

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PEER ASSESSMENT: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR FORSTERING 21ST CENTURY LEARNING

Abstract

This research explores attitudes toward peer assessment (PA) of 116 second year students of English major at Foreign Trade University using two sets of 5-point likert scale questionnaires adapted from Cheng & Warren (1997) and Cornelius & Kinghorn (2014) with a view to forecasting opportunities and challenges of employing PA in future courses for this group of students. Among the participants, 95 students who have already made PA in their previous learning courses fill set 1 questionnaire while the rest of participants fill set 2. The reliability of the questionnaires is first assessed (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.720 and 0.801 for set 1 and set 2 respectively) using SPSS software version 19; subsequently, the collected data is computed for mean scores. The mean values indicate that students generally attach importance to PA yet mainly as supplementation rather than substitution of teacher assessment. Students' lack of confidence about their peers' expertise and responsibility concerning PA is to explain for their response. The students, although they are well aware of their responsibilities in giving fair assessment of peers' work, still face challenges in maintaining objectivity and accuracy of the assessment. These results entail reinforcing students' self-confidence and increasing their confidence about peers in PA by providing them with adequate detailed guidance, modeling and training prior to PA.

Key words: peer assessment, students' attitudes, formative assessment, summative assessment, 21st century learning

I. Introduction

It has been consistently reported on the significant roles of classroom assessment in improving students' gains and teaching and learning quality in general. As such, past research also extensively discussed the transitions and interplay between the two main forms of assessment namely summative assessment (SA) and formative assessment (FA). While the former refers to assessment of learning aiming to measure the overall achievements of students' performance in forms of grades of tests (Morgan, et al., 2004), the later, also known as assessment for learning, stresses on evaluating students' learning in form of feedback (rather than grades) to inform teaching and learning (rather than to rank the students and give certificates) (Black & William, 1998; Joughin, 2009). SA had been widely used for decades in Asian countries, particularly in almost all Southeast Asian nations (SEAMEO Innotech Research Updates, 2012) including Vietnam before there was a movement toward a more effective form – that is FA, concerning its impacts on students' achievements and quality of schooling.

One of the main aspects of FA is students' self-assessment, “a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria, identify

strengths and weaknesses in their work, and revise accordingly” (Andrade & Du, 2007, p.160 cited in Spiller, 2009), and peer assessment which requires students to make judgments in forms of feedback or grades on their peers’ performance based on a set of criteria constructed by teachers and perhaps in negotiation with the students (Falchikov, 2007 cited in Spiller, 2009). There is a wealth of literature indicating that students, particularly at tertiary level, should be involved in assessing their own academic performance during a course of learning (Stiggins, 2002) as this enhances their learning and achievement (Black et al., 2005; Black & Wiliam 1998; Falchikov, 1995; McDonald & Boud, 2003; Pham, 2014; Topping, 1998), and on top of this, better prepares for their life-long learning (Sambell and McDowell, 1997; Boud, 2000; Elwood & Klenowski, 2002; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Cassidy, 2007)– an important mission of higher education. The need to develop university students’ capabilities to self-assess and peer-assess as graduate skills (Rigby et al., 2010) is increasingly important in the context of “uncertain future of professional practice and future learnings” as it would help them better prepare for “supercomplexity” they may encounter in the future (Barnett, 2000 cited in Rigby et al., 2010).

In addition, despite enormous efforts towards improving the education standard of the government and Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) of Vietnam through the Resolution on Organizing Higher Education Teaching and Learning for Regular Students in 2006 and Resolution 43 on Higher Education Training in the Credit-based System for Regular Students in 2007, Vietnam is still amongst a number of Asian countries where teachers’ assessment is claimed to remain dominant over students’ and summative assessment is popular (SEAMEO Innotech Research Updates, 2012). Major reasons include the examination-oriented teaching and learning culture in Vietnamese higher education (Nguyen, 2016; Stephen et al., 2006), the Confucian-based cultural beliefs of roles of teachers and students regarding student assessment (Ho, 2015), teachers’ lack of assessment knowledge and skills (Stephen et al., 2006; Luong, 2015) and teachers’ workload (Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen & Khairini, 2016; Luong, 2015). Yet teachers in a Vietnamese university (Nguyen, 2013) have started thinking about a change in assessment methods and have been more open-minded toward formative assessment following the Regulation 975 of the MOET. Little about students’ attitudes toward peer assessment in the Vietnamese tertiary context, though, has been recorded in the literature. Meanwhile, as students would take an agent role in peer assessment rather than a subject of traditional teachers’ assessment where the students’ performance is assessed merely by their teacher, whether they feel positive or negative about this alternative form of assessment would be a determining factor to the feasibility of PA application to classroom assessment. That is why an investigation into students’ attitudes toward peer assessment in the context of Vietnamese higher education is worthwhile, particularly for fostering learning in 21st century when there is a greater demand on interpersonal skills possessed by graduates such as self and peer assessment as previously mentioned.

This exploratory research aims to inquire into attitudes toward peer assessment of second year students of English major in the Faculty of Business English, Foreign Trade University in

order to forecast the opportunities and challenges of applying PA to future courses taken by this group of students. Following this, the research strives to find answers to the following research questions.

1. What are students' attitudes toward peer assessment?

- 1a. What are students' attitudes toward benefits and their ability in making PA?
- 1b. What are students' attitudes toward their peers' ability in making PA?
- 1c. What are students' attitudes toward PA in comparison with teachers' assessment?

2. What are opportunities and challenges for practicing peer assessment in future courses?

II. Literature Review

II. 1. Summative and formative assessment

The two main types of assessment namely summative and formative were first introduced by Scriven (1967). Summative assessment (SA) aims to evaluate learners' achievement at a particular point of time (Crooks, 2011). As a summary record of what learners achieve after a period of learning, SA serves as an internal report of learners' performance and also an external report to parents and other authorities. Formative assessment (FA), on the other hand, is "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.10). Popham (2006, 2008) also stressed on the use of formative assessment to inform teacher's instruction enabling teachers to make appropriate and timely changes to their instruction in an effort to help students achieve their desired learning outcomes. FA was extensively used in Western countries such as the US and UK following the rigorous review of classroom assessment practices by Black & William (1998), and later soon enjoyed a tremendous popularity in other parts of the world during the process of changing assessment practices. Southeast Asian countries, for example, has all agreed that FA is the way to go (SEAMEO Innotech Research Updates, 2012).

