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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFICACY OF USING PEER ASSESSMENT IN DEVELOPING PRESENTATION SKILLS OF ESL ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract

The significance of peer assessment is highlighted in different learning contexts and researches. However, studies on peer assessment are still limited in the Sri Lankan ESL context. The present study examines the correlation between the peer assessment and the development of the presentation skills of ESL adult learners. The sample of this study consists of 45 students studying in a higher educational institute. The students received peer feedback for the oral presentations they made. A pretest and a posttest were carried out before and after the oral presentation sessions. The marks of the pretest and posttest were analyzed using SPSS data analysis package. According to this study, there is a positive effect on the peer assessment in the development of the presentation skills of ESL adult learners. At the pedagogical level, the findings of the study are essential for the teaching and learning context of Sri Lanka.

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Introduction:-

Assessment plays a major role in education. This role is broadened and expanded in the present educational theories and practices. Many researchers have identified the importance of assessment. In the past, traditional methods have been used to measure the teaching learning process. However, considering the emerging demands and the recall for educational reforms, many scholars have been enthusiastic in introducing new assessment methods, which provide different types of exposures for the learners. Hence, they attempted to find 'alternative techniques of assessment to evaluate teaching and learning' (Sluijismans et al., 2003). The education system had to face the challenge of enhancing the skills of the learners to make them confident to deal with the world. (Gil-Salma, 2016). In fact, it was realized that the purpose of education was not only to provide knowledge for the future generation.

As a result of that alternative assessment has been introduced and it has the potential to meet students' needs. Similarly, alternative assessment permits teachers to gather diverse sources of learning. Alternative assessment includes portfolios, conferences, diaries, self-assessment and peer assessment.

Among these alternative assessment tools, peer assessment is popular due to its benefits. Topping (2009) highlights that the "...involvement in peer assessment at school can develop transferable skills of life" (p.21). At the same time, it improves learner participation in the assessment process. Puegphrom et al (2011) specify that peer assessment "is an alternative of assessment process that involves the learner's participation. It can well reflect the effectiveness of the learner's feedback and cooperation as well as enhance learners' awareness of self-learning and self-esteem" (p.2). Peer assessment shows the vitality of learner's feedback and the cooperation in the teaching learning process.

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On the other hand, it develops the learner's responsibility towards learning. In fact, peer assessment provides constructive feedback for the learners. Here, the feedback is provided by the peers. Although, peer assessment is widely used in education sector, it is hardly practiced in Sri Lankan context.

Literature Review

Peer assessment is not limited to one aspect as it contributes to the teaching learning process in various dimensions. Many scholars have studied about the different dimensions of Peer Assessment, among them Black et al.(2003) claim that "the ultimate aim of peer (and self) assessment is not that students can give each other levels and grades...the real purpose-the identification of learning needs and the means of improvement"(as cited in White, p.3). On the other hand, Karami & Rezaei (2015) point out that "Peer assessment is considered to be one of the main forms of alternative assessment. The importance of peer assessment is highlighted in different educational learning and educational research" (p. 94). It is obvious that the peer assessment provides opportunities for students to enhance different skills of learners. Hence, the role of peer assessment moves from a mere grade to a long term development.

Considering the theoretical framework of peer assessment, it is difficult to pinpoint an overarching theory behind peer assessment since there are many types of peer assessments (Topping, 1998). However, Topping has identified that some concepts of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory are the foundations of peer assessment. The same opinion has been shared by McGarr and Clifford (2013) pointing out that the Peer Assessment is "influenced by Vygotskian socio-cultural aspects of learning" (p.678). Hence, it is obvious that the concepts of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory are related to peer assessment. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition.

According to Topping (2009) "Peer assessment is an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners" (p.20-21). In the peer assessment process, the term "product" falls in different categories of skills. At the same time, the contribution of the assessor and the assessed can take place either in pairs or in groups. Topping (2009) adds that "A wide variety of products or outputs can be peer assessed, including writing, portfolios, oral presentations, test performance, and other skilled behaviors. The participant constellation can vary: The assessors and assessed may be pairs or groups" (p.21). Among them, oral presentation requires students to possess effective presentation skills which are a combination of few skills. The presentation skills are discussed in detail, as it is another aspect this study focuses on.

