer-assessment to teacher assessment as such assessments allow learners to compare their products and performance with learners, determine their standards in comparison with the peers' standards in the class and exchange knowledge, information and ideas (Williams, 1992). Similarly, Baker (2016) and Race, Brown and Smith, (2005) argue that peer-assessment allows learners to compare their products and performance with other learners, determine their standards in comparison with the peers' standards and exchange knowledge, information and ideas appropriately (Baker, 2016; Williams, 1992).

Studies that have been conducted in ESL and EFL contexts to explore teacher perception and learner perception about peer-assessment too report that students hold positive perception about peer-assessment. For instance, Prins et al. (2005) who have conducted a qualitative study, focusing on students' attitudes towards peer-assessment and practical use of peer-assessment assignments and tools found that students' attitudes towards peer-assessment were positive. Similarly, Grami (2010) conducted a mixed methods study using seventy-three intermediate and high-intermediate ESL learners registered in a writing course in a university in Saudi Arabia to understand the learner perception of peer-assessment and found that learners hold a positive perception about peer-assessment. Peng (2009) also conducted a mixed methods study in an EFL context in Taiwan employing eighty-eight high intermediate and low intermediate college students and their class teachers. The

college students of this study who followed a 3-credit year-long compulsory English course were asked to assess the group oral presentations of their peers. Peng used a closed-ended questionnaire, open ended questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, emails and a 300-word essay on the topic peer-assessment to understand the participants' perception of peer-assessment and the teacher's perception of peer-assessment and found that both learners and the teacher held positive perception of peer-assessment. Therefore, Peng (2009) concludes that peer-assessment can be used as an alternative assessment in higher education with careful planning and training. Similarly, Yang (2019) conducted a study involving 163 students from a Diploma in English course and reported that the majority of students are positive towards peer-assessment. Contradictory findings are also reported in the literature with regard to learner and teacher perception of peer-assessment.

Some researchers claim that learners and teachers hold negative views about peer-assessment. For instance, Cheng and Warren (2005) who have conducted a study to investigate the reliability and potential benefits of incorporating peer-assessment into English language programmes point out that students had a less positive attitude towards assessing their peers' language proficiency because students felt neither comfortable nor confident in evaluating their peers due to their own perceptions of inability. Leki (1991) also conducts a survey employing 100 ESL students to observe whose feedback they prefer and finds that teachers are the most preferred source of help and peers are the least useful in helping students correct written errors. In another survey study involving eighty-one ESL university students in the USA, Zhang (1995) conducted a study to explore learner perception about teacher, peer and self-directed feedback and found that overwhelming majority of the students (93.8%) preferred teacher feedback. Similar

findings are reported by Nelson and Carson (1998) and Tsui and Ng (2000). Tsui and Ng (2000) point out that all the participants in their study favored teacher comments and saw teacher as a figure of authority that guaranteed quality. Thus, learner perception and teacher perception studies about peer-assessment have produced mixed results. There seem to be various reasons such as learners' perceived low proficiency, friendship issues and time constraints for such mixed views regarding the potential of peer-assessment in the language classroom. Therefore, conventional paper based assessments seem to be the norm of the most of the educational programmes (Kulasegaram & Rangachari 2018; Quansah, 2018; Wanner & Palmer, 2018). More research is needed to uncover the potential benefits of peer-assessment. More importantly, we need to find out what teachers and learners think about peer-assessment because as Barkhuizen (1998) points out "...learners are hardly ever asked in any overt systematic way about their language learning experiences" (Barkhuizen, 1998, p.85). Chavez (2003) also argues that "...only the learners themselves can allow us to glimpse their attitudes, judgments, and perceptions" (Chavez, 2003, p.164-165). Therefore, investigation about learners' perception about peer-assessment will shed light on this underexplored area in Sri Lanka's ESL context.

1.1 Research Question

How do Sri Lankan ESL learners in writing class perceive peer-assessment?