It could be concluded, then, the ultimate aim of FA is for teachers to make timely changes to their teaching practices based on student assessment thereby helping students reach the desired learning outcomes. Unlike SA, which is usually implemented at the end of a course of learning and serves as the base for giving certificates to students, FA is performed continuously throughout the course with a view to informing teaching and learning timely. Furthermore, FA requires active participation of students as an agent rather than subject of assessment and the radical change in teachers' mindset towards the goals of student assessment. The differences between SA and FA are, however, not clear-cut. Bell & Cowie (2000), for example, claimed that SA could be used for formative purposes (cited in Dunn & Muvenon,

2009), which Wininger (2005) called formative summative assessment. In return, if FA such as feedback is counted toward the final grades of students, then FA could also be considered as SA (Dunn & Muvenon, 2009). They also further elaborated on the interplay between SA and FA while found that whether an assessment is formative or summative depends mostly on “the actual methodology, data analysis, and use of the results” of the assessment (p.2).

II. 2. Peer assessment

As a manifestation of students’ participation in assessment, peer assessment (PA) is an activity in which students use criteria and standards to make judgments and evaluation of the work of their peers (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). The concept of PA stems from active learning and social constructivism philosophies which stated that the construction of knowledge should be done on a collaboration through discourse basis (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). Thomas & Martin & Pleasants (2011) insisted “opportunities for learning are lost as they become passive recipients of assessment outcomes”. The rationale behind the introduction of PA to higher education learning is that PA helps improve learning (Falchikov, 1986) and more specifically “It not only acts as a meaningful learning activity, but also provides opportune feedback.” (Kishwar et al., 2015, p. 272) and it has positive impacts on students’ learning experiences (Vu & Alba, 2007). The action research by Logan (2009) on applying self and peer assessment to a foundation degree in early childhood studies also revealed that PA lead to an improvement of students’ critical thinking skills and confidence in learning, which subsequently promoted their academic performance. Furthermore, PA is claimed to enhance future learning which extends beyond classroom learning and prepares students well for their future study and work. “Future-learning oriented assessment engages students in the assessment process to improve both short- and long-term outcomes by requiring students to make sophisticated judgments about their own learning, and that of their peers” (Thomas & Martin & Pleasants, 2011, p.1). Boud and Associates (2010) supported the assessment approach such as PA that requires teachers to share the responsibility of making classroom assessment with students and help the development of necessary intellectual skills of students for well deciding their academic and personal lives in preparation for a successful future.

Yet not all studies found the positive correlation between the use of PA and the improvement of students’ learning outcomes. Following this, past research has shown a constant interest in investigating the issues of validity and reliability of PA by comparing with teacher’s assessment (TA). Falchikov & Goldfinch (2000), for example, have identified a substantial number of up to 48 PA studies which compared PA to TA using meta-analysis. The findings indicated that there was a good corresponding between peer marking and teacher marking, which aligns with the results of other studies such as by Topping (1998), Şahin (2008) and Kishwar et al. (2015). It also has been found a number of variables affecting the validity and reliability of PA including the extent to which criteria of assessment are well understood, whether assessment tasks are of an academic context or a professional practice, the extent to which students get familiar with and have ownership of assessment criteria (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). In order

to maximize the validity and reliability of PA, Kishwar et al. (2015) have called for training of how to provide meaningful, objective and accurate feedback of peers' performance and regular checking and monitoring of PA on the part of teachers to enhance PA effectiveness. In the same vein, Falchikov (2001) proposed that assessment criteria must be well understood by students and further suggested hiding students' name and using more than one peer evaluation of a student' work.

II. 3. Learners' attitudes toward peer assessment

It can be noted that while an extensive body of research on the issue of validity and reliability of PA does exist, the aspects of students' attitudes and experience in PA receive inadequate attention (Hanrahan & Issacs, 2001; Vu & Alba, 2007). The majority of limited literature on learners' attitudes and perceptions of PA reported a substantial level of anxiety and lack of confidence when giving PA. The study by McGarrigle (2013) on the opinions of PA within social constructivist research paradigm of second year students of an Honours degree programme in Early Childhood Education and Care in the South of Ireland, for example, has revealed that the students hold unexpectedly negative attitudes toward PA. Students' fear of potential bias and class conflicts as well as their lack of confidence in PA compared to teacher assessment (TA) account for their reserved opinions of PA. It is interesting to note that the main reason leading to their negative attitudes is that an education system that values individualism and competitiveness such as in the research context could not well accommodate PA which requires cooperation and collectivism. Reporting a similar problem of anxiety when undertaking PA, Cartney (2010)'s action research on the use of PA in enabling feed-back to feed-forward so as to improve students' future learning has argued that students were anxious about giving critical comments to their peers for fear that the comment would upset their peers. In turn, the students also find being assessed by peers anxiety-provoking as they did not fully aware of long term future benefits of PA, i.e. their future professions requiring PA. In addition, their extended familiarity with the role of a subject to be assessed by their tutor rather than an agent to undertake the task of assessing their peers also explains their anxiety in giving PA. Another leading to undesirable attitudes toward PA among this group of students is their failure to understand PA assessment criteria. Hanrahan & Isaacs (2001) also pointed out problems students encountered when making PA such as having difficulty maintaining objectivity, lack of experience in making assessment and uncertainty about marking standards, and unfamiliarity with peers' work of other areas rather than their expertise. These problems resulted in the students' discomfort and lack of confidence in PA practices.

