

Assessment for Learning: Applications in the Writing Classroom

Reem Rekieh, United Arab Emirates

This article reviews various research studies discussing the impact that particular assessment for learning strategies have on improving attainment of writing. The purpose is to relate observations found in the literature to the context at School X Private School in an attempt to develop and implement better strategies of assessing for learning in the writing classroom. The complementary relationship between self and peer assessment engages students in the process of assessing and being assessed. Through this journey, students develop the skills in their own writing that they are able to identify as areas of improvement in their peers' writing; ultimately leading to improved attainment.

Introduction

Teaching English poses many challenges to teachers however, a recurrent difficulty and reluctance amongst students is in the strand of writing. Not surprisingly, this may be as a result of the fact that the majority of students in the U.A.E are English Language Learners (ELL), and as such find difficulty expressing thoughts in writing in a foreign language compared with their mother tongue. Moreover, it is worth making note of the clear distinction between Arabic and English writing systems as Arabic is written from right to left (Leki, 1998). This distinction may further confuse ELL as they must switch to a different set of language schema to access writing in English. As is the case in School X Private School (AYS), close monitoring of student progress in writing allows us to discover weaknesses in teaching pedagogies, as well as the need for a reform in teaching writing in order to see improved attainment. Observation of students' attitude towards writing shows unwillingness by students to write, and negative attitudes continue to persist as a result of a barrier in language and lack of ability to express thoughts in second language (L2). Nasreddine Mohamed Sarsar (2008), a teacher in Al Ittihad Model School in Abu Dhabi recorded observations of his students' attitudes towards writing stating, "students showed reluctance to write and learned to hate writing." (Sarsar, 2008, p 5). The situation in AYS mirrors that of the model school mentioned and is a barrier that has been recognized as needing immediate modification. Students' deteriorating attitudes toward writing stem from deeper issues which include inability to generate ideas and even greater difficulty elaborating on them (ibid, 2008). Therefore, the integration of peer assessment as a form of Assessment for Learning (AfL) in writing lessons became an important focus for teachers to emphasize in lessons with the aim of creating a more collaborative learning environment, which sees students socializing more (helping with second language) as well as learning from each other. With a more student-led approach through the use of peer-assessment, greater responsibility is appointed to students, and this in turn can lead to improved attainment in writing as they play a more direct role in the assessment of the writing process.

Delving Deeper into the Field...

Over the years, research has focused on the impact that assessment has had on improving attainment of students in the field of writing (Sadler 1998 & Rollinson 2005). Synthesizing a number of studies in this field has helped develop an understanding of the nature of assessment for learning and has helped form our planning moving forward. Guiding this project are some key discussion areas that links research in the field of assessment to the context at AYS.

Peer Assessment as a Form of AfL

Formative assessment has created a reform in the social constructs of classrooms as greater responsibility is awarded to students in their learning journeys. Black and Wiliam (1998) posit that based on bodies of firm evidence ‘formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement.’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p 90). Applying peer assessment as a form of AfL in the writing classroom may be one way to improve standards of writing for ELL students. Hawe and Parr (2013) depict AfL as a collaborative working environment where students interact with teachers and peers which include seeking, reflecting and responding to information from dialogue. Students would greatly benefit from opportunities to engage socially as White, Morgan and Fuisting (2014) and Black and Wiliam (1998) agree that ‘the use of peer review in EFL classrooms has the potential to offer affective, cognitive, and linguistic benefits for learners.’ (White et al., 2014, p 21). Aside from benefiting students linguistically, they are offered greater opportunities to take control of their learning, shifting from dependent learners to more independent, autonomous and self-regulating learners.