The findings of the present study will be useful for the teachers, material designers and course designers who can incorporate peer-assessment appropriately in their courses.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Sample Selection

Eighty-three ($N=83$) first-year students following a six credit 300 hour long common ESL programme at a state university in Sri Lanka were selected to the study using non – probability sampling technique, namely convenience sampling method. The participants were asked to assess nineteen writing tasks including paragraphs, essays and a letter written by their peers and offer feedback and comments to the peers. Another set of forty-two second year students pursuing English as a major in the same university were also selected for the study using convenience sampling method. They were involved in four peer-assessment exercises where they wrote one paragraph, two critical reviews of the poems "Richard Cory" by Edwin Robinson and 'The Caged Bird' by Maya Angelou and an essay. They too exchanged their essays and offered feedback and comments to their peers. All the participants of the study were numbered for confidentiality and anonymity purposes.

2.2 Data Collection

After the participants gained hands on experience in peer-assessment, they were asked to share their experience through a questionnaire and focus group discussion. The participants following English major were asked to share their experience regarding peer-assessment through a reflective essay on the topic "Advantages and disadvantages of peer-assessment vs teacher assessment." Focus group interviews were also conducted with them to further unpack issues related to the use of peer-assessment.

2.3 Data Analysis

The present study used the mixed method approach in research to explore the learner perception regarding peer-assessment. Accordingly, quantitative data collected through closed-ended questions of the questionnaire were analyzed using Microsoft Excel that produced descriptive statistics. On the other hand, the qualitative data collected through focus group discussions, reflective

essays and open-ended questions of the questionnaire were analyzed using deductive content analysis method. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) point out that according to directed content analysis approach, the "...analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). According to Kondraki, Wellman, and Amundson (2002), with a deductive approach, the researcher begins with predetermined key words, categories, or variables (based on relevant literature and/or other resources) and sifts the data using these variables. Accordingly,

based on the themes that emerged from the quantitative data analysis and peer-assessment literature, data obtained from the open-ended question of the questionnaire, focus group discussion and reflective essays were transcribed and analyzed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Quantitative Data

Quantitative data were collected via a closed ended questionnaire that was circulated among the participants as a Google form.

Table 1. Questionnaire results

Item	Strongly Agree(%)	Agree(%)	Neutral (%)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree (%)
Peer-assessment was a useful tool that helped me learn English better	41%	57%	2%	0	0
I am willing to take the responsibility and get involved in peer-assessment	39%	59%	2%	0	0
Peer-assessment allowed me to identify my own errors in English essays and those of my peers	53%	39%	8%	0	0
I think the peers in my English class had the skills to assess my essays	12%	53%	31%	4	0
I liked to accept the comments given by my peers on my writing in the English class	45%	35%	20%	0	0
Peer-feedback in the English class helped me to become an active independent learner	29%	57%	14%	0	0
I think only teachers should assess English essays, not the peers	0	0	20%	53%	27%

As per the data given in table 1 above, most of the participants (98%) believed that peer-assessment was useful to learn English. Interestingly, most of the learners (39% Strongly agree and 59% Agree) were willing to take the responsibility and assess their peers. Approximately, 92% of the participants thought that peer-assessment allowed them to identify their own errors and errors made by their peers. Further, most of the participants of the present study believed that peers in the English class had the

necessary skills to assess their peers' essays. Therefore, they were willing to accept the comments and feedback given by their peers and incorporate such comments into their writing. Most importantly, participants of the present study (86%) believed that peer-assessment helped them become active independent learners. Also, most of the participants (80%) believed that peers too can assess the essays and help them learn. Thus, the descriptive statistics obtained via the closed-ended questionnaire showed that

the majority of participants of the present study held positive perception about peer-assessment. Although the findings of the present study reject the views of Liu and Sadler (2003), who claimed that learners hold negative perceptions regarding peer assessment, the findings support most of the previous research (e.g. see Peng, 2009; Sivan, 2000 & Topping, 2009).

3.2 Qualitative Data

Qualitative data obtained via open ended questionnaire, focus group discussions and written reflections also support the view that the learners generally hold positive views regarding peer-assessment. First, the qualitative data were transcribed and coded as shown below in Table 2.

