Student Responses to Online Peer Assessment in Tertiary English Language Classrooms

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Abstract

The use of peer assessment has been investigated for decades. However, the results of different studies are mixed. In this study, the implementation of peer assessment was attempted to assess students' reading aloud and oral presentation in two higher diploma/associate degree English language courses in Hong Kong. Students' opinions towards the implementation were obtained from the online questionnaire and follow-up interviews. In the end, 163 students from the two courses completed the questionnaire and 11 of them were involved in the interviews voluntarily. Apart from focusing on students' perceptions of peer assessment, the effects of the use of an online platform for peer assessment were explored. The results showed that more than half of the students were positive towards peer assessment because of their perceived benefits such as consolidating subject knowledge, engaging critical thinking and encouraging active student involvement in the assessment process. Regarding peer feedback, a few participants expressed that they were not confident in their abilities and English levels. Also, the majority of students interviewed commented negatively about the quality of their peers' feedback. Based on the findings, some implications for education and future studies were drawn.

Keywords: peer assessment, English language, oral presentation, reading aloud, Hong Kong, Moodle

Introduction

Peer assessment is an alternative assessment method in which students evaluate the performance of their peers (Falchikov, 1995; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). It can be implemented as either a formative or summative form of assessment (Topping, 2009), and the products to be assessed can be writing, oral presentations, or other project work.

There are numerous benefits of peer assessment. Firstly, peer assessment can help students to enhance their learning (Adachi, Tai, & Dawson, 2017; Lladó et al., 2014). Secondly, McDowell (1995) and Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014) found that students' critical thinking can be engaged through reflecting on their own performance when assessing their peers and their abilities to make evaluative judgement can be developed (Cowan, 2010; Nicol, Thomson, &

Breslin, 2014). In other words, students' higher-order thinking skills (Falchikov, 2001), which are examples of some employability skills (Cassidy, 2006), can be facilitated by the use of peer assessment.

Literature Review

The Use of Peer Assessment

The use of peer assessment in higher education has been investigated for decades (Ashenafi, 2017). This includes the use of peer assessment in speaking (e.g., Buana, 2016; Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2017; Patri, 2002) and writing (e.g., Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2017; Kaufman & Schunn, 2011). The results of the use of peer assessment in different studies are mixed. For example, Wen and Tsai (2006), in their study of peer assessment involving 280 students conducted in two universities in Taiwan, found that more than half of the students (66.2%) expressed their preference to have peer assessment score counted as a small part of their final course results, and 21.1% of the students even thought that the peer assessment score should be counted as 50% of the total course grade, showing a somewhat positive view of peer assessment. Buana (2016), in analysing 25 Indonesian university students' opinions of the use of peer assessment in oral English, also found that more than half of the students (60%) were positive towards its implementation, as they could benefit from their peers' comments and would be more motivated to perform better. However, negative results are shown in Kaufman and Schunn's (2011) study of perceptions of 250 undergraduate and graduate students across six universities in the United States about the use of online peer assessment for writing, in which the participants thought that peer assessment is unfair and peers are not qualified to evaluate students' work.

Peer Assessment of Oral Skills in Hong Kong

As peer assessment has been investigated for more than a decade, some previous studies on peer assessment of oral skills in higher education in Hong Kong can be found. Cheng and Warren (1997) conducted a study of peer assessment involving 52 first-year undergraduates in three classes studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP), with an oral presentation as one of the three coursework components, to find out students' perceptions towards peer assessment before and after a peer assessment exercise. The major results of this study show that although the students were found to be generally positive towards peer assessment, both before and after the peer assessment exercise, the majority of them were either unsure of or negative towards the idea of involving first-year students to participate in peer assessment.

In another study involving three classes of 51 first-year undergraduate students studying an EAP course, Cheng and Warren (2005) investigated students' attitudes towards peer assessment and the reliability of its results in assessing their peers' language proficiency in seminar and oral presentation. The findings suggest that students' attitudes towards assessing their peers' proficiency were not positive, as most of them felt unqualified to assess their peers.

