PROMOTING PEER ASSESSMENT ‘LEARNER TO LEARNER’ FEEDBACK IN A MULTILINGUAL HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE SETTING

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Abstract

Feedback, further known as assessment in this research, is critical to learners’ growth and learning. This study is grounded in verbal and written peer experiences acquired throughout peer evaluation in a multilingual context. This study aims to determine the problems of Grade 11 EFAL learners with peer assessment and how to develop peer assessment practices in a multilingual setting at the high school level. There were 27 learners in the class. Designated three learners gave three demonstrations on various matters premised on a requisite Grade 11 literature set book and were graded by their classmates. The perspectives of the learners who were assigned to work in groups were elicited by requesting them to respond to open ended questions in writing after their classmates’ presentations. According to the findings, some peer assessments can be subjective depending on the bond between the assessor and the assessed. The learners had a natural feeling of inadequacy in their assessments. When giving feedback in a multilingual setting, it becomes important to give it in a language they are most comfortable with. Similarly, helping students relate new information from peers to the knowledge that they already have helps them to understand and organise information in meaningful ways.

Keywords: Peer feedback; Peer assessment; Multilingualism; English as foreign language; English as first additional language

INTRODUCTION

English is now used as a language of instruction in several countries. Most learners in South Africa use it as an additional or second language. According to the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) Report (1992), a first additional/second language is attained or learnt upon gaining some competency in a first language. It is typically not used in the learner’s home but in the broader community wherein the learner resides. Nevertheless, there are significant disconnects to which distinct learners have access to a first additional/second language because a first additional/second language could be a foreign language if the learner has no exposure to the language outside of the classroom (NEPI, 1992:XI)

Peer assessment refers to "a reciprocal process whereby students' produce feedback reviews on the work of peers and receive feedback from peers on their work" (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014:102). Peer assessment can be formative or summative, quantitative (providing grades) or qualitative (providing extended verbal feedback) and a variety of products can be peer-assessed such as written assignments, presentations, portfolios, oral statements and scientific problems (Topping, 2017).

Research indicates giving EFAL learners opportunities to engage in negotiation of form can help them develop their second language faster. Sato and Lyster (2012) conducted a study that shows that peer-to-peer feedback appears to have a positive impact on both accuracy and fluency development in a second language learning environment. Sato and Lyster (2012) conclude that peer assessment offers opportunities for repeated production practice; it
sharpen their abilities to monitor both their language production and that of their peers. Their study suggests that peer feedback accelerates learners’ monitoring progress, which stretches them to achieve their full potential in the automatisation of second language processing.

There is also evidence that peer assessment has a positive impact on learners’ motivation (Hsia, Huang & Hwang, 2016), creativity (Hwang, Hung & Chen, 2014), self-regulation skills (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016) and overall enhancement of student learning and performance (Kablan, 2014).

The study aims to determine the problems of Grade 11 EFAL learners with peer assessment and how to develop peer assessment practices in a multilingual setting at the high school level. The two research questions addressed by the participants are as follows:

1. What are the opinions of learners on the problems of peer assessment in a multilingual classroom?
2. What are the suggestions of learners for the development of peer assessment practices in a multilingual classroom?

*Literature Review*

Because this research is about second language and culture, it is critical to grasp multilingual strategies on peer feedback in second language learning. The fairest model for maintaining, preserving and promoting all languages in a region is to use them in a multilingual context. Aside from multilingual individuals, the community is multilingual since individuals from across the world come to participate in communities that are already multilingual, contributing to the languages articulated in those communities.

After the demise of apartheid, South Africa instituted among the most integrated language legislation on the African continent, encouraging linguistic diversity. The concept was to retain the learning opportunities, which included the awareness, expertise and perspectives attained by learners via cultural and historical encounters in their social and familial existence as well as cultural identity via daily lives (Estes, 2017).