Table 2. Code names and definitions

Code	Definitions
Cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies	These codes referred to the development of competencies through the following skills: active learning skills independent learning skills self-learning skills life-long learning skills higher order thinking skills reflective skills critical thinking skills reasoning skills noticing and learning enhanced target language proficiency
Personal and intellectual competencies	These two codes referred to the development of abilities to take initiatives take ownership and responsibility for their own learning develop personal relationships enhance learner autonomy and independence develop interaction
Professional development	This code referred to the development of teaching skills independent evaluative skills listening skills collaboration and teamwork communication and negotiation skills interaction professional relationships
Social competencies	This category referred to the development of communication and negotiation skills interaction with peers collaboration and personal relationships
Challenges to peer-assessment	This category referred to limited language proficiency of the learners friendship related factors

These codes are commonly found in existing peer-assessment literature (Eg: see Falchikov, 2001, 2005; Peng, 2009; Topping, 2005). Thus, these were used as initial codes to identify the themes in the qualitative data. During the initial data analysis stage, when evidence was found for the existing codes, a code from the existing list was assigned. It should be noted here that some skills such as communication, collaboration and negotiation skills were discussed under both professional skills and social skills as they generally operate in different ways in both professional and social domains. After reading the transcribed data several times in order to identify evidence for existing codes and ensure accuracy, concepts that could not be categorized into any of the existing codes were marked separately. Those that did not represent a category already existing were assigned new codes. This was useful to identify new codes and themes emerging from the data itself. Accordingly, the following new code was inductively derived from the quantitative data of this study:

Code name and definition

Code	Definition
Suggestions	Learners' suggestions to implement peer-assessment more effectively

Finally, there were eight codes that emerged from the quantitative data of the present study. As the second step, codes were categorized. From the categories, the following three major themes emerged.

1. Benefits of peer-assessment
2. Challenges to peer-assessment and
3. Suggestions for effective implementation of peer-assessment

Qualitative data analysis suggested that peer-assessment provided learners with multiple benefits such as the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies, personal

and intellectual competencies, professional skills and social skills. These learner views found in the survey, interviews and written reflections are presented below under each subheading.

3.2.1. Cognitive and Meta-cognitive Competencies

First and foremost, the participants of this study pointed out that peer-assessment helped them develop their cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies when they were involved in peer-assessment. For instance, the participants pointed out in the open ended questionnaire that peer-assessment encouraged critical thinking, higher level thinking and active independent learning rather than passive learning because learners constructed knowledge together with the help of their peers. For instance, the participant seventeen of the compulsory English group pointed out: "peer-assessment creates a good opportunity for the weaker students to learn from the better students to write better". Similar findings are reported by Topping (2005) who claims that learners learn and reconstruct their knowledge during the peer-assessment exercise either by readjusting old myths and false beliefs or confirming old knowledge when support and scaffolding are available from more competent peers. Also, this finding is consistent with Piaget's (1971) theory of constructivism where individuals construct knowledge through collaboration, support, scaffolding and interaction with more knowledgeable and skilled adults or peers.

According to the findings of the present study, it is evident that peer-assessment helped learners to develop their critical thinking, higher level thinking and active independent learning rather than passive learning. One participant stated that "In peer feedback methodology, a learner is an active participant both in learning and correcting." The results of the qualitative data of this study also suggested that peer-assessment encouraged the participants to take

initiatives, ownership and responsibility for their own learning. For instance, the participant two of the compulsory English group stated: "I use dictionary if I come across a difficult word. Although we don't use the dictionary when we write, we use dictionary very much when we mark peers' essays." Further, the view expressed by the participant seventeen of the compulsory English group made it clear how peer-assessment encouraged learners to take the responsibility to plan, guide, identify their strengths and weaknesses, decide their own learning strategies, target areas for remedial action and develop personal and intellectual skills and ensured deep level lifelong learning. These views are in agreement with the findings of Falchikov (2005), Sambell et al. (2006) and Topping (2005) who argue that peer-assessment transfers the ownership of learning to the student and promotes learner autonomy, responsibility and independence. Peer-assessment can be considered a knowledge exchanging activity. A participant of the study said that "Today, I marked an essay, and it is far better than my essay. After reading it, I felt if I too could write like this. I learnt from that essay too. I also got a photo of it, and I can read it again and learn further." A similar view is claimed by Falchikov (2004) who points out that peer-assessment encourages the learners to take the responsibility to plan, guide, identify their strengths and weaknesses and decide their own learning strategies. Thus, the results of the present study suggest that peer-assessment helps learners develop various cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies such as independent learning skills, active and autonomous learning skills and critical thinking skills.