Peer Assessment in the UAE Context

There is wide base of research that shows effective use of peer assessment helps establish an encouraging learning environment. Perhaps this heightened role of responsibility awarded to students along with a shift from traditional assessment processes, may improve students’ negative perceptions towards writing. As Sarsar (2008) clearly states, ‘English teachers who teach in UAE model schools know perfectly well that the sweeping majority of their students have poor or no writing skills.’ (Sarsar, 2008, p 1). Sarsar relates well to the majority of teachers who struggle to instill an enjoyment for writing in students. Focus is usually on performance outcomes (grammar and handwriting) rather than on meaningful content (addressing an audience) (Sarsar, 2008). This may mean that teachers in the UAE are under more pressure as a result of varying academic and second language ability. However, one must understand the benefits of peer assessment as an additional tool for learning, and one that makes students stakeholders in their learning journey. As Harm Tillema (2014) posits, ‘Another important reason for looking at peer assessment as a supportive tool for learning is its positive effect on motivation and engagement in learning of other students, and its encouragement of each individual student to actively take part in the evaluation of their learning process.’ (Tillema, 2014, p 41). If teachers are looking for increased attainment in writing, less thought needs to be put on the outcome and more focus on the process along with the well-being of the student. Arguably, if students ‘hate’ writing, it could be as a result of an undesirable experience.

Deakin-Crick, Sebba, Yu, Lawson, Harlen and Durant (2008) mention the three ways that self and peer assessment impact on students which include: attainment, self-esteem and learning to learn. For the purpose of this review, mention of attainment and self-esteem are of importance when explaining the impact that peer assessment has on writing attainment, as again, self-

esteem and attainment in writing are complementary. Involving students in the creation of shared success criteria, and the process of identifying specific learning intentions opens up an array of responsibility for learning that can enhance students' confidence in their ability to write, hence leading to improved results.

Importance of Feedback and Revision

Central to assessment is the impact that feedback has on students' revision of their work. Traditionally, students have 'more or less relied on their teachers to tell them how to effect improvement,' (Sadler, 1989, p 138) which according to various studies, has not yielded improvement in writing because of quality of feedback as well as time constraints in providing adequate time for revision. This has been mirrored in a study by Ruegg (2014) that compares the effects of teacher and peer feedback on improvement in English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' writing ability. The results of the study found that students receiving peer feedback achieved higher scores on their final drafts as opposed to students who only received teacher feedback. Learners were separated into two groups: one group receiving systematic teacher feedback, while the other group only gave and received systematic peer feedback on a set of essays for one year. Results demonstrated that teachers' feedback focused on more surface level revisions, whereas peer feedback focused on more meaning-level revisions (Ruegg, 2014) which is in agreement with Rollinson (2005) who found 'that teacher feedback was rather general, whereas student responses were more specific.' (Rollinson, 2005, p 24). In comparison, results from Abadikhah and Yasami's (2014) study indicated that students took into consideration teacher feedback more than peer feedback when making revisions to their writing; however they understood feedback received by peers more than teachers. The implementation of Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers and Punctuation (VCOP) as mini plenaries and embedded drills in writing lessons in AYS, resulted in improvements in students' writing accuracy (referring to correct grammar, punctuation and vocabulary). Students' feedback (using 2 stars and a wish) mainly revolved around surface level errors/successes rather than on feedback relating to content/meaning, which contradicts previously mentioned studies by Ruegg and Rollinson. Feedback which focuses on the general rather than the specific may be the reason why students in AYS made little or no progress in writing as focus is on correction of grammar errors rather than on organization of ideas and sentence fluency (not surprising as lack of English language is the main reason). Provisions in teaching students to qualitatively peer assess need to be adapted in order to yield better quality of writing, as well as providing multiple opportunities for students to revise their drafts based on feedback received. Interestingly, students 'demonstrate higher levels of satisfaction with qualitative commentary and feedback, and prefer feedback on specifics rather than on general remarks.' (Tillema, 2014, p 45). As a result, 'this could be seen as a suggestion for teachers to shift the focus of their feedback away from errors and towards ideas.' (Ruegg, 2014, p 75). Linking to the context of teachers in AYS, focusing on surface level revisions may be the simplest form of feedback as it is the easiest to observe, and is primarily what is taught with the use of VCOP. With pressure to cover curriculum content, teachers may not have adequate time to deliver meaning-level (content specific feedback) to each and every pupil, hence the reason why attainment of writing remains stagnant. Therefore, teaching staff that are knowledgeable in providing meaningful feedback are able to relay this skill to students in order to enhance the benefits of the peer assessment process. As a result, students' increased role in providing useful feedback may yield improvements in attainment of writing that teachers' assessment alone may not be able to achieve.

