Full Length Research Paper

Teachers' practices and beliefs regarding peer assessment in L2 writing classrooms at Jimma town, South-Western Ethiopia

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This study aims at investigating practices and beliefs of teachers regarding the use of peer assessment in EFL writing in Jimma Seto Semro and Jiren preparatory and high schools in South Western Ethiopia. In this study, a descriptive survey based on both qualitative and quantitative data were used. To achieve the objective, all (13) EFL instructors in Seto Semro and Jiren high schools and participated in the study. Questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions were utilized as a main data collection tool which was substantiated by an interview. The findings of the study showed that the majority of teachers are practising peer assessment in EFL writing. The findings of this study revealed that peer feedback was found to be beneficial, for it increased teachers' positive beliefs and motivation in English writing class. Participants also liked peer review and the majority liked to carry out this peer assessment. Peer evaluation was helpful for improving students' writing in lay out, content, organization, language use, spelling, capitalization, mechanics, grammar and vocabulary. Based on the findings, it was recommended that teachers of writing should use peer assessment to help students improve their writing in the areas of spelling, mechanics and grammar. It is further recommended, that there is a need to train EFL teachers to make them aware of the idea that peer assessment develops students' writing skills.

Key words: Second language (L2) writing, peer feedback, teachers' practices, teachers' beliefs, benefits of peer assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Even if previous studies have substantiated the contributions of peer assessment to L2 writing revisions and development (de Guerrero and Villamil, 2000; Hu, 2005; Tsui and Ng, 2000), and these findings also indicate that students' attitudes towards peer feedback play a central role in its implementation and effectiveness (Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010; Zhu and Mitchell, 2012), whether to use peer feedback as a learning activity and

how to use it depends on the teachers rather than students in writing classes. Teachers' beliefs have been showed to have an important influence on teachers' practices (Borg, 2003; Tsui, 2003), both of which "have a direct effect on the teaching and learning process" (Griffiths, 2007, as cited in Lee, 2008: 13). From this point of view, teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to peer feedback are central to its implementation and efficacy in L2 writing classes and will determine whether students have the opportunity to engage in and benefit from peer reviewing activities. Much work has been done to explore issues in L1 and L2 writing feedback in recent decades. Among the literature, some research works have investigated teachers' beliefs and practices regarding teacher feedback while some other studies examined students' views on teacher and peer feedback (Lee, 2008; Yang et al., 2006; Zhao, 2010). Nevertheless, little attention has been given to teachers' practices and beliefs about peer assessment, more especially in L2 writing classes contexts. We still know little as to the relationship between L2 writing skill teachers' practices and beliefs about peer feedback in the Ethiopian context. Therefore, EFL teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to peer feedback are worth exploring to fill this research gap and enable teachers to have a voice about peer feedback in L2 writing instruction.

Research questions

1. What are Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and High school English language teachers' practices of peer assessment in EFL writing skill development?
2. What are Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and High school English language teachers' beliefs/attitudes about peer assessment in EFL writing skill development?
3. What are the opinions of Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and High school English language teachers' about the benefits of peer assessment in EFL writing skill development?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and High school English language teachers' concerning practices of peer assessment in EFL writing skill development.
2. There is no significant difference between Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and High school English language teachers' beliefs/attitudes concerning peer assessment in EFL writing skill development.
3. There is no significant difference between Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and High school English language teachers' opinion concerning benefits of peer assessment in EFL writing skill development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design of the study

The design of this study is cross-sectional descriptive survey where questionnaire was used as a main data collecting tool. In addition, a mixed methodology was selected to use the advantages of both the qualitative and quantitative techniques (Dornyei, 2007).

Participants

The participants were 13 (100%) English teachers who work were working in the various schools in Ethiopia. Their ages ranged from 43 to 46 and their experiences of teaching English reading and writing to students ranged from one to more than 20 years. Two of the teachers had MA degree and 11 had Bachelor degrees in English or related fields.