The term multilingualism has come to mean more than just the phrase “more than two languages” (Philibane, 2014). Heller (2007) argues that an accurate description of the notion is hard to pin down as the notion refers to ever-changing sets of practices governed by context and time rather than a fixed entity that can be employed in a similar pattern at all times. The term ‘multilingual’ is defined according to the number of languages an individual uses in society. McArthur and McArthur (1992) define multilingualism as:

> The ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of codeswitching ... according to some, a native-like fluency is necessary in at least three languages; according to others, different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to such factors as register, occupation and education (McArthur & McArthur, 1992:673).

From a structural-functional point of view, multilingualism takes a divided language approach to how language functions in communication. Multilingualism has historically been viewed as multiple monolingualism(s), as “previous social arrangements typically required only a particular additional language, language-related knowledge and/or several specific language skills for sustaining economic, political and religious systems” (Williams, 2015). In South Africa, and most of the African continent, African languages are a numerical majority, but are minority languages when it comes to usage in controlling domains. By the functional space, they enjoy controlling domains like education, the media and government communication, English, French and Portuguese are the majority languages in most African states (Gambushe, 2015).
The traditional question remains unanswered: Which degree of language competence is necessary to be bi/multilingual? At what stage of competence can we speak of bi/multilingualism? There is no precise definition of the degrees of language competence. Besides, competence has to take into account the different language areas (lexis, phonetics, syntax, etc.) and the four language skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. But this question is not easily answered because:

Even if we can gauge bilingual or multilingual capacities with some accuracy, there would remain problems of adequate labelling, for it is hardly to be expected that measured individuals would neatly fall into a small number of categories of ability (Edwards, 2013:13).

Multilingual practices are manifested in translanguaging. García and Kano (2014:261) refer to translanguaging in education as ‘a process by which students and teachers engage in complex discursive practices that include ALL the language practices of ALL students in a class to develop new language practices and sustain old ones, communicate and appropriate knowledge and give voice to new sociopolitical realities by interrogating linguistic inequality’. According to Allard, translanguaging includes flexible language practices such as code-switching, co-languaging and others, though the term extends the understanding of these practices as “dynamic and functionally integrated” in ways not previously captured by a focus on the alternation of two separate codes (2017:117). Thus, translanguaging fulfils a scaffolding function offering temporary bridges between languages which allow pupils to build links between official instruction languages and between home and school languages. These scaffolding moments acknowledge all different languages by giving them the same role and relevance in daily classroom routines.

Since this study seeks to expand current conversational sociolinguistics research on peer-to-peer engagement in second language learning, it becomes important to understand how multilingual practices can render us conscious that we are mandated to others because of poor common linguistic differences. An array of linguistics research is focusing on how speakers utilise language through performance and social encounters. The discourse of belonging is encouraged by using multilingualism to obtain corrective feedback.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

**Research Design**

This study was designed as a qualitative research project. It took place in a multilingual Grade 11 classroom. None of the participants was a native speaker of English. For this qualitative study, only 27 EFAL learners in Grade 11 were used as participants. The participants comprised 8 boys and 19 girls and were aged between 16-19. Statistics from the school revealed that the school has almost double the number of females compared to males. The researcher requested parental consent for their children to participate in this study. Three learners were selected to make 3 presentations on different topics based on a prescribed Grade 11 literature set book and were assessed by their peers. Their selection was based on their marks in an English literature test they had written. The best three performers were selected to make presentations to their peers because their content mastery in the set book was unquestionable.

The researcher also requested assent from learners to participate in this research. These learners were stationed at one high school in South Africa. In 4 groups of 6 each, the learners assessed their peers based on the Feedback Form that had 4 open-ended questions. Before the participants took part in the peer assessment, they were informed of the general aim of the study, which is ‘aims to determine the problems of Grade 11 EFAL learners with peer assessment and how to develop peer assessment practices in a multilingual setting at high
school level.’ The participants were also introduced to the interview guide form with open-ended questions used as a data collection instrument.

The learners asked their peers (presenters) questions during their presentations for clearness. Also, they explained some presenters’ points to guarantee clarity. Again, after their presentations and oral and written sample, peer-peer feedback assessment was done based on the prescribed criteria. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity for participating in this study.