Peer vs. Teacher assessment

Reliability of results can be a concern for teachers and students when implementing peer assessment and therefore, some studies in this aspect have been conducted. First, Rudy, Fejfar, Griffith, and Wilson's (2001) study of 97 first-year students in a university in the United States

shows a statistically significant correlation between the ratings given by faculty and peers. Further, Hughes and Large (1993), in their study involving 44 final-year undergraduate students in a university in the United Kingdom, found that there was a high level of consistency between the marks given by teachers and those given by students. Similar results were also found in other studies if students are familiar with the grading criteria through taking part in training (Patri, 2002) or having discussions about the grading criteria (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). However, Ginkel et al.'s (2017) study conducted in a Dutch university in which the feedback processes on 95 undergraduate students' oral presentation performance were examined revealed that the teacher feedback condition scored significantly higher than the peer feedback condition on all seven feedback criteria. Similar results were obtained by Cheng and Warren's (1999, 2005) studies involving three classes of 51 first-year undergraduate students in Hong Kong, in which the peers' and teachers' marks given to two oral tasks (parts of a group project), including seminar and oral presentation, were compared. In their study, it was found that there were significant differences between the marks given by peers and teachers in all the three classes for all tasks. Besides, in a study conducted in 4 middle school classrooms in the United States, Sadler and Good (2006, p. 23) found that the grades awarded by students are not identical to those awarded by teachers and thus, teachers are suggested to "add some oversight to the process of student-grading". Moreover, in Buana's (2016) study, it is shown that many students (76%) were afraid of giving bad results to their peers as it would affect their relationship with others. Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling (1996) also consider that simply comparing the results given by teachers and students can be misleading, as they found that certain areas of the marking criteria may be either over-marked or under-marked by students. In other words, the scores given by peers may not truly reflect students' performance. Therefore, it is not preferred to give grades (Liu & Carless, 2006) but only feedback when implementing peer assessment, which can benefit students' learning.

The present study was conducted by implementing peer assessment in two English language courses for higher diploma/associate degree students in a university in Hong Kong to find out their responses to peer assessment. Although the sub-degree (higher diploma/associate degree) students comprised 24% (29,266 sub-degree, compared with 92,583 undergraduate students in 2017) of the post-secondary students studying at UGC-funded universities [1] in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2018), no study related to using peer assessment in English courses has been conducted. Previous studies on peer assessment have focused mainly on students' perceptions towards peer assessment and the correlations between teacher and peer assessments. In the present study, apart from exploring students' perceptions and their perceived benefits of peer assessment, their attitudes towards peer assessment were further explored by investigating students' confidence of giving feedback to their peers through an online learning platform and their confidence in the feedback given by their peers. It is hoped that the results obtained in this study will give some insights to academics who are planning to implement peer assessment in their English language courses for sub-degree students. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions were answered:

1. What are students' perceptions of peer assessment?
2. What are students' perceived benefits of peer assessment?
3. Do students feel confident of giving feedback to peers?
4. Do students trust the feedback given by their peers?

The details of the methodology used in this study will be presented in the next section.

Methodology

The Context and the Participants

The present study was conducted to try out the use of peer assessment in the courses titled 'English I' and 'Communication and Presentation Skills'. They were two core English language courses for first-year and second-year Associate degree or Higher Diploma students respectively (majoring in Liberal Studies, Music, Social Work, and Sports Coaching & Management) in a government-funded university in Hong Kong in the 2015/16 academic year. The students are all Hong Kong students with Cantonese as their mother tongue. One of the assessment components of the 'English I' course is to submit a recording in which students read aloud an assigned prose passage as meaningfully as possible, and they were assessed in terms of vowels and consonants, syllables, stress, intonation, phrasing, smoothness, and pace (see Appendix 1 for the rubrics of assessing students' reading aloud). For the 'Communication and Presentation Skills' course, peer assessment was conducted in oral presentation (in which students presented a topic chosen by themselves about education/music/social work/sport) and were assessed with four criteria: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation (see Appendix 2 for the rubrics of assessing students' oral presentation).

Procedures

Before being formally assessed by the course lecturer, as a teaching activity, each student was required to participate in peer assessment to assess two randomly assigned classmates' reading aloud/oral presentation performances. The lecturer (also the researcher of this study) explained different aspects of grading criteria clearly in lessons and students could clarify with the teacher immediately if they had anything unclear about the criteria. The lecturer also showed three samples of oral presentation (high, middle, and low levels) in assessor training and discussed with the students the performance of the presentation by referring to the grading criteria. For reading aloud, the lecturer played a sample recording to the students and asked the students to comment on the performance based on the grading criteria. The purpose of showing samples of oral presentation and reading aloud was to make sure that students understand how their peers' presentation performance/reading aloud should be assessed.