Training and a Collaborative Classroom Environment

When observing the process of writing through the use of peer assessment, the term ‘complementary’ describes many important associations. Peer feedback does not eliminate or neglect the importance of teacher feedback; as one may not be able to provide feedback to peers without proper training by the teacher. As Villamil and Guerrero (1998) clearly state, ‘We do not see peer feedback and teacher feedback as being in competition; rather, we see them as complementary forms of assistance in the writing classroom.’ (Villamil and Guerrero, 1998, p 508). Therefore, speaking on the premise of a collaborative classroom environment where students, peers and teachers work collectively to reach a common goal, various avenues of assessment are seen as equal to arriving at a set goal, rather than one form taking precedence over another. Deakin-Crick et al. (2008) go on to explain the complementary relationship between self and peer assessment as well as the importance of training students in self-assessment to help become successful peer assessors, and to yield results of improved writing attainment. “Seven studies identified the crucial need for students to receive some training in self-assessment and to understand the terms and concepts which they are expected to use to assess themselves. While this has implications for building self and peer assessment into the national policies, it also suggests the need to build these processes into day-to-day activities in classrooms.” (Deakin-Crick et al., 2008, p 3). Although there is immense pressure for teachers to adhere to strenuous curriculum demands, one must keep in mind the importance of the goal, and the means to reach it.

Therefore, training students becomes the main objective to achieving results of improved attainment in writing, regardless of lack of time. ‘Teachers could ensure effective peer engagement in editing by modeling peer interaction to their students early on in the semester...’ (Diab, 2011, p 286). Correct modeling of assessment strategies as well as the use of helpful sentence frames for students to assess their peers, helps to provide students with the support to encourage them to become critical assessors.

Moreover, students peer assess each others’ work using the strategy, ‘2 stars and a wish’. Two stars indicating two things that students have done well (which helps transform negative perceptions towards writing), and the wish stating areas for improvement. This strategy of peer editing and revising takes considerable time to train students; however benefits include becoming better peer assessors and critical self editors. In Diab’s (2011) study, results conveyed the benefits of complementary forms of editing (self and peer) by stating the following: ‘Both training in peer-editing and training in self-editing help students revise their writing because the two techniques involved the practice of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies that have been noted to bring writing development.’ (Diab, 2011, 286). As such, it is clear that the process of self and peer-editing plays a significant role in the revision of students’ writing, therefore leading to improved writing compositions. Conversely, what may need reevaluation in AYS is the amount of time allotted to students to revise their compositions based on the feedback provided. Linking back to the results of Diab’s study, ‘of the revisions which writers made in response to peer feedback, 92% improved the writers’ second drafts’ (Diab, 2011, 283) which closely mirrors the results of Peterson and Portier’s study where ‘Grade 1 class students took advantage of the opportunity to learn through revising as they revised 90% of teacher and peer feedback.’ (Peterson & Portier, 2012, p 255) Therefore,

offering students ample opportunities to revise drafts after receiving feedback is critical if students are going to improve written compositions and hence, improve attainment of writing.

Advantages of Peer Assessment

In a study completed by Abadikhah and Yasami, comparing the effects of peer vs. self editing on writing accuracy of Iranian EFL students, it was found that:

“Training in both peer-editing and self-editing assisted students to revise their essays. The analysis of data also showed that there was a statistically significant difference in revised drafts in favour of the peer-editing group. Students who effectively edit their peers’ compositions can be better self-editors.” (ibid, 2014, p 116)

Therefore, the very act of editing whether that be peer, or self-editing offers avenues for reflecting and evaluating one’s own writing or that of a peer’s (allowing students to enter each other’s zones of proximal development [ZPD]); which ultimately see students utilizing higher order thinking skills according to Bloom’s taxonomy and as such can lead to improved attainment of writing. In Peterson and Portier’s study on grade one peer and teacher feedback, students developed their writing skills and learned to evaluate their own writing as a result of supplying and receiving peer feedback (Peterson & Portier, 2012, p 238). Consequently, as agreed by Peterson and Portier (2012), Abadikhah and Yasami (2014), Hawe and Parr (2013), Rollinson (2005) as well as Sadler (1998); ‘the reason that learning to edit others’ writings improves one’s own writing accuracy may be due to the fact that students learn from these kinds of activities to critically self-evaluate their own writings.’ (Rollinson, 2005, p 24). The social interactions will not only allow students to improve their writing, but also their language acquisition as indirectly through shared dialogue, students are entering and exiting different learning spheres which allow students to learn from each other, and therefore improve their writing as a result of peer collaboration.