**Data Analysis**

The qualitative data for this study were analysed using the content analysis method also known as an interpretive method. The interpretative analysis reduced the volume of information and identified significant patterns. The researchers analysed the participants’ responses to peer presentations closely, finding links and similarities in the responses and coded them appropriately. Then, the researchers abridged and positioned the results into themes.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Research Findings**

This study aims to investigate the learners’ opinions on the problems of peer assessment in a multilingualism and find out learners’ suggestions in developing peer assessment practices in a multilingual classroom. The research findings can be presented as follows.

**What are the opinions of learners on the problems of peer assessment in a multilingual classroom?**

It is natural to have a feeling of inadequacy in whatever we do. Even after seemingly thorough preparation, one always feels ill-prepared for that which is yet to happen. Similarly, of course, this could be truer of peer assessment. The problem with such peer assessment is that it may be less likely to be "correct" than teacher feedback (Topping, 2017). To solidify this assertion, the participants had this to say:

*We have a lot of faith in our teachers’ subject content. He does not battle to explain any concepts to our fullest understanding. When we compare his assessments to that of our peers, we can see a great imbalance. His contributions are always more detailed, measured and reassuring than those of our peers (Learner 12).*

*Our English teacher went for training to teach this subject. It becomes obvious that his feedback is professional and convincing unlike what we get from our peers. It’s not always persuasive enough (Learner 4).*

Terminology management is how specialised concepts should be represented to provide the user with an adequate understanding of their meaning as well as sufficient knowledge of their location within the general knowledge structure of a scientific or technical domain. Such a conceptual representation should contain information in various formats. In this regard, peer feedback in linguistic and graphical descriptions of specialised entities plays a major role in knowledge representation, especially when both converge to highlight the multidimensional nature of concepts and the conceptual relations within a specialised domain. When giving feedback in a multilingual setting, it becomes important to give structured feedback in terminographic definitions meshed with the visual information and explanations both in words and in images for a better understanding of complex and dynamic concept systems. This is highlighted as follows:

*Any feedback which is not represented in diagrams or pictures is difficult to remember because my vocabulary is not yet rich (Learner 1).*

*I love feedback displayed both in picture and word form because pictures are very colourful and I get attached to them so easily (Learner 23).*
Some peer assessments can be subjective depending on the bond between the assessor and the assessed. It is a fact that learners relate to each other depending on their friendship. The worry about peer assessment is also reported by Bay (2011) who notes that the relations built upon friendship could prevent a valid peer assessment. This observation is shared in the excerpts:

It’s difficult to assess our friends’ presentations truthfully. We are always biased towards our friends regardless of their presentations which might be far from being convincing. The whole idea is to preserve our friendships at all costs (Learner 20). We are not fair in our assessments of our peers who are closer to us. Friendship matters most; we cannot afford to lose our closeness because of academic activity. Even when we can tell that the presentation is not up to the standard, we try to make it look better in our assessments (Learner 16).

Language is culture and culture is language. Humans identify themselves with their language. Humanity and language are inseparable; they are always intertwined. For this reason, humans are tempted to resort to their mother tongue when an opportunity arises. These assertions are captured in the following excerpts:

There are moments when we tend to over-use our mother tongue at the expense of English which is the official medium of communication during peer assessments. This might affect the quality of our feedback (Learner 9). I think in our assessments, we tend to use our mother tongue more often than English. This becomes a problem when we have to translate into English when we write any given work (Learner 6).

What are the suggestions of learners for the development of peer assessment practices in a multilingual classroom?

The study has shown the need for learners not to use demeaning remarks as they give peers some feedback. Any feedback which is hardly punctuated with positive comments demoralises the recipients. Any meaningful feedback motivates the recipient, hence the need to over-reference the positives in the assessment followed by a few negatives. Peer assessment ushers hope in all the asessees, thus, the focus is the good in presentations. Initially, peer feedback should highlight positive aspects of the work in question (Topping, 2017). Then, it should move on to aspects that might be improved (one hesitates to say “negative”). This augurs well with the following findings:

Peer assessment can be beneficial if the assessors consider both the good and the bad about any presentation. The idea is to give hope to their peers instead of just condemning them for their half-baked responses (Learner 2). We suggest that when we give peer feedback, we see the good or strengths in other people’s responses instead of just focusing on the weaknesses in their presentations. We are all bound to make errors; hence, we must not invest a lot of time on errors in our tasks (Learner 21).