Data collection and analysis

In this study a questionnaire and interview were used for data collection. A questionnaire was mainly used as instrument of data collection. The role of the questionnaire is to elicit the information that is required to enable the researcher to achieve the objectives of the research (Brace, 2004). To insure the validity and reliability of the data tools, pilot study by using Cronbach Alfa (the result is 0.929 which is a high internal consistency coefficient) and expertise comment was employed. Interview is used to complement or strengthen the data gathered through the questionnaire. An interview guide was used to elicit teachers' perspectives about peer feedback, their experiences of implementing peer feedback in their own classes, the reasons for using or not using peer feedback, and the effectiveness of peer feedback. The interview data was coded according to Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis scheme. We first categorized the interview items and the participants' responses into the relevant research questions and then read the answers again and again. From the extensive reading of the responses, it is possible to identify the common patterns and themes as to the nature of the responses. Based on the preliminary coding analysis, we summarized the teachers' perspectives, practices, roles and reasons respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data obtained through observation on practices and beliefs of teachers regarding the use of peer assessment in writing development

Classroom observations were held in 18 classes for 9 h in each class of grade ten in both high schools. The teachers employed the peer assessment strategy to teach students conceptualize language use, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics at Seto Semero and Jiren High schools. While the researcher was observing different EFL writing classes, some teachers told their students as to why they included peer assessment in teaching of EFL in writing classes. They told their students that, we do not always use teacher assessment in our English writing classroom because we know that peer assessment is important since it reduces anxiety, develop confidence, and increase motivation as well as

critical thinking. And we know that students are very alert when we use peer assessment. The use of L1 dominated students' converse. They were more relaxed and able to express themselves when using L1. They often conversed in L1 when they were seeking or providing clarification. Students used L1 to elaborate their points of view to their peers. L1 in peer interaction assisted them in understanding peers and being understood by them. L2 was a difficult mean to use in order to justify their context. According to Vygotsky (1978), the facilitative role of L1 in peer interaction supports the view in socio-cultural theory that language is the most essential tool to mediate language development with social interaction which corroborates the present study.

EFL beliefs **and** practices **of** teachers regarding peer assessment **in L2** writing **classrooms**

Benefits of peer assessment in the teaching of English writing

The result of the survey showed that while 13 teachers in both high schools replied that peer assessment developed the skills to use standards while making assessments, seven of teachers in Seto Semero and that of five in Jiren preparatory and high schools benefited from peer assessment as it improves their competences. Besides, 12 of teachers in general responded that peer assessment provided them the opportunity to make comparisons whenever practice diversity happened. More importantly, it enables teachers to focus on teaching. From Table 1, 11; 13; 10; and 12 of teachers perceived that peer assessment has benefits by improving openness to criticism, developing assessment skills, enhancing empathetic skills, and improving critical thinking skills, respectively. In general, it can be concluded that peer assessment has substantial benefits in teaching of English writing.

In support of the present finding Cok (2011) reported that among the many benefits of peer assessment, this assessment would enable to develop the skills to use standards while making assessments, improves teacher competences, provides the opportunity to make comparisons, enables a focus on teaching, improves openness to criticism, develops assessment skills, improves empathetic skills and critical thinking skills. In support of this finding, Cok (2011) pointed out that peer assessment improves cooperation, communication, empathy and openness to criticism. According to the same author the positive impact of peer assessment on critical thinking can be explained by the fact that students make a reflective criticism of their peers' works and performances by using predetermined standards in the peer assessment process. Topping et al. (2000) state that peer assessment can improve many social and communication skills such as verbal lecturing skills as well as an ability to criticize and an openness to criticism.

Practices and beliefs of peer assessment in the teaching of English writing

All the sample teachers (13) in both high schools taught writing course (Table 2). The feedback that peers gave focused on different aspects. Six and four of the teachers in Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and high school, respectively, responded that they used peer feedback in their writing classes. The different mechanisms that the teachers followed to practice peer feed were as follows:

1. Making students exchanging their exercise books and check for spelling, punctuation, capitalization, structure and layout of what they have written, and putting marks.
2. Splitting students into group and checking by themselves, and giving his feedback.
3. Giving opportunity for team in order to check their exercise by each other.
4. Writing on the board and then letting students discuss in pairs and writing individually.