On the other coin of the issue, students in a Public Speaking course at a Tokyo University were reported to have positive attitudes toward PA and the application of PA in the course shown effectiveness in promoting learning (White, 2009). In the same vein, the students in a construction management course in McLaughlin and Simpson (2004)'s study were observed "overwhelmingly supportive of the process and viewed peer assessment as a very positive assessment experience" (cited in White, 2009, p. 9). Although there were not yet a collective

attitudes toward among sport studies students in the UK in Bloxham and West (2004)'s study, they generally found that the students were positive about PA as it assisted their understanding of how assessment is made. It could be noted then, it is difficult to make a complete conclusion on students' attitudes toward PA as they may feel positive about some certain aspects of PA whilst dislike other aspects. For example, Ballantyne, et al. (2002) in a large study involving 939 students at the University of Technology, Australia have found that students well appreciated the long term benefits of PA such as helping them develop the skills of self-reflecting and comparing vital to their future profession while they questioned the fairness of peers in giving PA and considered PA time-consuming. The issues of fairness and consistency in giving PA were also concerns of a third of students in the study by Bloxham and West (2004) and in Papinczak, Young, Groves and Haynes (2007). While well valuing comparing skills which could be sharpened in PA practices such as in Ballantyne, et al. (2002)'s study, students in Wen and Tsai (2006)'s research, however, contended that they were not comfortable with being criticized by peers and not confident to assess their peers. An overall analysis of the findings, however, allowed Wen and Tsai (2006) to conclude that in general the students were positive about PA.

On the whole, while the existing body of literature reported students' widespread opinions of PA, it could be seen that the positive attitudes are generally about the important role of PA in improving learning experiences and sharpening essential future skills such as self-reflecting and comparing while there has been an overwhelmingly number of issues worrying the students such as their lack of confidence and experience in giving PA, lack of belief in peers' ability to maintain fairness and consistency in making PA and lack of familiarity with and understanding of assessment criteria. The latter may discourage students welcoming PA and thus, further research is needed to make a comprehensive conclusion about students' attitudes toward PA and the feasibility of applying PA to higher education setting possible.

III. Methodology

This piece of action research is mainly quantitative in nature. Traditionally, quantitative research aims to seek answers that "occur in the form of 'naturally' quantitative data" to research questions such as "How many students learning Experiential English I get A's in the first semester? What percentage of the students learning Experiential English I has negative attitudes towards the course?" (Sukamolson, 2007, p.3). Nevertheless, researchers who want to collect quantitative data – answers to research questions which may not be naturally in form of numerical form such as inquiries into "attitudes and beliefs" could still employ quantitative approach by designing quantitative data collection instruments such as "questionnaires or tests" (Sukamolson, 2007, p.3). The present study follows this approach to examine students' attitudes toward peer assessment using questionnaires as the main tool for collecting data. In addition, qualitative data is collected by leaving a space after each question item in the questionnaires for respondents to justify their choice thereby helping provide explanations for the findings emerged from quantitative data. The study uses two sets of five-point likert scale questionnaire adapted

from Cheng & Warren (1997) and Cornelius & Kinghorn (2014), which would be detailed later in this section. The research sample consists of 116 second year students of English major at Foreign Trade University among whom 95 students have practiced peer assessment in their previous courses such as writing and speaking courses while the others have not yet participated in PA at the time of the research. Details regarding research participants, data collection instrument and procedure and data analysis are below.

III. 1. Participants

The research participants consist of 116 second year undergraduate students of English Major at Foreign Trade University. They have completed a half of the total number of 27 courses in their program at the time of the research. The researcher use both convenience and purposeful sampling to achieve the objectives of the study. Firstly, from February to April of 2017, the researcher only taught English Phonetics and Phonology courses to second year students in the Faculty of Business English, Foreign Trade University and thus access to collecting data from other classes seemed not be as at her convenience as right from her own classes. In addition, as this research aims to explore students' attitudes toward PA with a view determining the feasibility of applying PA in courses in the Faculty in the coming years, second year students are more relevant than less or more senior students. This is because, toward the end of their second years of study, it is much likely that the students have made PA in certain courses and gained PA experience based on which they could reflect on allowing their attitudes toward PA to be identified. More importantly, there are still a large number of courses in the following years of their study where PA could be considered to be or not to be employed in classroom assessment based on the findings of this research. First year students have less chance to practice PA in a significant less number of courses taken compared to second year students which may lead to little reflection to be made. Third year students, though they may have substantial more opportunities to give PA and thus are able to have profound discussion on their experience in PA, are going to take just several courses next year and devote most of their time to their graduation report or thesis. This is to claim the principle of selecting participants for this study is to make certain that the participants bring with them certain experience in PA and there is still ample chance to invite them to PA in their future courses if they have positive attitudes.

III. 2. Data collection instrument

This research employs a five point likert scale questionnaire which is adapted from Cheng & Warren (1997) and Cornelius & Kinghorn (2014). The research by Cheng & Warren (1997) investigated changes in attitudes of students in the English Department of Hong Kong Polytechnic University toward peer assessment using pre and post-questionnaires which had been previously adapted from Burnett & Cavaye (1980). The present study adopts 4 question items from Cheng & Warren (1997) and makes changes to the format of the questions to better fit the frame of five-point likert scale as well as to the content of the questions to be relevant to

the research participants. The following table provides further details on the adoption and adaptation.

<i>Cheng & Warren (1997)'s study</i>	<i>The present study</i>
Q1. Do you think students should take part in assessing their peers?	Q1. Students should take part in assessing their peers.
Q2. Do you believe a first-year students should be able to assign grades to peers in a responsible manner?	Q2. A second year student should be able to assign grades to peers in a responsible manner.
Q3. Do you think you will feel comfortable in making peer assessments?/ Did you feel comfortable when you made peer assessments?	Q3. I think I will feel comfortable in making peer assessments./ I felt comfortable when I made peer assessments.
Q4. Do you think you will make a fair and responsible assessment of your peers?/ Do you think you have made a fair and responsible assessment of your peers?	Q5. I think I will make a fair and responsible assessment of my peers./ I have made a fair and responsible assessment of my peers.
3-Scale: Yes – No – Not sure	5-point likert scale: Strongly agree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly agree

Cornelius & Kinghorn (2014)'s study employed a five-point likert scale online survey to explore the prevailing attitudes towards self and peer assessment amongst Japanese first year EFL learners and to determine if self and peer assessment can be valuable language learning tool. The table below outlines the original question items in Cornelius & Kinghorn (2014)'s study and the adapted items in the present study.