Once students are used to peer assessment and have overcome their initial fears and hesitations, reliability is likely to be quite high, not that different from teacher reliability (Bay, 2011). This sentiment is echoed in the following excerpts:

Peer assessment must not be a once-off thing; it has to be part of our learning so that we get used to it. Exposure to peer feedback will help us overcome some of our worst fears such as the urge not to disappoint, choice of words and relevance. The teacher also needs to give us some hints on how to assess our peers so that no one ‘strays’ when tasked to give feedback (Learner 5).
Practice makes perfect, therefore, teachers need to do less teacher-assessment and let us give feedback to each other. When we get used to it, I'm certain our feedback will be as accurate as expected of learners in Grade 11 (Learner 3).

By paying adequate concentration to the basis of academic and emotional life, all the merits obligatory for a good citizen, clear expression, clear thinking, sincere thoughts and action and feeling fullness of imaginative and emotional life can be refined and ‘urbanised’ simply by mother tongue. Essentially, learning in the mother tongue is effortless but learning in a second language takes more time, which unsurprisingly hinders the learners’ individualities. Giving respondents feedback in a language other than the respondents’ language is a breach of good pedagogy ethics and culpable of cultural imposition. Hence, it is important to give feedback in the mother tongue and teach through the mother tongue because the learners’ growth depends on it. This is echoed in the following sentiments:

*I like it when the my classmate tells me about my mistakes in my home language, Sesotho. It will take me time to forget such corrections and contributions* (Learner 10).

*It seems any criticism be it verbal or written, as long it’s in my mother tongue, stays ‘with and in me’ forever. In most cases, I can easily remember even the whole wording* (Learner 19).

This study also revealed that learners will not struggle with giving and receiving feedback as long as they (giving and receiving feedback) are based on a familiar area. They are largely content with feedback that focuses on a theme they are mindful of. Similarly, Francois (2016) advocates for prior knowledge activation because new information is better integrated with existing information. Helping students bring to mind prior knowledge can have a strong positive impact on learning. Similarly, helping students relate new information from peers to the knowledge that they already have helps them to understand and organise information in meaningful ways. This finding is also supported by Mophosho, Khoza-Shangase and Sebole (2019) and Constantinescu (2007) who report that for second language learners to understand the written text and given feedback, they rely on various skills and strategies, combining background knowledge and real-world knowledge and first language related knowledge. The participants had this to say:

*It’s easier to master feedback when it is centred on what I once read or experienced. The moment I see the link, then, I am ready to accept the feedback* (Learner 17).

*Many times, if feedback relies on what we did the previous years, I like that because it’s like a way of refreshing my memory the way I do with my phone when it’s freezing* (Learner 13).

Discussion

In this subsection, the author(s) comes to the main part of the article. This subsection serves the answers of question(s) stated in the introduction section. To support the answer, the author(s) explain by showing the relevance of findings described earlier in this section. Highlight the most significant results, but do not repeat what has been written in the Results section. Connect your findings with the literature review or theories you use in your research.

According to the findings, while giving feedback to learners, it is critical that they feel good about it (Piccinin, 2003). This is regarded as a method of encouraging learners to make use of the comments they have received. Learners must not be discouraged by feedback at whatever expense. Although it is necessary to direct learners’ awareness to the less productive aspects of a learning aspects, learners should be sensitive in delivering such "negative reviews.” The study has shown the need for learners not to use demeaning remarks as they give peers some feedback. Any feedback which is hardly punctuated with positive comments demoralises the recipients. Any meaningful feedback is meant to motivate the recipient, hence the need to over-reference the positives in the assessment followed by a few negatives. Peer
assessment is designed to usher hope in all the assesses. As a result, learners can increase other learners’ learning environments by giving constructive feedback.

