

The Role of Peer Feedback in Augmenting Academic Literacies

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Abstract

This research utilises the New Literacy Studies or academic literacies (which includes meaning making, identity, power, and authority) as its base to explore how academic literacy writing skills can be enhanced through student peer feedback. This paper discusses the first part of the research conducted where the researcher reflects on the process of various types of assessment tasks (diagnostic, formative and summative) developed to assist business students improve their academic writing skills via peer feedback. A sequel of this research will discuss the actual case study and how utilising peer feedback contributed to enhancing students' academic literacies demonstrated in their final assessment results.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Peer Feedback, Writing Skills, Student Learning Process

1. Introduction

Entering the tertiary education field requires students to adapt to new ways of learning, interacting, understanding, interpreting, acquiring new study skills and knowledge. In order to excel or even survive in this new territory, students need to understand the academic language manifested in the material provided through their readings and writing material, which is referred to as their competency in academic literacy. Lea and Street (2006) explained that academic literacy is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context (p. 369). They further illustrate that students view academic literacy as the requirement to switch their writing styles and genres between one setting and another and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes (p. 368). On the other hand, Ballard and Clanchy (1988) described academic literacy as the understanding of rules and conventions that govern the learning process.

This research utilises the New Literacy Studies or academic literacies as its base to explore how students' writing skills can be enhanced through student peer feedback. This paper discusses the first part of the research conducted where the researcher reflects on the process of various types of assessment tasks (diagnostic, formative and summative) as a means to assist Business Students develop and improve their academic writing skills through the process of peer feedback. The research paper commences with an explanation of the researcher's interest in this subject matter, presents the feedback typology, discusses the impact of peer feedback on the learning process, and finally presents an overview of the various types of assessments and specific ones utilised in this research. All through the research paper, the researcher provides reflections on actual classroom practices and observations of students' learning process.

2. Why the interest in this subject i.e. feedback?

Feedback is important for various aspects of our lives as it helps us confirm the base of our knowledge. It is a means of development and moving forward and an indicator of what we lack and need to improve on to enhance our performances either professionally or personally. Coming from a business background, where I believe that everything goes through a process, the feedback loop is of great importance to enable the person to monitor and have control on processes. Moreover, feedback is an integral part of the process of students achieving their writing goals. Feedback highlights areas where improvement is required. Relating this concept to students' feedback is a means of assisting students in their learning journey by understanding their learning process; what is happening and what further actions are required to enhance their learning to their utmost benefit.

As an educator/ facilitator, my first and foremost interest is my students' benefits. Hence, my aim is to provide them with a conducive learning environment that works in their favour. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) echoed this point by stressing on the usefulness of peer feedback for all parties involved - the provider and the receiver. They illustrate that peer feedback allows students to develop critically and to judge work objectively, according to given standards, which could later on transfer to their own work.

3. Feedback Typology

Pedagogical literature, especially in the field of academic literacy, refer to the term 'feedback' interchangeably, e.g. peer review, peer assessment or peer feedback. What is feedback? Dinham (2008) explained that feedback could be written, spoken and/or gestural to indicate approval, encouragement or criticism. From a teaching and learning context, he defines feedback as "any form of response by a teacher to a student's performance, attitude or behaviour, at least where attitude or behaviour impinges upon performance" (p.35). On the other hand, Kulhavy (1977) described feedback as a corrective process that involves "any numerous procedures ...used to tell a learner if an instructional response is right or wrong" (p.211).

Feedback about students' writing in New Zealand has a negative connotation as mentioned by Ward and Dix (2001; 2004) because it lacks specificity in relation to a given task and is devoid of constructive critique. However, in this research, feedback will take a more comprehensive interpretation for the purpose of furthering student learning through quality feedback that tackles the following criterion mentioned by Sadler 1989 (in Hawe et al, 2008: 45):

- The goals of learning;
- What constitutes achievement in relation to these goals;
- The nature of student performance in relation to these goals and;
- The moves or strategies that can be used to bridge the gap between current and desired performance.