<i>Cornelius & Kinghorn (2014)'s study</i>	<i>The present study</i>
Q2. Are you comfortable with peer assessing and commenting on your class work? Q8. Do you enjoy self and peer assessment activities in class?	Q3. I think I will feel comfortable in making peer assessments./ I felt comfortable when I made peer assessments.
Q4. Do you think you are a good judge of your peers' English language ability?	Q5. I think I will make a fair and responsible assessment of my peers./ I have made a fair and responsible assessment of my peers.
Q5. Do you agree that students should participate in their own self assessment and/or assessment of peers' class work? Q6. Do you agree that the teacher should be in sole charge of assessing your class work?	Q1. Students should take part in assessing their peers.
Q7. Do you feel that peer feedback on class work is as valid as teacher feedback	Q4. I preferred being assessed by my peers to by my teacher.
3-Scale: Yes – No/ Strongly agree – Agree – Indifferent – Disagree – Strongly disagree	5-point likert scale: Strongly agree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly agree

The other four question items asking for students' opinions of the contribution of PA to overall grades of peers, their reflection on and preference regarding teachers' roles in PA and their desire to participate in constructing assessment criteria are designed based on various literature on PA practices as discussed in the Literature Review section. In addition, in order to find the underlying reasons for participants' answers, an extra space is provided below each question where they could further explain their choice. This qualitative data would allow the researcher to gain deeper insights into the participants' attitudes toward PA and help explore the feasibility of applying PA in future courses. After a preliminary discussion and asking for students' consent to take part in the study, the researcher learns that 95 out of 116 students agreeing to be research participants have already made PA in their previous courses while the rest have not had first-hand experience in PA. Following this, the researcher decides to design another version of questionnaire whose items are almost the same in terms of content, yet differ in terms of wording to fit in the participants' background. For example, in question 3, instead of asking if the students felt comfortable in making PA, the question asks for whether the students think they will feel comfortable in making PA. These two sets of questionnaire are later named as Set 1 (for those having experience with PA) and Set 2 (for those not yet practicing PA).

III. 3. Data collection and analysis

The survey was delivered in the last lesson of the English Phonetics and Phonology class in April of 2017 when there was the highest percentage of 100% student attendance. After the students were clear about the purpose of the survey and research, they spent about between 10 and 15 minutes filling the questionnaire and then returned to the researcher directly. The collected data was then analyzed using SPSS software version 19. The reliability of the questionnaires was first assessed (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.720 and 0.801 for set 1 and set 2 respectively).

Reliability

[DataSet1] C:\Users\Admin\Documents\Already.sav

Scale: ALL VARIABLES

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	95	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	95	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.720	9

Reliability

[DataSet3] C:\Users\Admin\Documents\Not yet.sav

Scale: ALL VARIABLES

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	21	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	21	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.801	9

Subsequently, the data was computed for mean scores. The qualitative data was highlighted and grouped into emerging themes for later interpretation of the quantitative findings.

IV. Findings and Discussions

Research question 1: What are students' attitudes toward peer assessment?

1a. What are students' attitudes toward benefits and their ability in making PA?

The participants' attitudes toward their role and ability could be uncovered through their answers to question 1, 2, 3 and 5 in the questionnaires set 1 and 2. The table below shows the

mean score of each survey question that helps explore the students' awareness of their role and potential to give effective PA.

Descriptives

[DataSet1] C:\Users\Admin\Documents\Already.sav

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
q1	95	2	5	3.76	.740
q2	95	2	5	3.65	.796
q3	95	1	5	3.45	.908
q4	95	1	5	2.63	.745
q5	95	2	5	3.83	.694
q6	95	1	5	2.57	.753
q7	95	1	5	3.04	1.020
q8	95	2	5	3.86	.780
q9	95	1	5	2.74	1.094
Valid N (listwise)	95				

Descriptives

[DataSet3] C:\Users\Admin\Documents\Not yet.sav

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
q1	21	1	5	3.29	.902
q2	21	1	4	3.14	.854
q3	21	1	4	2.86	.793
q4	21	1	5	2.52	1.030
q5	21	1	5	3.29	1.056
q6	21	1	4	2.52	.873
q7	21	1	4	2.76	1.179
q8	21	3	5	3.86	.573
q9	21	1	5	3.33	1.017
Valid N (listwise)	21				

A glance at the mean scores of questions 1, 2, 3 and 5 answered by both students who have already made PA and who without PA experiences indicates that in general the students were well aware of the benefits they could gain from practicing PA and accordingly, they show positive attitudes in being able to making effective PA. In detail, those who have had experience assessing their peers in their previous courses agreed that they should take part it PA. The qualitative data show that they perceived PA as a valuable opportunity to obtain assessment from multiple perspectives, rather than from only teachers', which would allow the assessment to be

far from bias. They also further added that practicing PA helps enhance their critical thinking skills as previously found in Logan (2009)'s study, and offers them a precious opportunity to learn from their peer's strengths as well as draw lessons from their peer's weaknesses as in Saito (2008). For example, a student who has made PA in a writing course in her first year of study noted in response to survey question 1 that "When I read my classmate's paper, I was very excited at learning from her well-formed sentence structure, especially the cohesive and coherent flow of idea. On the other hand, I also saw myself in her writing as she made similar mistakes to mine, which reminded me of those mistakes and encouraged me to correct these in my future writing". Concerning the role of PA in students' future jobs, merely a student revealed in the survey that he was very motivated to take part in PA for the sake of his future jobs indicating a substantial lack of awareness among the students of long-term benefits of PA, which has been well grounded in the literature of PA (Sambell and McDowell, 1997; Boud, 2000; Elwood & Klenowski, 2002; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Cassidy, 2007). The qualitative data obtained from the second group of participants, who have not yet given PA, presents similar findings; yet it is found that this group put more emphasis on the regular contact among students that allows a profound understanding of one another's performance and subsequently enables them to make accurate assessment of peers. It could be noted from these findings that in the participants' perspective, whether or not students should undertake PA depends largely on their awareness of the benefits of PA and interestingly their ability to ensure the accuracy of the assessment.