The students were given two weeks to prepare and upload their recorded reading aloud/oral presentation onto the Database of Moodle, an open-source course management platform. Each student needed to submit one recording only. After that, students were given one week to listen to the recordings (for their assigned peers' reading aloud) or watch the videos (for oral presentations) and then post their comments on the peers' performance on the Moodle by referring to the teacher-developed grading criteria. Within this one-week time, students could listen to the recordings/watch the videos for any number of times to judge their peers' performance, but each student only had to give comments to a peer once.

After the implementation of peer assessment, students could make an improvement on their reading aloud/oral presentations based on their peers' comments (if they wanted to), and then submit the final version of reading aloud recordings/oral presentation videos to their lecturer to let her assign a final grade.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data through an online questionnaire created by using Google Forms and follow-up semi-structured interviews respectively. Its main purpose is to achieve data triangulation which can lead to more valid and credible results (Jick, 1979; McMillan, 2000; Seliger & Shohamy, 1989) because both consistent and conflicting results can be revealed from different sources of data (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

The rationale behind using an online questionnaire created by Google Forms is that all responses can be collected automatically and saved into an Excel file, with the percentage of responses given to each option of different items being calculated. The link of the online questionnaire was sent to 295 students (116 Year 1 and 179 Year 2 students) studying the two English courses, but the return rate is disappointedly low even though they were assured that their responses would be kept anonymous. Only 163 students (81 males and 82 females), comprising 88 Year 1 (45 males and 43 females) and 75 Year 2 (36 males and 39 females) students, completed the questionnaire. In other words, the total response rate is only 55% (for Year 1, the response rate is 75.9%, and for Year 2, the response rate is only 41.9%). To allow the researcher to answer the four research questions, 15 close-ended items were set in the questionnaire: Questions 1-2 & 15 are related to students' perception of peer assessment; Questions 3-8 aim to explore students' views regarding how peer assessment enhanced their learning; Questions 9-11 are to elicit responses about students' confidence in the feedback given to their peers; Questions 12-14 are to find out whether students trust the feedback given by their peers. The questionnaire items are based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly Agree' (5), 'Agree' (4), 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' (3), 'Disagree' (2) to 'Strongly Disagree' (1), and the last item is an open-ended item to elicit other comments about the use of peer assessment. An inclusion of a neutral option in this questionnaire was to avoid forcing respondents to express their agreement or disagreement as they might not have such a clear opinion (Johns, 2010).

Then two follow-up group interviews were conducted, with six Year 1 (three males and three females) and five Year 2 students (two males and three females), who were informed about the aim of the study, volunteered to participate in the interviews as they were guaranteed to be given coupons as incentives. The reasons for conducting group interviews are that much time could be saved, and it is easier for the researcher to determine if there are any shared views among the participants (Patton, 1990). Nevertheless, since the students in the same group were interviewed at the same time, they might tend to give responses that were more socially acceptable or desirable because of social pressure. The researcher started the interviews by asking the participants some pre-set questions (see Appendix 3 for interview questions), which allow for "probing, follow-up and clarification" (McMillan, 2000, p. 166).

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The data were analysed by using qualitative content analysis (Flick, 2014). The researcher first read through the interview transcripts to generate a list of initial codes. Through reading the transcription repeatedly, certain recurring patterns emerged, and the themes were then refined. Finally, the themes were summarised in a systematic manner (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989) to answer the research questions.

Results

To find out the respondents' perceptions of peer assessment, and their confidence of the feedback given to and by their peers, the findings collected from questionnaires and interviews are categorised into four themes to answer the research questions listed in the earlier part of this paper.

Students' Perception of Peer Assessment

Based on the questionnaire results, it can be found that more than half of the respondents (67% of Year 1 and 62.7% of Year 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed that they like the use of peer assessment (Item 1). Only a very small number of them (2.3% and 4% respectively) indicated that they do not like peer assessment. Their positive attitudes can also be shown in Item 2 in which many of the respondents (77.3% and 77.4% of Year 1 and Year 2 respondents respectively) strongly agreed and agreed that they like the idea of including peer assessment into the English courses they took. On the other hand, the percentages of respondents indicating that they (strongly) disagreed with this item are trivial (2.2% and 2.7% of Year 1 and Year 2 respondents respectively). Overall, students' perceptions of peer assessment shown in the questionnaires are rather positive (see Table 1).