On the other hand, some of the teachers who did not apply peer assessment in writing lesson raised the reason of time factor. According to them since conducting peer assessment is time consuming it is difficult to conduct it in writing lesson. Despite this, teachers' classroom research shows that alternative feedback practices can lead to better student motivation, more effective learning, and even improvement in student writing (Lee, 2007). In Seto Semero high school 1, 3, one of teachers said that feedback focused mainly on organization, grammar, and vocabulary. From this, majority of the feedback focused on grammar. Three of the teachers in Seto Semero preparatory and high school replied that feedback targeted on all aspects. In general, four respondent teachers said that the feedback focused on grammar, four of the feedback is on combination of organization, content, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. This finding is in line with the finding of Lee (2008) who pointed out that teachers should put more emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and students write to practice the grammar and vocabulary they have learnt.

Teachers were also asked their beliefs regarding peer feedback in EFL writing classes and forwarded different perspectives. Some of the teachers perceived that peer assessment has a lot of advantages in improving the writing skills of students. Others said that students can feel free and relax when they receive feedback from their peers. On the other hand, some individuals (fast learners) may not accept feedback from others. As each group has different skill and knowledge in writing, students in peer groups' can correct themselves on grammar, spelling mechanics, and other writing elements. It is very good to increase the capacity of students. Peer feedback can be

Table 1. Benefits of peer assessment in the teaching of English writing.

Benefits of peer assessment	Seto Semero (N= 8)	Jiren (N = 5)	Total (N =13)
Q1. Does peer assessment develop the skills to use standards while making assessments? (Yes).	8	5	13
Q2. Does it improve teacher competences? (Yes).	7	5	12
Q3. Does it provide the opportunity to make comparisons (practice diversity? (yes)	7	5	12
Q4. Does it enable a focus on teaching? (yes).	6	3	9
Q5. Does it improve openness to criticism? (yes).	7	4	11
Q6. Does it develop assessment skills? (yes).	8	5	13
Q7. Does it improve empathetic skills (yes)	6	4	10
Q8. Does it improve critical thinking skills? (yes)	7	5	12

Table 2. Practices and beliefs of peer assessment in the teaching of English writing.

Practices and beliefs of peer assessment		Seto Semero (N= 8)	Jiren (N = 5)	Total (N =13)
Q 9. Have you ever taught writing course?(yes).		8	5	13
Q10. Do you use peer feedback in your writing classes? (yes).		6	4	10
Q11. What do the feedback the peers give focus on? (yes).	Organization	1	2	3
	Content	0	1	1
	Grammar	3	1	4
	Vocabulary	1	0	1
	Mechanics	0	1	1
	All	3	0	4
Q14. How much did your students like peer feedback?	Very little	2	0	2
	Little	0	1	1
	Some	2	0	2
	Much	2	2	4
	Very much	2	2	4

an option to assess the English writing skills. But most of the students are poor in writing skill, in terms of organizing, grammar usage, vocabulary and mechanics. It also helps students to exchange their ideas and to know what other's know and share to those who do not know. It is essential as it involves all of the students in participation and then helps them to correct mistakes.

In some way, to practice this peer feedback need enough time; lack of time may influences the practice and effectiveness of it. The problem of poor communication with friends and poor relationship between students, and lack of confidence are problems that might affect peer assessment negatively. Some perceive that students must have competence using their intelligence. Some of the perspectives influence teachers to positively practice peer assessments and helped students by developing their day to day practice. Their perspectives would have also positive influence if it is applied effectively and carefully. When teachers were asked whether their students like peer feedback, four of them replied that students liked the peer feedback very much. In addition, another four teachers replied

Table 3. Guideline in using peer assessment in developing the writing skill.