4. Impact of Peer Feedback on Learning

Some of the benefits of incorporating peer feedback in the learning process are to encourage students to think of it as a means to increase their confidence. Stefani (1994) reported in his research that students claimed that peer feedback made them think more. While research

conducted by Venables and Summit (2003) on computer science students confirmed that peer feedback helped enhance their knowledge. Falchikov (1986 & 1995) added another dimension to those benefits by mentioning that sharing assessment with students (in this case by introducing peer review/feedback) is a means of sharing power with the teacher which could encourage students to take responsibility in their learning process. Furthermore, research conducted by Li et al (2010) confirms that engagement in peer review empowers students and facilitates active learning. Angela Brew (2003) stated that peer assessment can be used to refer to both peer marking and peer feedback. Nevertheless, she stressed the point that peer assessment can be unpopular among students, while peer feedback can contribute to cohesiveness of student groups and help them focus on learning.

Keith Topping (1998 & 2009) posits that research on peer assessment in various educational levels shows evidence in improving the quality of learning for both assessor and assessee. He further illustrates by listing the following benefits:

1. Feedback: The value of giving feedback is to confirm existing information, reduce errors and assist in the development of self-regulatory skills.
2. Cognitive gains: through identification of knowledge gaps and engineering their closure.
3. Improvements in writing: Research confirms that peer feedback is effective and helpful in all stages of writing.
4. Improvements in group work: Research shows increase in the frequency and quality of help seeking and help giving attitudes among students.
5. Possible saving of teachers' time: There is a lot of controversy around this issue. Some suggest that peer assessment could save teachers' time, while others believe that it requires time for organization, training, and monitoring. Hence, there's no time saved. Nevertheless, teachers benefit from peer assessment as it leads to scrutiny and helps clarify assessment objectives and purposes, criteria and grading scales.

Sally Brown and Phil Race (1995) stressed the importance of feedback for the following reasons: a) to feel positive about our achievements, b) to confirm that the things we are doing are done well, and c) to find out what to do about the things we are not yet doing satisfactorily. Hence, feedback is of vital importance for a successful learning process. Looney (2007) confirmed that constructive feedback given through formative assessment motivates students by building a relationship between them and their educators, and between them and their learning process, while addressing specific educational challenges.

It is important to consider the research conducted by Hyland and Hyland (2006) reporting on students' preferences regarding types of feedback on foreign language tasks. This research suggested that students perceive peer feedback as inadequate, because fellow students may not have sufficient expertise. Besides, students are of the belief that it's the teacher's job to give feedback. Topping (2009) posits that even if a peer assessor is less skilled at assessment, due to more availability of time, the assessor may produce an assessment of equal reliability and validity to that of a teacher. Similar findings have been reiterated by Patri (2002) on Chinese students, showing that in the presence of clear criteria, peer feedback enables students to make comparable judgements to the educator.

5. Methodology

This research utilised the critical reflection methodology developed by educationists Argyris and Schon (1976), and Schon (1983). Critical reflection (Fook, 2002) is defined as the process of explaining to oneself how they participate in a discourse and to identify the power relations in the said discourse. In this paper, the researcher used critical reflection as a tool to identify the discourse taking place in her classroom, and to identify the power of peer feedback and its impact on students' academic writing skills.

6. Types of Assessments and their impact on Student Learning

Assessment is one of the central themes of higher education as it supports the process of learning, makes judgements on students' achievements in course requirements and helps maintain standards of the teaching profession. Gordon Joughin (2009) posited that assessment can be used to promote learning through its design (the type of assessment chosen), promoting feedback and through development of students' capacity to evaluate the quality of their own work while they undertake assessment tasks.

In order to choose the suitable type of assessment, several researchers eluded to the importance of considering the diversity of learners and the impact of their past experiences on their confidence and motivation (Benseman, 2001; Boud; Cohen & Walker, 1993; Brookfield, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Research conducted by Falchikov and Boud (2007) on teachers of master's degree in adult education confirmed that there are both positive and negative correlation between their emotions and previous assessment experiences which had an impact on their learning and self-esteem. Askov et al. (1997) suggested that the assessee/educator should consider the following questions when choosing assessments: 1) what are the purposes of the assessment? 2) What are the assessment information needs of each stakeholder? 3) What are the strengths and limitations of the various assessment instruments for meeting each of these needs? (p.65)

This section attempts to discuss three of the most well-known assessment approaches namely: 1) Diagnostic assessment; 2) Formative assessment; and 3) Summative assessment. Discussing these approaches will show how they can be different and at the same time overlap in their purpose, depending on the educator's intentions and how these tools are utilised to improve the quality of learning and teaching. The researcher utilised these three types of assessments (diagnostic, formative and summative) to assess the level of student academic writing, provide adequate and fitting tasks for students, with the aim to enhance the quality and level of their academic writing skills.