Table 1. Findings of the questionnaire collected from Yr 1 and Yr 2 students (Items 1-2)

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	*SD
1. I like the use of peer assessment.							
Year 1 students	11 (12.5%)	48 (54.5%)	27 (30.7%)	2 (2.3%)	0 (0%)	3.77	0.69
Year 2 students	5 (6.7%)	42 (56%)	25 (33.3%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.65	0.67
2. I like the idea of including peer assessment into the "English I" / "Communication and Presentation Skills" course							
Year 1 students	19 (21.6%)	49 (55.7%)	18 (20.5%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.95	0.76
Year 2 students	11 (14.7%)	47 (62.7%)	15 (20%)	2 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	3.89	0.67

*Notes: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor Disagree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; M = Mean; *SD = Standard Deviation*

Students' good perception towards peer assessment could also be revealed in the follow-up interviews. In the interviews, while one student mentioned that peer assessment is "innovative", three participants expressed being motivated to do better:

- *I think it's good. We will be more motivated to perform better by comparing our performance with that of others.* (Interviewee #2)

- *I think peer assessment can force me to do better because if I did it well, other classmates will see my work and then I will have the motivation to do it even better next time.* (Interviewee #6)

- *It is the chance to force students to work harder and to study the class notes so as to give peers appropriate feedback.*(Interviewee #8)

However, students' perceptions of peer assessment were not always positive. In the follow-up interviews, four respondents (three from Year 1 and one from Year 2) expressed their negative feelings about peer assessment, which concern the feedback they can receive and feeling embarrassed to be judged by peers. Some responses mentioned in the interviews are illustrated as follows:

- *I don't like peer assessment as I don't think it helps me. The peers just give me positive feedback and so, I cannot know my weaknesses for improvement.* (Interviewee #5)

- *I feel embarrassed to be commented by my peers. They may laugh at me for making mistakes. So I will be ashamed.* (Interviewee #10)

Also, two participants showed their mixed feelings about the use of peer assessment because it depends on the quality of the feedback given by peers:

- *My feeling about peer assessment really depends on who assess me and the quality of the peers, whether their opinion is constructive or not.* (Interviewee #8)

- *It's good. Through giving feedback to others, we can pay attention to the mistakes made by others and then we will avoid making those mistakes. On the other hand, as we are students only, we may not have the abilities to judge others accurately. Worse still, our classmates may even give wrong comments to their peers and then we will learn something wrong.* (Interviewee #6)

Even though more than half of the students expressed positive perceptions of peer assessment in the questionnaire, when asked whether they prefer peer assessment to teacher assessment (Item 15), fewer than half of the respondents (35.3% of Year 1 and 25.3% of Year 2 students) agreed and strongly agreed with the item. There are even slightly more students who disagreed and strongly disagreed (26.7%) than those who agreed and strongly agreed with the statement in the Year 2 group. On the other hand, only 26.2% of the Year 1 group disagreed and strongly disagreed that they prefer peer assessment to teacher assessment, and nearly half of the Year 1 students (48%) chose the 'neither agree nor disagree' option. The percentages of choosing the 'neither agree nor disagree' option in this statement are the highest among all questionnaire items for both Year 1 and Year 2 respondents (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Findings of the questionnaire collected from Yr 1 and Yr 2 students (Item 15)

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	*SD
15. I prefer peer assessment to teacher assessment.							
Year 1 students	10 (11.4%)	21 (23.9%)	34 (38.6%)	16 (18.2%)	7 (8%)	3.13	1.09
Year 2 students	4 (5.3%)	15 (20%)	36 (48%)	18 (24%)	2 (2.7%)	3.01	0.88

Students' Perceived Benefits of Peer Assessment

In the questionnaire, more than half of the respondents (70.5% of Year 1 and 62.7% of Year 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed that the use of peer assessment has enhanced their learning (Item 3). Only a few of them (4.5% and 4% respectively) disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement. For Item 4, slightly more than half of the respondents (62.5% and 53.4% of Year 1 and 2 respondents) agreed and strongly agreed with it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that 30.7% and 40% of these Year 1 and 2 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this item.