Presentation skills include a variety of areas such as the structure of the presentation, design of the slides, tone of voice and the body language of the presenter. Aryadoust (2016) specifies that "...presenters may modulate their voice and pitch or use nonverbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, to communicate their message effectively" (p. 4). Thus, it is obvious that the skilled presenters are able to get the attention of the audience and to gather the audience around his or her own ideas or point of view. Therefore, the presenter has to play his or her role successfully in a presentation as presentation skills play a major role in many academic and career settings. With the globalization and the expansion of trade and commerce, there are more opportunities for employees with presentation skills. Li & Lei-na (2012) refer to this situation as follows; "With the fast development of the international trade, oral presentation is increasingly popular in business transactions. Oral presentations serve multiple objectives that reflect intellectual values and academic skills" (p.1005). Thus, without limiting to the educational qualifications, employers seek individuals with outstanding presentation skills. However, acquiring presentation skills cannot be done overnight. Hyland (1991) points out that "Oral presentation skills take a long time to develop....." (p.6), that is a combination of skills that cannot be performed by memorization i.e. it needs constant rehearsals and productive and constructive feedback.

In literature, some studies have been carried out on assessing presentation skills through peer assessment. Similarly, some scholars have found the efficacy of peer assessment in the development of presentation skills. Falchikov (2005) points out, "involving students in the assessment of presentations is extremely beneficial" (p.16). Further, with reference to literature, there are a few more studies focused on incorporating peer assessment into presentation skills. In the study of De Grez et al.(2012) they depict the importance of peer assessment of oral presentation skills and conclude that "the results reflect a very positive attitude towards the value of peer assessment of oral presentation skills" (p.10) Thus, it is obvious that the learners were able to identify the value of the peer assessment process.

However, there are counterarguments on peer assessment. In her study, Sukanuma Oi (2011) looks at a combination of self/peer and teacher assessment of English oral production of 92 students and she claims that there is no correlation between teacher assessment and peer assessment while self-assessment showed a high consistency with teacher assessment. Further, some academics have identified drawbacks of peer assessment. According to Nortcliffe (2012) peer assessment is “time consuming to implement” and “racial prejudice, personality clashes and personal loyalties may distort the results’ (p.2). On the other hand the learners find it difficult to move with groups which are very familiar to them. Topping (1998) believes that “social embarrassment might be a particular issue of concern in smaller groups where students know each other and students may not take the exercise seriously” (p. 253). In fact, this type of factors can negatively affect regions like Asia where culture and religion have much influence on people.

Yet, according to the literature, there are many benefits of peer assessment compared to its detriments. The benefits of Peer Assessment “...arguably outweigh any drawbacks; indeed it is a powerful methodology for encouraging autonomous learning...” (Carnell; 2015; 6) Even though peer assessment is important as a pedagogical tool which facilitates learning and is popular in many fields of education, as Hanrahan & Isaccs (2001) point out, specific studies focusing on peer assessment are limited or “still alarmingly sparse” in ESL context. (as cited in White, 2009, p. 5). However, referring to Peer assessment of oral presentations, Peng (2008) mentions that “...relatively few studies were devoted to examining this facet” (p.19). As a result, in recent years there has been a call for more research into the quality of peer assessment, specifically its application to oral presentations in higher education (Magin & Halmore ,2001).

However, in Sri Lankan context and in the set up to which this particular institute is attached, peer assessment is a new concept. There is a demand for studies on peer assessment in this particular context. Consequently, this study aims to investigate whether there is a correlation between peer assessment and the development of presentation skills of adult ESL learners.

Methodology:-

The sample

The sample of this study consisted of 45 students who were studying in a higher educational Institute. They have studied in science stream during their Advanced Levels. The participants belonged to the age group of 21-23 and all of them belong to the lower middle socio-economic background. At the same time, they are a mixed ability group. The sample consisted of students from different parts of the country. To maintain the homogeneity of the sample, only the students who have obtained a “C” pass (Credit pass) for “General English” offered in G.C.E. A/L examination (General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level)) at schools were included in this sample. It was observed that the majority of the participants were female students (based on the data obtained from the bio-data questionnaire).

The tests

In this study, individual presentation was identified as the test. At the same time, both pre and posttests are designed for equal proficiency level. Pre and posttests were utilized to measure the presentation skills of the students prior to the intervention and after the intervention. In grading the tests, the teacher assigned a numerical score to both the pre-test and the post-test to demonstrate the progress of the students. In the study, the researcher assessed the presentation skills of the students. Therefore, an oral presentation was used in both the pretest and the posttest. The topics given for both tests were designed with a slight change in the wording of the posttest compared to the pretest. The oral presentations were based on the general topics as mentioned in the following table.