1. Diagnostic Assessment

This approach or type of assessment identifies the student's strengths and weaknesses. It may be generic or specific and can take place during any stage of the programme. New Zealand Council for Educational Research (2006) referred to this assessment as 'initial assessment' if it takes place at the beginning of a programme with the aim of identifying the learners' needs to design a learning plan for each individual student. Askov et al. (1997) named it "screening or placement testing" where the learners get interviewed to determine their reasons for enrolling, goals, interests, talents and educational history.

Looney (2007) posited that diagnostic assessments in the shape of program entrance tests and informal interviews - which could be standardised - assist both learners and educators. For

learners, it helps to identify their capabilities to place them in the right and suitable level of education and it could help identify learners' disabilities or difficulties. While for educators it assists them to link the learning objectives with the learners' motivations, interests and goals. This assessment instrument (e.g. IELTS or TOEFL) is of importance to the tertiary education sector as it is the initial identification for placement in levels of English Language proficiency, since the medium of communication and teaching in New Zealand is English.

I believe that this initial assessment, besides being used on a national and institutional level, is also used by educators at the beginning of any programme to familiarise the teacher with individual students, their needs and requirements to assist in planning for their progress and motivate them during their learning journey. Accordingly, the researcher utilises this technique to informally assess the level of students' writing skills at the beginning of any course through the use of writing samples. Such diagnostic assessment helps her develop the right tasks for assisting students in improving their academic literacy and academic writing skills. Moreover, it helped improve the quality of her teaching in this specific course and for future improvements in other courses, by catering to students' needs.

2. Formative Assessment

This approach of assessment involves an ongoing assessment of learners through and during the life of the whole programme, with the intention of giving feedback on progress to both the learner and educator. Hence, it adapts teaching to meet the needs of the learner (NZCER, 2006). Derrick & Ecclestone (2008) named it "assessment *for* learning".

Effective formative assessment builds positive relationships between educators and students, and students and their learning process through constructive feedback that motivates them (Looney, 2007). This has been further reiterated by Dochy (2009) who mentioned that there is strong support for representing assessment as a tool for learning where students participate in the development of the criteria and the standards for evaluating their performance - both the process and product are being assessed. An illustrative example for this point would be the use of reflective journals or portfolios that the researcher developed for various courses for students to keep track of their academic or vocational growth over time, which assists in clarifying their goals. Students' feedback gained from their reflective journal confirmed their views in relation to peer review/feedback and its impact on their learning process, which enhanced their academic writing skills. Students' academic growth also assisted the researcher in teaching, based on the feedback provided.

Dochy (2009) provides examples of what he called "new assessment modes" to fit with the current assessment culture: observations, text- and curriculum-embedded questions, interviews, over-all tests, simulations, performance assessments, writing samples, exhibitions, portfolio assessment, product assessment, and modes of peer-and co-assessment. Askov et al. (1997) presented the following as "informal assessment" or formative assessment: observations, self-assessments (e.g. informal reading inventories, retell exercises, writing samples, logs and checklists) and portfolio assessment. Those assessment techniques can actually be used for both formative and summative assessment depending on the purpose and course objective.

The researcher's work experience revealed that choosing a suitable formative assessment mainly depends on the student cohort, their level of knowledge and their capability to apply this knowledge in the course and solve real life problems – which is relating theory to practice. The choice of formative assessment also depends on the goals and objectives of the course and how all the tasks could be linked together. Some of those mentioned techniques of formative assessment tend to be used automatically by experienced and well-trained educators in the classroom as they become second nature to their teaching. Educators tend to observe their students as they work in class to look for effective use of skills or areas that require additional work and improvement. In relation to self-assessments, the researcher tends to use a few of the forms mentioned by Askov et al (1997) with her students depending on their skill level and learning requirements e.g. informal reading inventories, retell exercises and writing samples. In relation to portfolio assessment, the researcher uses it with her students in association with their current learning in the classroom. The researcher has also managed to engage her students in constructing a part of the summative assessment which got them engaged and motivated in the process.