Guidelines		Seto Semero (N= 8)	Jiren (N = 5)	Total (N =13)
Q12. Do you give guidelines to students on how to exchange peer assessment before they practice in writing? (Yes).		6	5	11
	Can	4	3	7
Q13. Can you trust the feedback provided by your students for their peers?	Not sure	3	2	5
	I cannot	1	0	1

that students liked it much. Two of the total sample teachers responded that students liked peer feedback to some extent. In general, these findings agree with the previous report of Liu and Chai (2006) who obtained that peer feedback focused on peer assessment of grammar and vocabulary. In general, our findings on teachers' practices and beliefs on peer assessment agrees with the finding of Borg (2003) and Tsui (2003) who reported that teachers' practices and beliefs on peer feedback "have a direct bearing on the teaching and learning process" (Griffiths, 2007, as cited in Lee, 2008: 14).

Guidelines in using peer assessment in developing writing skill

It has been expected for teachers to provide guidelines for students helping them to practice peer assessment accordingly. The survey result revealed that five of teachers from Jiren and 6 in Seto Semero high schools gave guidelines to students on how to exchange peer assessment before they practice it in writing skill (Table 3). According to Brown (2004), peer assessment is among the best possible formative types of assessment and possibly the most rewarding but it must be carefully designed and administered for it to reach its potential. According to the same author, four guidelines namely, telling students the

purpose of peer assessment, defining the tasks, encouraging impartial evaluation of performance or ability and ensuring beneficial wash back through follow-up tasks will help teachers bring this intrinsically motivation into the classroom usefully.

Trust of teachers on the feedback provided by students for their peers

While conducting peer assessment; sharing feedbacks among students are common. Teachers were asked to reply on whether or not to rely up on the feedback provided by students for their peers. Only four and three of teachers in Seto Semero and Jiren preparatory and high schools, respectively, trusted the feedback provided by students for their peers (Table 2). In general, while five of the total interviewed teachers are not sure of the feedback shared among students, only one of sample teachers could not trust the students' feedback. The reasons mentioned by teachers for not trusting and/or not being sure of the feedback came from students because sometimes students demoralized each other; students have no background of knowledge; most of the students cannot give genuine feedback, students give feedback without being interested; and only few students are capable of giving accurate feedback.

Implementing of peer assessment by EFL writing class teachers

Many factors affected teachers while implementing peer assessment. Shortage of instructional time (time taking/consuming), lack of (less) attention by some of the students, some students are careless enough to improve their skill, lack of interest (some students are not volunteer) and poor knowledge (ability) of students, lack of trust on the students' feedback, infrastructural problem and (class size). This finding is in line with finding of Ofsted (2008) considering time taking nature of peer assessment only. Students being unable to assess properly their peer's work, time taking nature of peer assessment, and shortage of materials are some of the factors affecting the implementation of peer assessment. Thus, for the successful implementation of peer assessment, issues raised above better be solved by the concerned bodies.

The role of peer feedback in students' writing development

The role of peer feedback in students' writing development includes overcoming anxiety, shyness; increase autonomous learning and motivation, cooperative learning, develop communication skill. All these improves listening,

reading, speaking and writing), increases students critical thinking. In support of this study, Walkabayashi (2013) reported that through peer feedback, learners engage in critical evaluation of peer text for the purpose of exchanging helps for revision. Because learners can learn more about writing and revision by reading other's drafts critically, their awareness of what makes writing successful and effective can be enhanced. In addition, Maarof et al. (2011) pointed out that learners eventually become more autonomous writers through peer assessment agreeing with this study.