The use of peer assessment strategies in writing classrooms ties into various theories which include Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory and collaborative learning theory. According to Vygotsky, ‘knowledge is social in nature and is constructed through a process of collaboration, interaction and communication in social settings.’ (Abadikhah & Yasami, 2014, p 114). Central to this notion is the importance of social dialogue and interactions between teachers and students. It is through these very interactions that student’s progress through different ZPD’s, pushing forward and leading to higher level thinking.

Issues with Peer Assessment

As positive as peer assessment may seem in practice, many students’ perceptions about having peers assess their work is negative highlighting ‘students’ discomfort with peer assessment and their reservations about its fairness and accuracy.’ (Kaufman & Shunn, 2010, p 2). Linking back to the classroom, the majority of students being taught are ELL, creating further apprehension to peer assess as well as receive peer feedback given lack of confidence in L2. Here, one may see the importance of proper training as well as ‘creating a classroom environment of openness to giving and receiving feedback’ (Peterson & Portier, 2012, p 255) as critical in ensuring students reap the benefits of assessing and being assessed. The importance of proper professional development opportunities as well as suitable training in the implementation of peer assessment in the writing classroom is vital. ‘Creating a learning environment where students felt comfortable in making errors and receiving suggestions to

correct them,' (Peterson & Portier, 2012, p 247) should be the ultimate aim for all teachers by establishing a shared learning environment that offers students accountability in the assessment process. As a teacher from AYS describes, 'the writing improves due to the feedback from peers; the feedback given by students of similar abilities can improve their writing.' (Teacher A, AYS, 2015).

Shifting back to negative perception of students on peer assessment, Kaufman and Schunn (2010) observed that feedback from multiple peers yielded improvements in writing regardless of students' negative opinions on peer assessment. Therefore, the devotion of more time to teaching proper strategies of peer assessment, as well as having students engage rather frequently with this form of assessment, may impact students' perceptions, as is the example of Simone who thinks negatively of the process. (Kaufman and Schunn, 2010). "When speaking about reviewing the work of her peers, Simone noted that the review process 'actually helped me figure out how I wanted to make my paper better...for example, there was one paper that didn't define a certain word that they needed to define. It was like, the stronghold of their paper, and I realized, I didn't do that either. Oh my goodness, I'm probably going to get the same review that I'm giving out.'" (Kaufman and Shunn, 2010, p 16). Simone's case clearly outlines how the ability to peer-assess feeds into one's tendency to self-assess their own writing as both types of assessment are complementary and feed into the main aim of AfL which is to create autonomous, self-regulating learners; regardless of negative feelings towards the process.

Another issue is whether teachers are ready to pass on assessment responsibility to students. As Sadler (1989) states, 'Assessment is regarded as strictly the teacher's prerogative: it sets them apart from their students and to some extent from parents and the rest of society.' (Sadler, 1989, p 141). Therefore, one can understand the reluctance or lack of implementation of peer assessment strategies within modern day classes. Of great importance is creating a contagious learning atmosphere; one where students, peers and teachers can all learn from each other, share with each other as well as assume relative accountability for the learning process in its entirety.

Conclusion

Having analyzed various studies, benefits that arise from students engaging in the peer assessment process are numerous and do not just provide positive written outcomes. The impact stretches beyond improved levels, helping to create more autonomous learners who are able to provide feedback, reflect on feedback and to share knowledge. All of which are important skills to help sustain learners in the 21st century.

Hawe and Parr (2013), Villamil and Guerrero (1998) and Peterson and Portier (2012) all agree that improved attainment in writing does result from opportunities for students to take part in the assessment process through assessing writing of peers.