Table 3.1:- Presentation Topics for Pretest and the Post test

Pretest	Post test
Environmental Pollution	The fate of nature in the face of human activities
Deforestation	Massive destruction of trees
Child Abuse	Child maltreatments
Time Management	How to manage your time effectively
Dengue	Causes and precautions for Dengue fever

The procedure

The study was carried out for a period of 8 weeks in which students were supposed to make two individual presentations (pre-test and posttest) and two group presentations.

Analysis of data

The data collected from the pretest and the posttest of the sample was used to analyze the research question. As the same group was assessed in the pretest and the posttest, the paired sample t-test was used to analyze the data.

Results:-

This study aimed at finding the correlation between the peer assessment and the development of presentation skills of ESL adult learners. To analyze this question statistically, it was hypothesized that there was a correlation between peer assessment and the development of presentation skills.

Hypothesis – There is a correlation between peer assessment and the development of presentation skills of adult ESL learners.

In order to explore the research question statistically and to test the hypothesis, the pretest and posttest marks given to the sample by the two teachers were used. As there were two teachers for the pretest and the post test of this study, the means of the marks given by the two teachers were considered as the pretest and the posttest marks.

Further, in the process of analyzing the research question, a paired sample t-test was employed because the same group was being assessed by the two teachers in two times as pre-test (before presenters receive the feedbacks from their peers) and post-test (after receiving the feedback from their peers). In order to examine the question, the mean value of the pretest and the posttest were calculated using SPSS statistical package.

Table 4.1:-Paired Sample Statistics

01. Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Mean marks of pre test	43.3889	45	8.59366	1.28107
	Mean marks of post test	50.5222	45	7.68998	1.14636

According to table 4.1, when the mean values of marks between pre-test and post-test were considered, it was evident that in the sample, the post-test marks were higher than the pre-test marks. Hence, it was apparent that peer assessment is effective in developing presentation skills of adult ESL learners.

Correlation means a mutual relationship or connection between two or more objects or values. If values of two variables are increasing or decreasing together, it is evident that there is a positive correlation. Correlation is expressed on a range from +1 to -1. The Paired Samples Correlation of table 4.2 indicates that mean marks of pre-test and mean marks of posttest are significantly positively correlated ($r = .847$). As a result, the hypothesis developed for the research question i.e. there is a correlation between peer assessment and the development of presentation skills of adult ESL learners, was accepted.

Table 4.2:- Paired Samples Correlations

01. Paired Samples Correlations					
			N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Mean marks of pretest & Mean marks of post test		45	.847	.000

Hence, the above analysis proves that there is a correlation between peer assessment and the development of presentation skills of adult ESL learners i.e. peer assessment is able to develop the presentation skills of ESL adult learners.

In this study, it was observed that peer assessment was able to develop the presentation skills of these adult learners. It is significant that though these participants were exposed to peer assessment for the first time, peer assessment has a positive effect on the participants.

Similarly, when literature is considered, in examining the effect of peer assessment on oral presentation in an ESL context, Ahangari et al. (2013) point out that peer assessment had a significantly positive effect on oral presentation i.e. peer assessment contributes to the development of presentation skills. Interestingly, according to the study of Kovac et al. (2012) "The majority of participants (88%) think that peer evaluation, in other words, commenting about different levels of performance (verbal, non-verbal, technical and organizational) can help perceive errors more clearly and consequently improve some aspects of future presentations". (p.14-15). Therefore, it can be concluded that irrespective of the drawbacks mentioned in the literature, peer assessment has positive effect on presentation skills in some contexts.

Conclusion:-

There is no doubt that assessment plays a crucial role in the education system and as a result various assessment methods should be practiced which provide students an outstanding platform to show their skills. Though teachers in the Sri Lankan context are aware of peer assessment, only a few have attempted to practice it in the real scenario. Hence, this study aimed at introducing a new assessment culture for this particular learning context. The findings of this study illustrate that there is a correlation between peer assessment and the development of the presentation skills of ESL adult learners. The students in this study neither had experience with peer assessment nor heard of the peer assessment process but, the fact that peer assessment is able to make active learners in the class room is obvious in the study and the curiosity of the new method has driven them to deliver successful presentations. However, it is difficult to generalize the findings of this particular study as the sample consisted of students who belong to the science stream. However, irrespective of its limitations, the important pedagogical implications of this study contribute to make the name sake peer assessment to a reality in Sri Lankan context.

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