The interview of teachers

1. Regarding the EFL teachers use peer feedback in their classes. The interview data showed that most of the teachers (11/13) have used peer assessment in their classes, but the frequency of use varies. Most of the participants (12/13) stated that they frequently used peer assessment/ feedback in their classes. These teachers always required their students to work in pairs or small groups to comment on each other's L2 writing. Mostly, they implemented such activities in the classroom and sometimes they asked the students to give peer feedback outside the classroom. For instance, teacher 'A' mentioned that "I usually use peer feedback in my classes. I ask my students to work in pairs or small groups to do peer feedback activities in the classroom usually. Sometimes they are required to finish this task after class at their home. I ask the students to point out the problems in the essays, correct, layout, the grammatical errors, mechanics, capitalization, and spelling and write comments and provide scores. I like using this activity in my classes." "Before peer feedback, the teachers always presented instructions as to how to give comments and for each round of peer feedback they usually asked the students to focus on one aspect of their writing, such as tense, subject-verb agreement, and the use of conjunctions.

All of them reported that they included peer feedback as one part of the students' final scores of this course". For example, Teacher 'B 'responded that "Peer feedback is often used in my writing classes and it is one form of the formative assessment in this EFL writing class. I give a guideline to students before they start to review the different essays. I usually ask the students to focus on several aspects of writing in each review. For example, I request my students to comment on the content, structure, the grammatical errors and vocabulary use of the essays. I will collect all the essays and the students' written comments and have a look when they finish their reviews. However, the minority of the teachers (2/13) answered "not so often" when asked how often they used peer feedback. They used peer feedback twice or three times a semester. For example, teacher 'C' has not often used peer feedback in her classes due to the limited in-

class time and differences in the background of the students. She answered that "I used peer feedback in my previous classes, but there were many teaching tasks and I didn't have much time to ask students to comment on their peer's writing in class. I usually comment on my students' writing in the final weeks of each semester." Teacher 'D' also responded that "Sometimes I encourage the students to comment on their classmates' essays, but not so often since the in-class time is too limited." For those teachers who do not often adopt peer feedback activities in their classes, they do not train the students to give comments during peer assessment in EFL writing class. For example, teacher' E 'pointed out that "I seldom use peer feedback in the writing class. I haven't provided any training yet.

With regards to the role of teachers in peer assessment in EFL writing class they worked as: trainers, actors/actress, organizers, demonstrators, guidance, coach, models, checkers and commentators.

Although, the minority of the teachers did not train their students as to how to give effective feedback, the majority of them tended to intervene in the peer feedback process or give instructions and training before peer feedback and summarize the problems involved in peer feedback when students finished the activities. Some teachers preferred to demonstrate as a model how to give peer comments and what aspects of writing should be given attention to. From the interview data, we also know that most of the teachers would collect students' essays with peer comments and give another round of teacher feedback before they explained the problems in students' writing and comments in classes. Besides, two teachers stated that they had never used peer reviewing as an activity in the teaching and learning of L2 writing. For these teachers, they showed concerns about the effectiveness of peer feedback and the students' ability to identify problems and language errors in their classmates' essays.

2. Considering the beliefs of teachers on the role of peer assessment in student writing development the teachers focused on the effectiveness and benefits of peer feedback, and students' competency to give peer comments. As for the effectiveness of peer feedback and to what extent peer feedback can benefit students and their learning, teachers' belief is similar too. The interview data indicates that the majority of the teachers think peer feedback is useful. For the majority of participant teachers, peer feedback is helpful for their students to become aware of the common errors in their writing, to learn from their peer's writing, to raise the audience's awareness, to enhance their own writing quality, to promote interest and to overcome fear and shyness, to develop confidence, to increase critical thinking, to improve four skills, to develop their communication skills and motivation in L2 writing. For instance, Teacher 'F'

responded that "I don't think only the teacher is the reviewer of the students' essays. Students shouldn't hold a belief that they write essays in English because their teachers ask them to do so. By means of peer feedback, the students can see that not only their English teachers but also there are other readers/peers who may read, review, appreciate and comment on their work. So...my students like peer assessment activity and want to be recognized by their peers … The students can identify the basic errors (such as grammar, spelling, etc.) in their peers' essays...I think peer feedback can help students to improve their English writing." Teacher 'J' also mentioned that "I would like to use peer feedback in my classes and it is also effective in improving the students' writing skill .

