

## **EXPLORING PEER-ASSESSMENT PRACTICE IN GRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING**

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**DOI:** [doi.org/10.24071/llt.2019.220106](https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.2019.220106)

received 12 January 2019; revised 21 February 2019; accepted 18 March 2019

### **Abstract**

This study aims to explore the practice of peer-assessment in academic writing. The current researchers find it urgent to investigate academic writing because it has rigid rules that can sharpen writers' critical thinking. The products of academic writing need to be assessed. Peer-assessment is one of alternatives used to assess students' learning outcomes and monitor students' progress in the class. This research is a case study. Data were collected from the first semester students, who joined an academic writing class, of the graduate program of a university in Surakarta. The findings show that peer assessment practice can be effective as one of the assessment tools to measure students' writing in the academic writing class.

**Keywords:** academic writing, assessment, case study, peer-assessment

### **Introduction**

Assessment practice has to be implemented in every class. In understanding the outcomes of learning, assessment activity is carried out in the class. According to Topping (2009), peer-assessment requires students to think critically and deliberate the score which is appropriate for their friends. Peer-assessment allows the students to consider successfulness of the outcomes of learning, including worth, value, and quality of others of similar education status (Topping, 2000). Typically, the students review their peers' performance with one or several assessment scales, comments, or a combination of both.

Peer-assessment, as suggested by Min (2005), can provide opportunities for writers with different strengths to do positive interaction both in oral and written communication, including questioning, responding, and instructing. The students are responsible not only to provide grades but also to interact with each other to deliberate the grades in the end. The peer-assessment, seen from Min (2005), provides opportunity for the students as the participants of peer-assessment activity to work in peer, with the aim of exchanging the information that they need and they have. The students had a chance before considering the score, value, or feedback during the practice of peer-assessment. The peer-assessment activity requires the students, as assessors or assesses, to use a rubric, which will become a tool to help them realize the aspects of learning. By knowing the standards of assessment that they involved in, the students can easily do the evaluation of their own capacity and their friends.

Some researchers have conducted research on peer-assessment. Zhao (2014) focused on the implementation of peer-assessment for EFL writing. He directed the implementation of peer-assessment under the different teachers' intervention strategies. The research was a case study with 18 participants. The results suggested that the students were satisfied with the teacher's support strategies. The students agreed that the training supported by the teacher improved the efficiency of peer-assessment itself. The students felt that the training of peer-assessment affected the nature of peer feedback in two ways, namely grammar and wording.

Cheng, et al. (2015) conducted case study research that focused on the role of feedback on students' writing performance during online peer-assessment activities. This research focused on the content of peer-feedback messages that are provided after the implementation of peer-assessment. The researchers found that cognitive feedback messages were more helpful for the students' writing than the affective feedback and metacognitive feedback. The participants of this research likely got benefits from the cognitive feedback, although the affective feedback also helped them.

Iraji, et al. (2016) argued that providing the opportunity for the students to use peer and self-assessment was needed to help and influence to improve students' argumentative writing. The students could construct better writing products when the teacher provided alternative assessment techniques. The results of this study showed a significant change in the experimental group; therefore, the findings can help EFL teachers who like to help students develop strategies for students' learning, find strengths and weaknesses of their own, become independent learners and develop their own self-regulation.

Students' attitude in practicing peer-assessment was investigated by Zou, et al. (2017). This research was conducted under the case study research method. The researchers found that positive attitude has a significant negative impact on one predictor of peer assessment participation. The procedural rationality of peer assessment may discourage students' peer assessment participation. Peer assessment is a form of collaborative learning in which the students learn with and from each other as peers.

A study which is similar to the present research was conducted by Fristiara, et al. (2018). They conducted research on assessment, particularly self-assessment in academic writing of higher education students. The research found that the students realized the important roles of self-assessment for evaluating their strengths and weaknesses in writing.