The study reiterates the need for the learners to receive feedback in their mother language where possible. The value of a mother language can be attributed to several factors. People’s perceptions and sentiments are framed by their home language. A child's upliftment must learn to talk in his or her home language. Fluency in the learner's home language, also known as the native language, aids the learner in a variety of ways. It connects him to his heritage and promotes intellectual abilities (Nishanthi, 2020). A child’s earliest understanding of the world is through the language in which their mother communicates before they are born and throughout their lives. Several pupils in underdeveloped countries learn next to nothing in school, a fact that can be attributed to the instruction given in a language they do not completely comprehend (Nishanthi, 2020). This is a technique that results in little or non-existent information and cognitive ability, unpleasant encounters, and school drop and repetition frequencies. Language policy must consider mother-tongue instruction to increase educational quality. Approaches of teaching that overlook the home language throughout the early years can be unsuccessful and detrimental to children's learning. At least in the early years, mother-tongue education can help teachers teach and learners learn more efficiently.

This study also revealed that learners are comfortable with feedback that addresses the known that is then linked to the unknown. This calls for prior knowledge activation by other learners or even the teacher because new information is better integrated with existing information. Helping students bring to mind prior knowledge can have a strong positive impact on learning. Similarly, helping students relate feedback from other learners to the knowledge that they already have helps them to comprehend concepts so easily.

The study has served to show that multilingualism is one of the most relevant social phenomena of the present age and resultantlly, an issue that needs our attention in the academic world. It is important to use the learners’ home language as the language of instruction as this certifies their distinctiveness and gives them a sense of ownership as advised by Zano (2020). Around the world, there is a rising drift of supporting instruction in the mother tongue in the child's early years of education. Even Sathiaseelan (2013) asserts that the children think and dream in the mother tongue so training in mother tongue use is the first instrument of human culture and the first essential of schooling. This means the only language most excellent to attain originality in thought and expression is with which one lives and grows. For the participants, their mother tongue is the natural language of thought and exceedingly appropriate for concept formation. Although educational laws are prohibitive, both teachers and learners tend to smuggle their home languages into the classroom for the benefit of their learners (Charamba, 2020a). When a learner gives other learners feedback in their mother tongue, consequently, they are also catering for the other learners’ emotional, cultural, linguistic and psychological needs to mention a few. Thus, it is of huge substance for children to have a compact base in their mother tongue.

The results show that giving feedback to learners when the medium of instruction is a tool and a vehicle of expansion in skills, knowledge, interests, abilities, and attitudes – although a tool of learning, the appropriateness of medium of instruction is to be determined on the deliberation of its helpfulness as a learning tool rather than based on political, cultural, or economic consideration. It is a noteworthy reality that learning through the learner's’ mother tongue has the utmost usefulness thus, the inevitable mother tongue for instruction is being recognized today.

It has also been noted that the teacher needs to train their learners on how to assess their peers. Perfection comes with practice, thus, the more the learners assess their peers, the more detailed and objective the feedback becomes. Without this constant exposure to peer feedback, the process can be hardly rewarding. In the end, it will be a futile effort. Also,
frequent peer assessment sessions help the learners dispel the fears they might be harbouring like fear of reprisals and hurting their peers’ feelings.

CONCLUSION

The existence of multilingualism as a language policy in the South African education system is a reality. The high schools need to put structures in place that will ensure that the policy is implemented to the fullest. In most cases, African languages are mainly used for communication purposes. Instead, there must be a robust shift from just confining them to basic interpersonal communicative skills but be extended to cognitive academic language proficiency skills. This is possible if these African languages are vigorously used in academic circles, for any language expands when used and extensive terminology must also be developed to cater to the scientific and technological disciplines. In short, indigenous African languages are also capable of marking their mark on the global map, hence the need to invest resources in promoting their usage in the teaching and learning environments.

REFERENCES