Item 5 of the questionnaire elicits feedback about whether the use of peer assessment allowed students to apply what they have learned from the courses to give feedback to peers. Here, many respondents (76.2% and 73.3% of Year 1 and 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed, but very small percentages of them (2.2% and 4% respectively) strongly disagreed and disagreed with the item. Students' perceived benefit of peer assessment to learning can be demonstrated in this Year 2 student's response to the open-ended questionnaire item.

- *Peer assessment can let me know more about my strengths and weaknesses. When I give opinions to my peers, it is also a learning process for me because when I found some mistakes made by my peers, I will be aware of them and won't make these mistakes in future.*

Relevant comments about the benefits of student learning can also be found in the semi-structured interview. These include:

- *When we assess our peers, we need to think about what has been taught in lessons to judge others' pronunciation.* (Interviewee #1)

- *When we listen to our peers' reading, we need to think about what we have learned from the lessons to give them comments. This can then consolidate our knowledge.* (Interviewee #4)

Apart from consolidating students' subject knowledge, there are other benefits of peer assessment. One of these is to encourage students' reflection. In the questionnaire, 70.4% and 69.3% of Year 1 and 2 students respectively strongly agreed and agreed that the use of peer assessment allowed them to have more reflection on what they have learned from the courses (Item 6). As illustrated from some participants' comments in the interviews, by having more reflection of what they have learned in lessons and their own work, students' learning can be enhanced, and they may produce a better quality of work:

- When we find some mistakes made by our classmates, we will also think if we have made the same mistakes before submitting the final version to the teacher. (Interviewee #4)

- We need to reflect on what has been taught in the class to give comments to our classmates (Interviewee #5)

- As we may not want our classmates to know how bad our performance is because the video is posted on Moodle, we will reflect on what we have learned in the lessons and do our best to minimise the mistakes we will make. (Interviewee #8)

Nonetheless, whether reflection can be encouraged by peer assessment depends on students' attitudes. This aspect was pointed out by one of the participants in the interview:

- *They may seldom have reflection …As the comments are posted on the online platform, some classmates may just look at what others have commented and then copied from others.* (Interviewee #11)

The data also reveal students' views regarding engagement in critical thinking through peer assessment. In the follow-up interviews, six participants (out of eleven) thought that critical thinking can be developed. One significant comment is as follows:

- *When we assess other classmates, we need to exercise our critical thinking. At the same time, I can also use my critical thinking to determine if the comments given by my peers are correct or not.* (Interviewee #3)

However, in the questionnaire, only about half of the respondents (59% and 60% of Year 1 and 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed that the use of peer assessment has developed their critical thinking skills (Item 7). On the other hand, 7.9% and 10.7% of Year 1 and Year 2 respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed with this item. A representative response was given by a respondent in the open-ended item: "As the comments are posted on the online platform, some classmates may just repeat what others have commented without using their own critical thinking". In fact, about one-third of the Year 1 and 2 respondents (33% and 29.3% respectively) neither agreed nor disagreed with this item.

Finally, the data of this study show strong student agreement that peer assessment increased their active involvement in the learning process. In Item 8, many respondents (70.5% and 70.7% of Year 1 and Year 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed with it. On the other hand, 28.4% of Year 1 and 25.3% of Year 2 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this item. Only very small percentages of participants (1.1% and 4% of Year 1 and 2 respondents) expressed disagreement with the statement (refer to Table 3 below for details). Some examples of students' opinions given in the interviews include:

- *We will become more active because we need to check from notes or dictionary to find out the correct pronunciation before we can give accurate feedback to peers.* (Interviewee #4)

- *When my peers do well, I also hope I can perform well like my peers. Then I will become more active to try to do better.* (Interviewee #6)

- *At least we need to pay attention to the classmates' presentations and comment on their performance instead of being passive as in teacher assessment.* (Interviewee #11)

Table 3. Findings of the questionnaire collected from Yr 1 and Yr 2 students (Items 3-8)