Regarding the students' confidence in assigning grades to peers in a responsible manner, those with PA experience were more positive about their ability (mean = 3.65) than the other group of students (mean = 3.14). The students who believe in their ability to grade their peer responsibly argued that in the second year of their program, they were mature and responsible enough in undertaking tasks such as PA. They also highlighted their sufficient critical thinking skills obtained in their previous courses of study such as Critical Reading and adequate language skills to assess oral and written papers of peers in Speaking and Writing courses for making effective PA. Those without PA experience, however neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that they should be able to assign grades to peers. Lack of expertise, especially in specialized courses of their programs such as International Business and Business English courses, was what they believed to discourage their willingness to make PA. They also added that they preferred giving comments to grading peers' performance, which, in fact, corresponds to the formative nature of PA in which the emphasis is not as much on grades as in summative assessment.

It can be easily seen that there is a logical linkage in the participants' response to question 1, 2, 3 and 5 of the survey. Whether the students appreciate the benefits of PA and believe in their ability to give accurate PA would significantly correlate with the level of comfort they feel in making PA and the tendency of making fair and responsible assessment. Looking at the mean scores of the answers of the first group of participants, it is clear that in general they felt comfortable in making PA and they confessed having made fair and responsible assessment of

their peers. They explained in the survey that they felt comfortable in making PA because PA gave them a chance to learn from their peers, a sense of participation and contribution to classroom learning and not less important, since PA did not take much of their time. However, those who reported discomfort at evaluating peers argued this was due to their lack of knowledge and experience regarding assessment, and subsequently the feeling of inferior to peers concerning academic performance which undermined their confidence in giving PA. The students' lack of confidence in providing meaningful assessment of their peers is found to be a prevailing problem faced by students which subsequently leads to a lack of motivation and commitment to make PA (Shen, Bieber & Hiltz, 2004; Sivinicki, 2001, cited in Stevenson, 2006). In addition, it was very interesting to find that the students just felt comfortable assessing their peers with no close relationships to them – those of other groups rather than their group members (i.e, the students here often play and work in societies/ groups and keep a certain distance with those from another society/ group) as they were afraid of upsetting their close friends with constructive yet unfavorable comments, which may subsequently spoil their beautiful friendship. The same problems have been previously found in studies by Cartney (2010), Hanrahan & Isaacs (2001) and McGarrigle (2013). A student even honestly revealed that “I did not want to judge my friends because on the one hand, I think I may not be as good as them in terms of academic abilities to assess them and on the other hand, I was very scared of being criticized by friends for giving them adverse comments and of receiving the same critical comments from them in return”. The desire to maintain harmony which as discussed above made the research participants uncomfortable in assessing their peers, in fact, stems from the collectivism culture of Vietnam and many other Asian countries which avoids breaking “important group memberships and the necessary interpersonal relationships that group memberships create” such as of groups/societies that the students in this research belong to. That is why they fear that giving constructive yet critical assessment of peers, especially within their own group/society, may lead to an end of their beautiful relationship. This collectivism culture differs from that proposed by McGarrigle (2013) who associated collectivism with being constructive (i.e. giving constructive peer feedback, being cooperative) instead of being competitive (i.e. by giving critical comments which may not accurately reflect peers' performance with a view to degrade their achievement). However, a recent study by Azarnoosh (2013) found no friendship bias in PA and no significant difference between PA and teacher assessment among a group of 28 Iranian students taking an English literature course. With respect to ability to assess peers, the students with PA experience affirmed having tried their best to make the assessment fair based on the given assessment criteria since they believed the assessment would affect peers' performance and they were well aware of making constructive and precise comments in PA.

Overall, those students with a previous engagement in PA by far have positive attitudes toward this mode of assessment. This, however, does not completely align with the opinions of those who have not yet made PA in their courses of study, who generally show “neutral” attitudes toward the above aspects of PA with the mean scores of around 3 on average. From their perspectives, PA would add extra work to their workload which is undesirable, especially

when they were not as well appreciative of the benefits of PA as those with PA experience as discussed in the finding of survey question 1. While there has been an extensive literature on the disadvantages of PA as a factor adding up to the existing workload of most teachers (Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen & Khairini, 2016; Luong, 2015), there is a lack of concerns about how it increases the workload of students, who, in this case, are typically not willing to involve in PA unless there are some well-deserved rewards. Furthermore, like the first group of participants, this group also has many concerns about their academic ability and experience to assess peers. It seems that a lack of positive first-hand experience in PA makes them skeptical about their ability to undertake PA as well as determines the level of willingness and comfort to take extra work such as PA.

Research question 1. What are students' attitudes toward peer assessment?

1b. What are students' attitudes toward their peers' ability in making PA?

In response to the statement “My peers made as fair and responsible assessment of me as I did to them” for students having PA experience and “I think my peers will make as fair and responsible assessment of me as I will do to them” (Question 6) for those without experience in PA, it is surprisingly noticeable that the answer of both groups is “Disagree” (means = 2.57 and 2.52 respectively), especially when compared with the agreement regarding their own ability and tendency to have made/ make valid evaluation of their peers' performance as discussed in sub-research question 1b. While they were positive about making fair and responsible assessment of peers, they beggar the belief in or defy the likelihood of peers making similar fair and responsible PA. A large number of students with PA experience in writing courses stated in the survey that “while I always tried my best to give detailed objective and constructive comments on my peer' performance for his/ her future improvement, he/ she gave me very general feedback; that's why I could not understand what my strengths and weaknesses were, and how to improve my papers”. Those who have not yet made PA added that just only those who have good knowledge and understanding of the contents of the course would be able to make PA truly reflective of peers' performance without bias of under or over marking. The students in the two groups all have concerns about peer being influenced by personal relationships and subsequently failing to make objective feedback in PA. It is very interesting to note then this finding may reinforce the stereotypes of Foreign Trade University (FTU) students that they are known for being very confident about their academic and other life skills abilities (including the ability to assess others fairly amongst students such as found in this study) compared to students of other Vietnamese universities and colleges. One possible explanation for the very strong confidence of FTU students is that the students have substantial chance to enhance their self-efficacy by participating in a large number of students clubs (up to 42 clubs) in addition to their prior excellent performance to pass the national entrance exam to FTU, which somehow allows them to gain self-confidence about their capability. The problem is, however, there is a serious lack of trust and belief in peers' ability in PA among the research participants. This is perhaps partly because there had not been an intensive training session on how to use assessment criteria

consistently for the students so that they all were clear about how they would rate their peer's performance using the given criteria accurately.