3.2.2. Personal and Intellectual Development

The participants of the present study held a positive perception about peer-assessment for it helped them enhance their personal and intellectual skills. Primarily, during the peer-assessment exercise, the learner who is a

testee becomes a tester and this role reversal, as Falchikov (2004) argues, enhances the learners' personal and intellectual skills by encouraging them to take the responsibility to plan, guide, identify their strengths and weaknesses and decide their own learning strategies. Results of the present study too lend support to this claim. For instance, the participant two of the compulsory English group stated: "I use dictionary if I come across a difficult word. Although we don't use the dictionary when we write, we use dictionary very often when we mark peers' essays."

Thus, the learners of the present study believed that peer-assessment encouraged them to take the responsibility for their own learning.

3.2.3 Professional Development

The participants of this study also pointed out that peer-assessment helped them develop key professional skills such as teaching skills, independent evaluative skills, professional collaboration and teamwork, communication skills, negotiation skills and listening skills.

First and foremost, the participants pointed out that peer-assessment trained them to develop teaching skills and independent evaluative skills. For instance, the participant thirty-four of the compulsory English course stated: "There are several mistakes that we do in our paragraphs and peers mark them and they teach us how to correct them." Similarly, the participant fourteen of the compulsory English course pointed out in the open-ended questionnaire: "Peer-assessment is useful for future professions like teaching".

The participants of the present study pointed out how peer-assessment helped them become independent unbiased evaluators. For instance, the participant thirty-two of the compulsory English course stated that "peer-assessment trains me to become an unbiased person with regard to educational matters." The participant thirty-three of the compulsory English course also stated: "Peer-

assessment helps me to learn to evaluate essays independently". Similarly, the participant fifty of the same compulsory English course said: "Peer-assessment helps me to identify others' ideas and writing styles. Also, I can improve my skills to get the responsibility and offer marks fairly." These results are consistent with the findings of previous work that demonstrated a high correlation between peer-assessment and the development of professional skills such as independent evaluative skills and editing skills (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

A criticism levelled against the graduates in Sri Lanka is that they do not have required professional skills such as communication skills, negotiation skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, analytical skills and intellectual skills (Chandrakumara, 2015). However, the findings of the present study suggest that peer-assessment helped learners develop collaboration, interaction, teamwork and negotiation skills, some of the key professional skills. For instance, the participant thirty of the compulsory English group stated how peer-assessment encouraged learners to professionally collaborate with their peers and the teacher to enhance knowledge.

We can identify the errors of our friends. We correct them sometimes alone and sometimes with the help of more knowledgeable students or with the help of the teacher. I explain the errors to the friend. In my essay there were many grammatical errors. My friend explained them very well. She corrected some of them and explained them to me.

3.2.4 Social Competencies

Most of the professional competencies discussed above help learners develop their key social competencies too. First and foremost, peer-assessment encourages friendly relationships and close interaction with peers. For instance, the participant fifty-three of the English major group pointed out

in the written reflection: "When students give feedback to another student, he or she builds a friendly relationship between them. This helps the student to listen to the feedback of his friend and ask more questions regarding his/her mistakes." Further, those learners who were involved in peer-assessment learned to understand others and respect them, which are key social skills. The participant sixteen of the compulsory English course stated in the open ended questionnaire: "Peer-assessment helps me to improve my knowledge and learn to respect others' ideas." Similarly, the participant forty-four of the same course stated: "Peer-assessment helps me to learn about each other's attitudes, knowledge and skills." Peer-assessment also enhances learners' social competencies such as communication skills, face-to-face interaction and collaboration skills. For instance, the participant one hundred and forty of the compulsory English course pointed out: "Peer-assessment helps us know our weaknesses and discuss those weaknesses with the peers. Further, I can explain why I wrote so." Boud (2001) too argues that peer-assessment is an appropriate alternative assessment method for those students who do not have the time or the social skills necessary to develop successful relationships.

Although peer-assessment offers various benefits, there are practical challenges to implement peer-assessment in ESL writing classes.