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	*SD
1. The use of peer assessment has enhanced my learning.							
Year 1 students	11 (12.5%)	51 (58%)	22 (25%)	3 (3.4%)	1 (1.1%)	3.82	0.70
Year 2 students	8 (10.7%)	39 (52%)	25 (33.3%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.67	0.72
2. The use of peer assessment allowed me to consolidate my knowledge learned from the "English I" / "Communication and Presentation Skills" course.							
Year 1 students	11 (12.5%)	44 (50%)	27 (30.7%)	5 (5.7%)	1 (1.1%)	3.72	0.77
Year 2 students	5 (6.7%)	35 (46.7%)	30 (40%)	5 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	3.53	0.72
3. The use of peer assessment allowed me to apply what I have learned from the "English I" / "Communication and Presentation Skills" course.							
Year 1 students	16 (18.2%)	51 (58%)	19 (21.6%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.92	0.73
Year 2 students	10 (13.3%)	45 (60%)	17 (22.7%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.83	0.70
4. The use of peer assessment allowed me to have more reflection on what I have learned from the "English I" / "Communication and Presentation Skills" course.							
Year 1 students	14 (15.9%)	48 (54.5%)	25 (28.4%)	1 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	3.85	0.69
Year 2 students	9 (12%)	43 (57.3%)	20 (26.7%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.77	0.71
5. The use of peer assessment has developed my critical thinking skills.							
Year 1 students	15 (17%)	37 (42%)	29 (33%)	6 (6.8%)	1 (1.1%)	3.67	0.88
Year 2 students	10 (13.3%)	35 (46.7%)	22 (29.3%)	8 (10.7%)	0 (0%)	3.63	0.85
6. The use of peer assessment has made me become more active in the learning process.							
Year 1 students	19 (21.6%)	43 (48.9%)	25 (28.4%)	1 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	3.91	0.74
Year 2 students	11 (14.7%)	42 (56%)	19 (25.3%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.81	0.73

Students' Confidence in the Feedback Given to Peers

The questionnaire data show that more than half of the students expressed confidence in the feedback they have given to their peers. Regarding Item 9, many respondents (71.6% and 69.3% of Year 1 and 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed that they have given useful feedback to their peers. Only very small percentages of them (6.8% and 4%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the item. Also, many of them (75% of Year 1 and 68% of Year 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed that their feedback can benefit their peers' learning (Item 10). On the other hand, 22.7% and 30.7% of Year 1 and Year 2 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. Lastly, more than half of the respondents (67.1% and 69.3% of Year 1 and 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed that their feedback can help their peers to improve their reading aloud/oral presentation performance (Item 11). Only 2.2% and 1.3% of Year 1 and 2 respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with this item.

Nevertheless, nearly one-third of the respondents (30.7% and 29.3% of Year 1 and 2 students) neither agreed nor disagreed with Item 11 (see Table 4 for details).

Table 4. Findings of the questionnaire collected from Year 1 and Year 2 students (Items 9-11)

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	*SD
1. I have given useful feedback to my peers.							
Year 1 students	16 (18.2%)	47 (53.4%)	19 (21.6%)	5 (5.7%)	1 (1.1%)	3.82	0.84
Year 2 students	12 (16%)	40 (53.3%)	20 (26.7%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.81	0.75
2. I think my feedback can benefit my peers' learning.							
Year 1 students	13 (14.8%)	53 (60.2%)	20 (22.7%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.86	0.71
Year 2 students	12 (16%)	39 (52%)	23 (30.7%)	1 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	3.83	0.70
3. I think my feedback can help my peers to improve their reading aloud / oral presentation performance.							
Year 1 students	13 (14.8%)	46 (52.3%)	27 (30.7%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.78	0.75
Year 2 students	12 (16%)	40 (53.3%)	22 (29.3%)	1 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	3.84	0.70

In the follow-up interviews, three respondents also expressed that they are not confident of giving feedback to their peers because they thought they are not qualified to judge others:

- *We are students only. We may not have the abilities to judge others accurately and give them constructive feedback.* (Interviewee #3)

- *As my English is not good, I don't think I can give constructive feedback to my peers for their improvement.* (Interviewee #4)

- *As we are not professionals, some errors made by our classmates may be overlooked by us.* (Interviewee #6)

- *I think my level is similar to my classmates. So I don't think I am qualified to judge them.* (Interviewee #7)

Even though more than half of the students expressed confidence to give feedback to their peers, they may feel hesitant to give negative comments. Two participants explained in the questionnaire and in the interview respectively that they would not give negative feedback in Moodle because of concern about how it would affect their relationships with their peers.

- I am worried that my classmates will be angry with me if I give them negative comments in the (online) platform.