The previous studies underscore the role and value of peer evaluation in EFL writing instruction, generally in terms of developing the learners' writing ability, writing performance, and autonomy in learning. Furthermore, they found the perception of the teacher and students about the peer-assessment. This study similarly investigates the perception of the students, but in the setting of academic writing for graduate students that is more challenging and has more rigid and complex aspects of writing. Moreover, although self-assessment helped the students to give themselves feedback, the students still needed other people's review and feedback. It can be concluded that the implementation of peer-

assessment in writing class is important. Thus, this research intended to find and to complete the understanding and views of peer-assessment since this kind of assessment is one of the alternative assessments.

### ***The concept of peer-assessment for academic writing***

Peer-assessment shows a crucial role in writing (Arzanoosh, 2013). Peer-assessment supports the writing teacher and lecturer to help their students accept more feedback on their paper as well as give students practice with a range of skills important in supporting language development and the ability of writing. Peer-assessment may not only have one aim when it is applied in the classroom. The lecturer has the opportunity in deciding the objectives of practicing peer-assessment in the class. For example, peer-assessment activity aimed to save lecturer's assessment time or other costs while other assessment activities aimed to add cognitive and metacognitive values for participants. Cheng et al. (2015) reveals that affective, cognitive, and metacognitive peer-assessment activity affects students' performance development.

The focus or general purpose of peer-assessment can be in two orientations, namely formative orientation and summative orientation. Karami and Rezaei (2015) argue that formative peer-assessment provides feedback and intends to fill the gap between 'current and desired performance'. The needs of learners are crucial in the formative peer-assessment while the results are important in the summative peer-assessment. Topping (2017) argues that peer-assessment is done by peers, who have similar status. Although most peer-assessment occurred between students in the same year of study, some studies of peer assessment of professional skills and behaviours cut across years. In courses with many mature students, the ages and life experiences of the participants could prove very different results, even in a "same year" project. The few cross-year studies were likely to place the more advanced students in the role of assessor and to involve unidirectional assessment.

### **Method**

The current study was carried out in an academic writing class at a university in Surakarta in the academic year of 2018/2019. The lecturer of academic writing course facilitated the students to do the academic writing activity with two kinds of assessment, namely self-assessment and peer assessment. There were 24 participants from the first-semester graduate students who enrolled in the academic writing class and involved in this peer assessment activity. The data of this study were gathered from academic writing students and the documentation of the peer assessment on academic writing.

In this present study, the data were in the form of students' information, perception, attitude, and behavior. The intended data were collected qualitatively through observation, interview, and documentation. The peer assessment activity carried out here was the activity when the students exchanged their questions regarding their problem in writing academic articles with their peer. This activity was done on June 7, 2018. The researchers used the qualitative method in this research which focused on case study since this research intended to describe the implementation of peer-assessment in the academic writing class. The focus of the

case study is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). The researchers focused on the process of the application of peer-assessment as the assessment tools to assess students' writing and students' behavior during the peer-assessment practice in the class.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Peer-assessment practice in academic writing class and the difficulties of practicing peer-assessment are presented as follows:

#### ***Peer-Assessment Practice in Academic Writing Class***

The researchers found that the implementation of peer assessment in academic writing class obtained positive feedback from the students. Hyland (2000) highlights peer-assessment as a formative developmental process that gives the opportunity for writers to make discussion with their texts and learn another perspective of the text interpretation. The peer assessment activity was done in several meetings but the researchers used one meeting to be discussed here. The students are required to propose some questions regarding their difficulties of writing academic articles. Then, they needed to find their peer to share those questions. The students felt comfortable to propose questions rather than to share it with the lecturer.

Most of the students wrote more than three questions related to their own problems in writing an academic article. The answers provided by peers were written freely according to their understanding of the questions. The lecturer gave the time for the students to answer the questions that they got from their peer. Some of the students asked the lecturer when they had the problem answering the questions.