Deciding on the best fit and effective formative assessment technique depends on the programme objectives, student cohort and their learning capabilities. This has been reinforced by Clarke, Timperley and Hattie (2003) who stressed on the importance of the following elements:

- Learning intentions clarified at the planning stage;
- Learning intentions shared with students;
- Students self-evaluating against the learning intentions;
- Students receiving feedback about their progress specifically related to the learning outcomes; and
- Students supported to see their own learning goals (In NZCER, 2006).

Hattie et al (2007) developed those elements by stressing that teachers and providers need to focus more on the quality of information that comes from assessments and the decisions about 'where to next' (In Sutton & Denny, 2008, p. 200). This involves utilising feedback, either formal or informal, from students and the course outcomes to enhance future deliveries by being more capable in dealing with assessment challenges to create opportunities for lifelong learning, instead of just preparing to obtain certifications.

3. Summative Assessment

As illustrated earlier, formative assessment's main goal is to assess the level of the students to be able to build on it and assist in future learning. On the other hand, summative assessment (e.g. competencies or pathways for progression) is mainly concentrated on assessing for the sake of marking, in accordance with a marking guide, to put marks for certain reasons e.g. to earn certification, obtain governmental or institutional funds for a programme. This type of assessment is best described by Derrick & Ecclestone (2008) as 'assessment *of* learning'. Looney (2007) alerted to the mis-shape in this case of teaching to the test which could lead to the adult LLN learner's anxiety. Research evidence shows that the use of summative tests squeezes out assessment for learning and has a negative impact on the motivation for learning

for both students and teachers (Dochy, 2009). Some techniques used for the assessment are standardised tests, teacher-developed paper and pen exercises, and computer managed tests. Askov et al. (1997) attracted attention to some value in standardised testing in the way they yield comparable results regardless of location or programme type. Hence, they are reliable to funding agents and policymakers from an accountability perspective. They also show students' progress towards meeting specified criteria or competencies.

Sutton and Denny (2008) argued, citing various researches conducted in New Zealand, that standardised tests were not popular for the following reasons:

1. Foundation learning teachers are sceptical about the value of standardised testing due to lack of validity in measuring adults' LLN skills.
2. Testing engenders fear and embarrassment for most LLN learners which leads to low reliability in any screening tests.
3. Reliability of test scores improves after several weeks of teaching due to learners becoming more confident, not because of changes in literacy levels.
4. Standardised tests are difficult for ESOL learners who may not understand the questions for cultural reasons, not for lack of skills.
5. Standardised test development is specialised and expensive, and the lack of a local, adult specific resource has limited its introduction in New Zealand.

Another criticism against standardised tests is 'test anxiety' experienced by most adult learners due to their past experiences. In order to overcome such anxiety, the following approaches have been recommended to be used before, during and after testing (Askov et al, 1997):

- Avoid the word test
- Explain the purpose of the test in clear and simple language
- Ask whether students have any anxieties or worries and discuss with it with them
- Provide relaxation and positive visualization exercises
- Let students ask questions before they begin
- Allow students to write in the test booklets
- Watch learners while they are taking the test and whoever is frustrated assist them and reassure them
- Allow students to review tests after they are analysed.

The researcher used most of these approaches (e.g. observations, writing samples, reflective journals, self-assessment and peer assessment/feedback) with her students. The main research study used peer feedback technique to develop students' self-assessment skills and trust in collaborative work. The ultimate goal is to help them improve their academic writing skills before they submit their summative assessments for marking. That gave them the chance to concentrate on their learning process and overcome any anxiety that can be related to a final summative assessment. The researcher believes that the key issue here is preparing your students (i.e. enhancing their soft and hard skills) and eradicating their fear before it even starts, by giving them the tools and self-confidence in their capabilities to combat it.

6. Conclusion

This research paper is part of a bigger research project that explored how academic literacy writing skills can be enhanced through student peer feedback in a business degree course. This paper reported on the role of peer feedback in augmenting academic literacies through the researcher's reflections on the development of various assessment tasks utilised to assist students in their learning process. Research proves that there is a positive outcome from utilising peer feedback in enhancing students' academic writing skills indicated through students' assessment results, both formative and summative.

The main research study will report in more depth on the case study results pertaining to how peer feedback technique has been used successfully in improving students' academic writing skills, and augment their lifelong learning experience, through the development of their tertiary learning process.

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