- I dare not to give negative feedback to the peers in Moodle as it would affect the relationship with them because our names will be shown in the Moodle (Interviewee #11)

Students' Trust of Peer Feedback

About whether students trust the feedback given by their peers, Items 12-14 address this issue (see Table 5 below for details). Regarding the item 'I think the feedback given by my peers is useful' (Item 12), many Year 1 and 2 respondents (71.6% and 70.7% respectively) strongly agreed and agreed with this statement. Only a small percentage (5.6%) of Year 1 students and no Year 2 students strongly disagreed and disagreed with the item. Also, many respondents (75% and 72% of Year 1 and Year 2 students respectively) strongly agreed and agreed with the statement 'I can benefit from the feedback given by my peers' (Item 13). Again, only a small percentage (4.5%) of Year 1 and no Year 2 students strongly disagreed and disagreed with this item. Lastly, regarding the item 'I trust the feedback given by my peers' (Item 14), more than half of the respondents (68.1% and 69.3% of Year 1 and Year 2 students) strongly agreed and agreed with this statement. Merely very small percentages of them (2.2% and 1.3%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the item. However, it should be noted that 29.5% and 29.3% of the Year 1 and 2 students neither agreed nor disagreed with this item.

Table 5. Findings of the questionnaire collected from Year 1 and Year 2 students (Items 12-14)

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	*SD
1. I have given useful feedback to my peers.							
Year 1 students	16 (18.2%)	47 (53.4%)	19 (21.6%)	5 (5.7%)	1 (1.1%)	3.82	0.84
Year 2 students	12 (16%)	40 (53.3%)	20 (26.7%)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.81	0.75
2. I think the feedback I have given can benefit my peers' learning.							
Year 1 students	13 (14.8%)	53 (60.2%)	20 (22.7%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.86	0.71
Year 2 students	12 (16%)	39 (52%)	23 (30.7%)	1 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	3.83	0.70
3. I think my feedback can help my peers to improve their reading aloud / oral presentation performance.							
Year 1 students	13 (14.8%)	46 (52.3%)	27 (30.7%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	3.78	0.75
Year 2 students	12 (16%)	40 (53.3%)	22 (29.3%)	1 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	3.84	0.70

Only one respondent gave a negative comment in the open-ended item of the questionnaire:

- *Classmates may not take it seriously and then the reliability of their feedback will be affected.*

However, seven participants expressed negative feelings about peer feedback in the follow-up interviews, which can be seen below:

- *The feedback given by peers is not always clear and concrete.* (Interviewee #2)

- *I think some opinions my peers have given are not concrete at all. For example, your presentation is not fluent enough. But they didn't give us some tangible opinion.* (Interviewee #8)

- *If the classmates have a similar level as us or even worse than us, they may give us wrong comments and then we will learn something wrong.* (Interviewee #3)

- *I don't think the peer feedback helps me. They just give positive or very general feedback and so, I cannot know my weaknesses for improvement.* (Interviewee #5)

- *Students' feedback may be very subjective, depending on whether they have a good relationship with the ones being assessed.* (Interviewee #7)

- *Because our classmates may not know the subject matter well, they may not have the abilities to give comments in a neutral manner.* (Interviewee #9)

- *Some of them give us opinions which are useless and some even give opposite opinions. For example, some of them asked us to have more eye contact in the presentation but I think we have enough eye contact. So they should point out which part we have no eye contact. We feel so confused about that.* (Interviewee #11)

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings presented above, regarding students' perceptions of peer assessment, the questionnaire results in this study show that students were generally rather favourable towards using peer assessment (as a formative assessment method which aims to provide feedback to students for improving their learning performance (Curriculum Development Council, 2002), as in many previous studies (e.g., Buana, 2016; Cheng & Warren, 1997), because under peer pressure, students would become more motivated to perform better since they knew they would be judged by their peers in Moodle before the final assessment by their teacher. On the other hand, it is the embarrassment caused by being evaluated by peers (as the comments can be viewed by others in Moodle) that made one participant show negative feeling about peer assessment. The issue of losing face because of being assessed by peers was also found by Miller and Ng (1996). Although more than half of the students expressed positive feelings about peer assessment in the questionnaire, fewer than half of them preferred peer assessment to teacher assessment. Also, in the semi-structured interviews, both positive and negative feelings about peer assessment could be found, and a few of the participants even showed mixed feelings about peer assessment, depending on the quality of the feedback given by peers.