In addition, for the majority of teachers, peer feedback is a peer interactive process that can promote their learning. For instance, teacher 'K' responded that "I think peer feedback has good potential to improve students' writing. Learning can take place when students participate in group discussion." Teacher 'L' mentioned that "During peer reviewing, students have opportunities to make use of knowledge like the grammatical rules, vocabulary, and writing skills to make comments. In this way, students can improve their learning and enhance their own writing skills. Moreover, peer feedback can motivate their interest in writing." In addition, majority of the teachers think that peer feedback could benefit both feedback givers and feedback receivers. Teacher 'M' replied negatively with the following questions: First, can students make appropriate comments? Second, will students take peer reviewing seriously? How can a student with a low English proficiency help the other one with a high English proficiency? Teacher' N' also doubted the students' ability to give comments on their peer's writing, "I have used peer feedback in my class for spelling correction only.

3. Regarding the beliefs of teachers on types of feedback used and most beneficial types of feedback. Majority teachers responded as follows: Error identification, writing comment and conferencing were used. However, taped commentary was not used by the participant teachers in the EFL writing class. Error identification, writing comment and conferencing were the most beneficial types of feedback in EFL writing class but not taped commentary. Teacher 'M' and 'N' have used error identification since they doubted students ability to use types of feedback in peer assessment. In addition, both teachers do not use taped commentary.

4. Concerning advantages and disadvantages of peer assessment, teachers' interview data showed the following advantages of peer assessment: students are responsible and this has an effect on the motivation of the students. It has also positive effect on the efforts to learn and giving and receiving feedback is also a learning process. In addition, it has been mentioned that peer

assessment stimulates higher order thinking. Moreover, it saves time for teachers. Further, peer assessment has positive effects on the development of social and communication skills, that is, it has positive effects on skills for learning, how to cooperate in group, active learning, negotiate, evaluate and giving feedback.

According to Petty (2009), as cited in White, (2009), peer assessment results in collaborative learning where the responsibility for assessment is being shared, enable students to become more aware of their strengths, weaknesses and needs and teaches students that mistakes are avoidable and that improvement is possible. Moreover, according to White (2009), it is also helpful in improving students' ability, identify the gap between their present skills and their learning goals, to understand the nature of good work and how marks are gained and lost, students become more engaged in their learning, and it enables teachers to work collaboratively with their students toward appropriate and attainable outcomes. According to interview data the disadvantages of peer assessment includes favouritism which leads to higher scores and collusive marking. Another disadvantage of peer assessment is that there is little differentiation between the scores of the students and decibel marking. Moreover, dominant group members get higher scores and subjective marking. Furthermore, someone takes advantage of the work and scores of the others students/group score. The process of converting group scores to individual scores by means of co-assessment seems to be a good way to avoid this (Dochy et al., 2002, as cited in Davina and Stefanie, 2014).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Teachers' respondents in this study found both peer feedback and teachers' feedback were practised and found to be interesting and useful in English writing classroom. With careful examination of the responses from peer assessment, the majority of students evaluated their peers' writing in the area of content, organization, mechanics, and grammar, spelling, capitalization, layout and vocabulary and peer feedback was found to be helpful mainly for improving all these. Teachers found that peer evaluation is a useful strategy in polishing their writing skills, enhancing students' interaction, arousing and motivating their interests in English writing. Majority of teachers had positive beliefs to peer evaluation activity. Peer feedback had a role to keep the students to communicate using the comments. Thus, it has a beneficial effect in teaching writing as a process. Finally, the majority of teachers responded that peer assessment is important in writing skill development. Currently, teaching is becoming important in helping students to learn by themselves. One way of doing so is by letting students learn from each other through peer assessment

on writing skill. Thus, writing teachers are strongly advised to employ pear feedback technique to have students comment on each other's content, organization, mechanics, and grammar, spelling, capitalization, layout and vocabulary. There is the need to train EFL teachers on the importance and principles of peer feedback.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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