Research question 1. What are students' attitudes toward peer assessment?

1c. What are students' attitudes toward PA in comparison with teachers' assessment?

As previously noted in the Literature Review section, the issues such as validity and reliability of PA compared to teachers' assessment have been extensively studied yet there have been mixed results. This research also takes chance to inquire into students' attitudes toward PA in comparison with teachers' assessment assuming that their opinions of the validity and reliability of PA may have a significant influence on their attitudes. When being asked whether they preferred to be assessed by peers to by their teachers, the students having PA experience have "neutral" opinion (mean = 2.63, question 4) indicating a lack of decisiveness in selecting the mode of assessment. This is perhaps because they have had positive experience assessing by peers; yet teachers' assessment remained the norm as teachers are professionally trained and have more profound understanding in assessment leading to a balance opinion in this question. Many students shared that they would rather combine both teachers' assessment and PA since it helped give them a sense of 'safety' when their performance is assessed by the teacher who is believed to be able to give the most accurate assessment whilst avoiding bias of assessing from only one perspective – the teacher's. Wikstorm (2007) also suggested that assessment in 21st learning century no longer was of teachers' jobs only, but was implemented in collaboration with students or a group of peers (cited in Azarnoosh, 2013, p.2)

Unlike the first group of students, the other group who has not yet made PA prior to this research shown a clearer favour of teacher's assessment over PA. They claimed that their classmates often overestimated peers' performance in an effort to please each other while teachers, with no such a personal incentive, tended to give more objective assessment. This belief challenges the well-establishing literature on the reliability and validity of PA as discussed in the Literature Review section indicating again, a lack of trust on peers in PA. A limited number of students, though, chose to be assessed by peers only as they believed teachers could not observe the progress of all students, especially in the context of large classroom such as in the Faculty of Business English (ranged from 50 to 60 students per class), FTU in order to make accurate assessment of their performance. Their peers, on the contrary, despite having less expertise in making assessments compared to teachers, have more time and more chance not only in but also after class to understand their effort and contribution in completing tasks which would be taken into account in the assessment allowing it to better reflect peers' performance. In the students' perspective, therefore, other prior factors to the present performance need to be taken into great consideration when it comes to assessment, which sometimes the teachers may fail to see and thus PA would help complement this.

Research question 2. What are opportunities and challenges for practicing peer assessment in future courses?

Concerning applying PA in future courses for these groups of students in FBE, FTU, there are both opportunities and challenges which could be forecast based on the findings of survey questions 7, 8, 9 and 10.

On the bright side, the students did not consider the contribution of PA to the overall grades of peers highly essential to their participation in PA. This is to claim they put more emphasis on how PA would help the learning of them and their peer, and not taking PA in the summary of grades also helps reduce the pressure they may be under of threatening peers' GPA and maintain an extent of fairness in assessing peers. This elicits a future possibility to practice PA just for formative purposes in the research context as desired. The students were also well aware of the important roles teachers play in assisting PA and all looked forward to receiving teachers' guide. A number of students with PA experience acknowledged the detail guide they received from their teacher in Writing 1 course which has greatly facilitated their PA practices. Some suggested teachers give a model of a paper and an assessment of the paper so that the students are clear about what and how they are supposed to give feedback to.

On the dark side, both the two groups of students participating in the survey hold 'neutral' opinion of whether they were involved/ want to be involved in constructing assessment criteria with their teacher (mean = 2.74 and 3.33 respectively). This first demonstrates unreliable responses from the students with PA experience as this statement just asks for a confirmation on if they did join in designing the assessment criteria, i.e. a factual question. Thus no further discussion on this item from the first group would be included in this section. Rather, it could be seen then those who have not yet assessed their peers have not expressed a strong desire to be part of the criteria construction as they are supposed to be. Again, as they have an unconditional belief in their teachers' expertise and knowledge, they perceived it is teachers that should take an active role in making assessment criteria and they are willing to take the passive role of being "consumer" of that set of criteria. Just several students shown a clear wish to be involved in preparing the assessment criteria with a view to gaining a full understanding of the criteria for making accurate assessment. This does not follow the recommendation by previous studies such as Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) and Lane (2007) about the necessity of students to get involved in constructing PA criteria.

When being asked about in which courses in the following years of their program they look forward to making PA, both the students with and without prior experience in PA chose writing and speaking courses. This finding is in a close alignment with an extensive body of previous studies on the common practice of PA in these courses (Zhao, 2010). The rationale behind the increasing use of PA, commonly in form of peer feedback or peer review, in writing courses includes improving their writing skills (Richer, 1992; Lin et al., 2001; Plutsky & Wilson, 2004, cited in Bijami, Kashef & Nejad, 2013) and enhancing learner autonomy in writing

(Maarof et al., 2011; Wakabayashi, 2013, cited in Maarof, Yamat & Li, 2011). Likewise, PA has also been extensively used in speaking courses as it helps learners' speaking ability (Ahangari, Rassekh-Alqol & Ali Akbari, 2013), for example, by learning from speaking skills of peers so as to improve theirs (Goh & Burns, 2012). This finding adds to the literature of the roles of peer feedback – PA in these productive language skill courses and opens opportunities for future application of PA to speaking and writing courses to the research participants. In addition, as a result of worrying about giving inaccurate assessment, some proposed just allowing PA in courses involving maths and calculations such as Economics subjects where there is commonly one correct expected solution to tasks and thus may hinder ambiguity and inaccuracy in assessment. Bennett et al. (1997) also claimed that PA would be a challenging task in tasks with open-ended solutions and when there was a lack of well-defined assessment criteria (cited in Kulkarni et al., 2013, p.3). This again indicates an obstacle of applying PA to social science courses and elicits a gap for future research to inquire into.