3.2.5 Limited Language Proficiency

Limited language proficiency of the learners is a major barrier that demotivates learners from getting involved in peer-assessment. Participant twenty-two of the present study stated that "When there are difficult things that I cannot understand and correct, I feel embarrassed." A similar view was expressed by the participant twenty-four of the compulsory English group: "Poor knowledge, not knowing the grammatical structures, not being able to understand and correct complex

sentences are problems about peer-assessment. Therefore, when essays are not properly evaluated due to the said reasons, students get demotivated." According to the participant twenty-two of the compulsory English course, "When there are difficult things that I cannot understand and correct, I feel embarrassed."

The participants of this study also pointed out that limited proficiency of the learners leads to reliability and validity issues of peer-assessment as well. For instance, the participant ten of the compulsory English group pointed out in the open ended questionnaire that "Some peers ignore many mistakes and it is unfair by me." Similarly, the participant forty-nine of the same group pointed out in the open ended questionnaire: "Sometimes I do not get a reasonable mark. Also, the peer cannot identify all the mistakes of the essay." A similar view was echoed by the participant eighteen of the same compulsory English group: "I have a doubt whether the peer has given the correct mark." The participant thirty-four of the same group said: "It is difficult to understand some essays. Also, it is difficult for me to assess an essay of a more proficient peer." The participant forty-three of the compulsory English course shared a similar view: "Due to poor language proficiency, it is difficult for me to identify some grammatical structures and some words." Similar views have been expressed by Segers and Dochy (2001) who claim that students are uncomfortable and unsure of their capability of assessing each other fairly because they feel incompetent to offer appropriate feedback. Group based peer-assessment where learners with different proficiency levels work together and assess each other's writing may be a solution to overcome this issue.

3.2.6 Friendship Issues

Friendship is another challenge to implement peer-assessment successfully. This also affects the reliability and validity of peer-assessment. Although Azarnoosh (2013) who

has conducted a study on friendship bias in peer-assessment in Iranian context found no significant difference between ratings of friend and non-friend peers, the findings of the present study suggest that friendship affects the quality of peer-assessment. For instance, the participant forty-three of the compulsory English course pointed out that "Sometimes a proper assessment is not done due to friendship and as a result mistakes are not properly identified." Thus, learners believed that friendship negatively affects peer-assessment, in particular, in a country like Sri Lanka. Similar findings were reported by Sande and Illorente (2014). They claim that teachers usually express their resistance to peer-assessment due to friendship effects. However, a comprehensive marking scheme can be used to overcome the friendship biases and enhance the reliability of assessment as Jonsson and Savingby (2007) too suggest.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the present study indicate that the ESL undergraduates generally hold positive perception about peer-assessment. Therefore, this learner-centered alternative assessment method can be used to create a platform for the learners to review their peers' essays in the ESL class and offer feedback to improve the quality of their essays. More importantly, peer-assessment allows learners to interact, collaborate and learn from each other. There is a strong requirement to incorporate various transferable skills, such as teamwork, negotiation skills, communication skills, etc., into the curriculum today rather than teaching such skills in isolation. Therefore, the incorporation of peer-assessment into English essay writing classes and other similar environments is an appropriate alternative assessment in higher education. The present study proposes measures for the successful implementation of peer-assessment in university ESL courses. First and foremost, peer-assessment appears to be more productive in mixed ability groups.

Therefore, the learners need to individually write an essay on a given topic. Next, it is given to a peer who assesses the essay in a group where he/she can get help, if necessary, to assess it properly and give feedback in terms of language, content and organization. Essays should be exchanged among similar proficient learners. Such an arrangement will expose learners to more or less similar essays thus activating Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which says that second language acquisition takes place best when the new language is comprehensible and slightly above the current language competence of the learner. However, peer-assessment cannot be practiced everyday as it consumes some time. Hence, this can be practiced at regular intervals and help learners improve their essay writing skills in the English class. Therefore, peer-assessment can be recommended as a viable alternative method to teacher feedback in ESL writing contexts. However, it is recommended to use peer-assessment as a learning tool to enhance skills rather than an assessment tool that replaces teacher assessment and contributes to the final assessment marks of the students. Finally, the generalizability of the findings of the present study is subject to certain limitations such as small sample drawn from one particular state university in Sri Lanka. Therefore, future studies need to be conducted with a larger sample representing several universities to shed further light on this under-explored area.

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