The role of the lecturer in this activity was as the facilitator and the lecturer had to be ready when the students asked her/him questions. The most frequent questions proposed by the students were about how to write the instruments for their research. Here are the samples of the questions:

*How to obtain a proper instrument for the research? Is there any way to recognize an invalid instrument? How to validate it? (Participant 1)*

There were some questions which were similar to the questions above and the students that acted as the peer needed to answer the questions. Spiller (2012) argued that students can help each other to make sense of the gaps in their learning and understanding and to get a more sophisticated grasp of the learning process. Students are becoming involved in assessment in more and more ways. The most frequently encountered variety, however, is peer assessment. This takes many forms, often takes place in the context of group work and frequently entails the provision of feedback (Falchikov, 2005; Falchikov, 2007; Falchikov & Goldfinch (2000). From the interview, the students tended to seek further understanding about the materials and they needed to find the supporting ideas that support their own understanding or help them to comprehend better. One student from this class explained:

*"Doing peer assessment activity helps me understand the things that I have not to understand yet and help me to strengthen my point of view about something".*

The students had the freedom to share their opinion about everything they had in their mind which was beneficial to broaden their understanding of the things that they learned in the class. In answering their peer's questions, the students felt free and they enjoyed sharing their opinion with lack of anxiety and inconvenience. They tended to be more informative in answering their peer's questions in this peer assessment activity. They tended to give more detailed explanation to their peers rather than to explain in front of the class. This is the example of students' answers:

*Actually, it is based on what kind of research method that you used. I have read in some books that for quantitative research the more participants the better the result that we get ( $n > 30$ ) while for qualitative research the fewer participants the better result we get since we need to get data in depth. (Participant 2)*

From the student's answer above, it can be seen that in the implementation of peer assessment, the students can share the knowledge that they had known to the others. They can help their friend solve the problem.

#### ***Students' Difficulties in Practicing Peer-assessment***

Before conducting peer assessment activity, the lecturer discussed the activity with the students. This is to ease the process of peer assessment activity. As suggested by Spiller (2002), the lecturer needs to make sure the criteria for any piece of peer assessment clear and fully discussed with students or negotiated with them if circumstances are appropriate.

Some students enjoyed proposing questions to their peer. They had the freedom to ask everything they needed to know. But, there were some difficulties faced by the students when it turned to the answers to those questions. The interviewees taught that they felt insecure to make the wrong answer regarding the questions proposed by their peer. Participant 2 explained:

*I am afraid if I give the wrong answer to my friend's questions although I have read the materials related to those questions. (Participant 2)*

Likewise, Participant 4 stated that:

*I am not sure about my answer, but I've tried my best to give the answer to my peer's questions. (Participant 4)*

The difficulties of the students in conducting peer assessment was on answering their peer's questions. The lack of knowledge became the major factor that made the students unsure of their answer, but in answering the questions they tried to connect their background knowledge with the questions. Some students

revealed the answer with sources related to the materials that their peer's need to know.

The lecturer minimized the difficulties in the peer assessment activity by introducing the term of peer assessment to the students. The lecturer explained the things that they were doing and helped everyone to understand and to commit to the technique. Giving ample time was the best way to cope with difficulties in conducting peer assessment activity. Since writing was regarded as a complex skill, answering the questions about the writing skills was also a complex activity. It is in line with Sadler (2008) who states that assessing is a complex skill. Thus, the assessment activity needs time to develop.

### Conclusion

The results showed that implementation of peer assessment in an academic writing class can be regarded as an interactive way of assessing students' performance. Students enjoyed being involved in the peer assessment activity. The students seemed to have more freedom in asking questions related to what they do not know and they can find the solutions related to the problems they faced when writing the academic articles. The difficulties arise when the students were confused to answer their peer's questions but these difficulties can be solved by asking the questions to the lecturer.

The difficulties in answering the questions proposed by the peers will encourage the students to think critically and recall their memories regarding the materials that they have read before. Peer assessment activities make the students share ideas in an enjoyable situation. The lecturer will help students face the difficulties through questions asked by students. It can be a new source of information for the lecturer to prepare materials for the next meeting.

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