V. Recommendations

The results of this research have by far opened opportunities for future application of PA to future courses of this group of second year English major students at FTU, especially to Speaking and Writing courses as desired, though further investigations are vital prior to a decision to be made. However, the findings also indicated a number of challenges to the successful application of PA – students' lack of self-confidence, and especially confidence in peers' ability to make PA among the students. In addition, the students were found being uncomfortable assessing peers while still looking forward to having PA in addition to teacher's assessment in some future courses. This is because although they were fairly well aware of PA's benefits, they had many concerns about the objectivity and accuracy of PA which hinder their willingness to participate in PA. The following section strives to offer some suggestions to help tackle these problems.

There is no doubt about the important roles teachers play in successful implementation of PA, especially in helping the students develop the students' feelings of self-confidence and confidence about peers through providing guidance, modeling and training. In addition, they could also play a significant part in increasing objectivity and accuracy of PA by delivering well-defined assessment criteria, ensuring consistent understanding among students about how to use the criteria, and closely monitoring PA.

V.1. Developing feelings of confidence and competence to assess peers' work for students

For increasing self-confidence and confidence about peers in PA, Stevenson (2006) proposed that the students must be made aware of the three following things.

❖ “Expectations of the assignment”: At this very first step, it is indispensable that the students be clear about the requirements of the assignment so that they could make assessment of peers' performance regarding the assignment accordingly. For example, if the assignment puts

emphasis on the language rather than content, the students then are supposed to pay more attention to how peers use language in the assignment and make evaluation as well as recommendation on improving the language use, rather than on the amount or type of content to be included. It is evident that if students all take in the expectations of the assignment consistently among the whole class, there will be more opportunities for them to give consistently fair and accurate assessment of peers' work. Subsequently, this would greatly help increase the validity and reliability of PA and help enhance students' positive attitudes toward PA.

❖ “The criteria used to assess that assignment”: In order to make meaningful assessment of peer's work, the students need to have a clear understanding about what they are going to assess and how they are using the criteria to assess what are supposed to be. It is found that checklists and rubrics are common types of clear assessment criteria provision of which would greatly assist the effectiveness of PA. For example, regarding assessing speaking ability of peers, “the provision of the scoring criteria deepened learners' understanding of the construct variables consisting speaking ability resulting in a significant increase in the agreement between the learners' and teachers' scores.” (Babaii et al., 2015, cited in Soo, 2016). Although the students in this research received assessment criteria from their teacher, many of them reported that they did not received adequately detailed guidance, and especially were given no modeling from teachers in order that they all had a consistent understanding about how to use the criteria. As a consequence, they were skeptical about peers' assessment of their work as they were not certain about if their peers used the criteria the same way as they did in addition to whether they had friendship bias when giving PA.

Understanding the assessment criteria and being able to use the criteria to rate peer's work effectively remain challenges to students, especially in productive language skill courses such as speaking and writing in a second language in which courses the research participants look forward to practicing PA. For example, regarding assessing peers' speaking performance, students may meet more challenges such as “limited proficiency in the language, lack of anonymity, rating activities inseparable from classroom practices” (Jafarpur, 1991; Saito, 2008, cited in Soo, 2016, p.69) than teachers, who are often seen as more professional assessors. Although there have been contrastive results of whether students could assess aspects of speaking performance of peers such as grammatical accuracy and language use (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Lee & Chang, 2005; Fujii & Mackey, 2009, cited in Soo, 2016), research has shown that with the assistance of well-designed and well-defined assessment criteria (Babaii et al., 2015; Ibberson, 2012, cited in Soo, 2016) as well as adequate training by teachers (Patri, 2002; Sato & Lyster, 2012, cited in Soo, 2016), students in general are capable of making effective PA (cited in Soo, 2016). It is, therefore, essential that teachers who wish to apply PA to future courses of this group of students ensure the assessment criteria are well-designed and consistently understood by the students prior to their undertaking of PA. Although it is rather difficult to specify each criterion in a completely unambiguous way ensuring a totally consistent

understanding from the students (O'Donovan et al., 2004), the assessment criteria could still be made clear satisfactorily if the scale to be measure is well-defined. Below is an example of example of rubric for participation and group work, which could be used as PA rubric.

	Criteria				Points
	4	3	2	1	
Level of engagement in class	Student proactively contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions more than once per class.	Student proactively contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions once per class.	Student rarely contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions.	Student never contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions.	
Listening, questioning and discussing	Respectfully listens, discusses and asks questions and helps direct the group in solving problems.	Respectfully listens, discusses and asks questions.	Has trouble listening with respect, and takes over discussions without letting other people have a turn.	Does not listen with respect, argues with teammates, and does not consider other ideas, Blocks group from reaching agreements.	
Behavior	Student almost never displays disruptive behavior during class discussions and group activities.	Student rarely displays disruptive behavior during class discussions and group activities.	Student occasionally displays disruptive behavior during class discussions and group activities.	Student almost always displays disruptive behavior during class discussions and group activities.	
Preparation	Student is almost always prepared with assignments and required class materials.	Student is usually prepared with assignments and required class materials.	Student is rarely prepared with assignments and required class materials.	Student is almost never prepared with assignments and required class materials.	
Problem-solving	Actively seeks and suggests solutions to problems.	Improves on solutions suggested by other group members.	Does not offer solutions, but is willing to try solutions suggested by other group members.	Does not try to solve problems or help others solve problems.	
Group/partner teamwork	Works to complete all group goals. Always has a positive attitude about the tasks and work of others. All team members contribute equally. Performed all duties of assigned team role.	Usually helps to complete group goals. Usually has a positive attitude about the tasks and work of others. Assisted team members in the finished project. Performed nearly all duties of assigned team role.	Occasionally helps to complete group goals. Sometimes makes fun of the group tasks and work of others. Finished individual task but did not assist team members. Performed some duties of assigned team role.	Does not work well with others and shows no interest in completing group goals. Often makes fun of the work of others and has a negative attitude. Contributed little to group effort. Did not perform duties of assigned team role.	
				Total	

(Source: Teaching Resources on Biodiversity and Agriculture, from <https://www.cbd.int/ibd/2008/Resources/teachers/appendix3.shtml>)

In the above rubric, while the first criterion (Level of engagement in class) and each scale to rate are well-defined, the criterion of “Preparation”, for instance, needs specifying the difference, if applicable, between ‘almost always’, ‘usually’, ‘rarely’ and ‘never’ so as to minimize the inconsistency in assessment among the students as a result of their dissimilar understanding of each scale.