"While valuable in helping writers make improvements to their work, peer feedback also helps student-assessors clarify their own understandings and build their evaluative knowledge and productive expertise as they are exposed to the ways in which others have approached the same or a similar task. Engaging in peer feedback has the capacity to lead to intelligent self-monitoring. Students have reported that having opportunities to develop



self-monitoring skills has enhanced their ability to revise and improve their writing.” (Hawe and Parr, 2013, p 217).

Therefore, having analyzed various studies and related them to the context at AYS, it has been observed that peer assessment, as a form of AfL, has an impact on writing which facilitates students in improving attainment of writing, and more importantly, encourages students to become autonomous, self-regulated learners. This relates well to AYS’s vision as an inspirational, leading-edge, international school. After all, one does not realize their potential until given the opportunity to do so; perhaps this added responsibility is just what students need to recognize that there is no limit to their abilities.

References

Abadikhah, S, & Yasami, F 2014, 'Comparison of the Effects of Peer- versus Self-editing on Linguistic Accuracy of Iranian EFL Students', 3L: Southeast Asian Journal Of English Language Studies, Volume 20, Issue 3, pp. 113-124.

Black, P, & Wiliam, D 2010, 'Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment', Phi Delta Kappan, Volume 92, Issue 1, p. 81-90, London: Kings College

Deakin-Crick R, Sebba J, Harlen W, Guoxing Y, Lawson H. (2005) Systematic review of research evidence of the impact on students of self and peer-assessment. Protocol. In: Research Evidence in Education Library: EEPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

Diab, NM 2011, 'Assessing the relationship between different types of student feedback and the quality of revised writing', *Assessing Writing*, 16, pp. 274-292.

Education in Abu Dhabi. 2015. Education in Abu Dhabi. [online] Available at: <https://www.adec.ac.ae/en/Education/Pages/default.aspx> . [Accessed 01 August 2015]

Hawe, E, & Parr, J 2014, 'Assessment for Learning in the Writing Classroom: An Incomplete Realisation', *Curriculum Journal*, Volume 25, Issue 2, pp. 210-237.

Kaufman, J, & Schunn, C 2011, 'Students' perceptions about peer assessment for writing: their origin and impact on revision work', *Instructional Science*, Volume 39, Issue 3, pp. 387-406.

Leki, Ilona. 1998. 'Academic Writing: Exploring Processes and Strategies', Cambridge University Press, London.

Peterson, S, & Portier, C 2014, 'Grade One Peer and Teacher Feedback on Student Writing', *Education 3-13*, Volume 42, Issue 3, pp. 237-257.

Rollinson, P 2005, 'Using Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Class', *ELT Journal*, Volume 59, Issue 1, pp. 23-30.

Ruegg, R 2015, 'The relative effects of peer and teacher feedback on improvement in EFL students' writing ability', *Linguistics And Education*, 29, pp. 73-82.

Sadler, D, & D. Royce, S 1989, 'Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems', *Instructional Science*, Volume 18, Issue 2, pp. 119-144.

Sadler, D, & D. Royce, S 1998, 'Formative assessment: revisiting the territory', *Assessment In Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, Volume 5, Issue 1, pp. 77-84.

Sarsar, NM 2008, 'Intervention Learning Plan to Address the Issue of Poor Writing Skills among Students of Al Ittihad Model School', Online Submission, ERIC, EBSCOhost, viewed 7 August 2015

Teacher A (2015). School X Private School. Private Correspondence



The Big Writing Criterion Scale | Andrell Education. 2015. The Big Writing Criterion Scale | Andrell Education. [ONLINE] Available at:<http://www.andrelleducation.com/product/the-big-writing-criterion-scale/>. [Accessed 07 August 2015]

Tillema, Harm. 2014. Student Involvement in Assessment of their Learning. In: Claire Wyatt-Smith, Val Klenowski, Peta Colber. eds. *Designing Assessment for Quality Learning*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. Ch. 3, pp. 39-53

Villamil, O, & Guerrero, M (1998), 'Assessing the Impact of Peer Revision on L2 Writing', *Applied Linguistics*, Volume 19, Issue 4, pp. 491-514.

White, J, Morgan, B, & Fuisting, B 2014, 'Peer Review in EFL Writing: Teacher Attitudes', *Perspectives (TESOL Arabia)*, Volume 22, Issue 2, pp. 20-27.