Besides, involving students in constructing assessment criteria would offer students substantial benefits while somehow reduce the workload of teachers who are often left alone with the task of designing assessment criteria. In the case of the research, calling for the students’ participation in PA criteria construction would meet the expectation of a large number of students who believe they would have more profound understanding of the criteria and subsequently be able to make effective assessment using the criteria if they were involving in establishing the criteria. The study by Lane (2007) which explored the benefits of having engineering students lay down PA criteria instead of by teachers, and previous studies by Michaelsen (1992, 2004) having students decide the ratio of their grades have both indicated a greater ‘buy-in’ among the students (as cited in Cestone, Levine & Lane, 2008). “When students develop their own assessments, they become invested in the outcomes of their evaluation efforts, resulting in greater ownership for the assessment criteria and associated feedback. Put simply, students support that which they help to create.” (Cestone, Levine and Lane, 2008, p. 73). Furthermore, students’ engagement in constructing PA criteria familiarizes them with and grants them an “ownership of assessment criteria” would help enhance the validity of PA (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000). Teachers of future course should, therefore, highly consider asking for students’ involvement in developing PA criteria. Even though some students may be reluctant to have a voice in the criteria construction as they shared in the survey, it is still advisable that they participate so as to see the benefits of such a participation. Concerning how to get students’ involvement in constructing the assessment criteria in PA and grant them an ownership of the criteria, Race (2001) has proposed a very helpful detailed guideline of eighteen steps for teachers to refer to. Further details could be found in his *‘The Lecturer’s Toolkit’* (2nd Edition).

❖ “Examples of quality constructive feedback on this particular assignment using the specified assessment criteria”: After understanding about assessment criteria, it is essential then they be aware of how to provide constructive accurate feedback of their peers’ work based on the criteria. One way for teachers to help with this is to provide students with modeling and training students to provide quality peer feedback. This is because “giving appropriate and constructive feedback is a skill that takes time and instruction to do well”. This is very important as the quality of peer feedback depends largely on the guidance given by teachers (Bostock, 2000; Murphy, 2001, cited in Stevenson, 2006). As reflected by the students in this research, their teachers just gave them assessment criteria, explained briefly about each criterion and asked them to make PA. It could be drawn from this then if the students had been given more detailed guidance about how to use the criteria to give meaningful feedback, there may have not been as much lack of students’ self-confidence and confidence about peers as there were. Cestone,

Levine and Lane (2008) insisted teachers must “prepare learners before asking them to participate in peer evaluation” and should not assume that as they have prior experience with PA in other courses, they would surely know how to give effective PA in the present course. They also cited a concrete example of how teachers could model and train students from Topping, Smith, Swanson, and Elliot (2000) who made assessment of their own peer-reviewed journal publication to show how a quality constructive assessment look like in order for the students to learn from and be able to give such an assessment.

V. 2. Increasing the students’ feeling of comfortable in giving PA

As aforementioned, plenty of students in this research felt uncomfortable or will feel uncomfortable assessing their peers as a result of the fear that giving accurate yet direct and critical feedback would harm the beautiful relationships with their peers. Demanding anonymity, especially ‘Mutual anonymity’ would much likely help in this situation. ‘Mutual anonymity’ seems effective as though the teacher is aware of the identity of both students who give PA to each other, they themselves are unaware of whom they give feedback to and who gave them feedback which may put them at ease to give accurate comments without worrying about spoiling a friendship. “Anonymity may free students from incurring risks of social constraints, allowing them to feel comfortable to express their opinions without social conflict” (Akinson, 1999, cited in Stevenson, 2006, p.116). In addition, mutual anonymity thus would offer students a chance to objectively ‘attack’ arguments of peers, rather than the authors of those arguments – peers, avoiding committing Ad-hominem fallacy in their reasoning and thereby increasing the quality of their PA. Yet the teachers need to carefully monitor the assessment as “in an anonymous environment, there are added risks that students may engage in flaming (using abusive language) and/or providing overly critical feedback” (p.115). Lane (2007) also proposed that this subsequently may have an undesirable effect on the relationships among the students, which is contrary to the expectation of the group of students in this study. In order to achieve more objectivity, though, Freeman (1995) insisted on “appropriate training and practice in peer assessment.” This is to suggest that the students should be invited to more PA and receive sufficient training prior to PA so as to increase the feeling of comfortable which subsequently may result in more objectivity and accuracy of the assessment.

V.3. Establishing an environment of trust in the classroom

As the findings indicated that there was a low level of trust among students when they made PA, it is essential then an environment of trust in the classroom be established. Spiller (2012) proposed that teachers invite students to exchange their class notes at the end of each lesson on a regular basis asking them to spot the differences between their notes in order that the students get familiar with peer discussion, enrich their understanding of each other’s work and build up a collaborative learning environment in preparation for PA. In addition, creating a free-mark environment where students are encouraged to give comments on peers’ work for the purpose of learning, rather than for grading the learning, would increase the feeling of

comfortable of students thereby enhancing the spirit of being cooperative and collaborative in assessing each other. This would much likely allow constructive and accurate assessments to be made.

VI. Conclusion

This research has found a number of both positive and negative attitudes of second year students of English major at Foreign Trade University toward peer assessment. While the students are in general confident about their own ability to assess peers' work and are well aware of the benefits as well as their responsibilities in PA, they remain skeptical about their peers' ability to give accurate and objective PA. The students' own self-confidence about their academic background might be held accountable for their confidence about their capability in PA. Yet a number of students still manifest a lack of confidence due to their inadequate knowledge and experience about the course content, skills and assessment. A lack of detailed guidance, modeling and training from teachers along with not getting involved in the construction of assessment criteria on the part of the students may explain a lack of trust on peers to make meaningful PA. As such, the research has proposed a number of solutions to help solve the above problems so that PA could be better accommodated and more popularly applied to future courses of the students at this university.

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