Scholars such as Bostock (2000) and Vickerman (2009) suggest that peer assessment can benefit students' learning. In this study, the students' generally positive attitude towards peer assessment can also be explained by their perceived benefits found in previous studies such as enhancing their learning and consolidating their subject knowledge through judging peers' work based on their reflection of what has been learned from lessons, engaging their critical thinking (Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014) and encouraging active student involvement in the assessment process (Brindley & Scoffield, 1998). One more advantage of peer assessment is that students can get immediate feedback from different peers (Topping, 2009).

Regarding peer feedback, in the questionnaire, more than half of the students showed confidence that the feedback they had given could benefit their peers' learning and help them improve the quality of their work. However, in the interview, some participants expressed that they were not confident in their own abilities and English levels to identify all the errors made by their peers. They were also afraid of making their classmates angry and affecting the relationship with their peers (Buana, 2016) and so, they were not willing to comment on their peers' performance harshly or they may tend to give positive feedback instead of being too critical in the online platform. Contradictory results were also obtained when eliciting responses about students' confidence in the feedback they received from their peers. Although more than half of the participants indicated that their peers' feedback is useful and beneficial to learning and they trust the feedback given by their peers in the questionnaire, more than half

of the students commented negatively about the peers' subject knowledge and the quality of their feedback in the follow-up interviews, saying that the feedback was too general and subjective which may not benefit their learning. This result is in line with previous studies (e.g., Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2017; McDowell, 1995) in which many students involved in peer assessment lacked confidence in their peers' abilities to give appropriate feedback. In fact, whether peer assessment can bring benefits to students, to a large extent, depends on the attitudes of the students. If students do not take it seriously, the feedback they have given may not be meaningful and useful (Adachi et al., 2017). Worse still, they may judge their peers' performance incorrectly or even give irrelevant comments to their peers, as this study shows.

One of the major limitations of this study is that the peer feedback was given in the Database of Moodle and the names of peer reviewers could not be hidden in Moodle. Therefore, students might not be willing to be so critical to give negative comments, but only positive comments were given because they did not want to affect the relationship with their classmates. Relatedly, students' self-esteem would be undermined if they received more negative than positive feedback from their peers, which was known to the whole class. On the other hand, as the comments posted on the Moodle platform could be seen by all other course participants, some students might just look at what others had commented and then repeated what had been mentioned without engaging in any reflective and critical thinking, which might make peer assessment less meaningful.

Another flaw of the study is that the reliability of the results in this study may be affected (Weems & Onwuegbuzie, 2001) by the inclusion of the 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' option in the questionnaire. In the present study, some questionnaire items (Items 1, 4, 7, 11, and 15 in Year 1 group and Items 1, 3, 4, 10 and 15 for Year 2 group) were chosen 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' by 30.7% – 40% of the respondents, which cannot show whether the participants agree or disagree with the statement and, therefore the respondents' real opinions cannot be elicited.

Implications for Education and Future Studies

Based on the findings collected and the limitations of the current study, we can draw some implications for education and future studies. First, peer assessment should be implemented as a formative assessment method in tertiary English language classrooms in Hong Kong, including the English language courses for higher diploma/associate degree students. One important advantage of adopting peer assessment is that students can receive feedback not only from their teacher but also from different peers, which means more comprehensive comments can be obtained and bias can be minimised (Liu & Carless, 2006). However, students should only provide feedback to their peers and not expect to give marks because students are not as professional and knowledgeable as teachers to assess others' performance accurately and objectively. In other words, peer assessment should be implemented before students submit the final version of their assessment task to their teacher so that they can receive feedback from different peers for improving the quality of their work. Other advantages of peer assessment include engaging students to reflect on what they have learned, developing their critical thinking abilities, and allowing them to have participation and involvement in the assessment process. Of course, whether students engage in critical thinking and if they can benefit from peer feedback depends mainly on their attitudes. If the peer assessors do not take it seriously to

give constructive feedback, it cannot benefit others' and their own learning. A teacher should therefore, seek to nurture positive attitudes among the students.

Also, the success of peer assessment depends on its effective implementation. When implementing peer assessment, the names of peer assessors should be kept anonymous so that students can feel free to give both positive and negative comments without worrying about affecting the relationship with their peers. Therefore, Moodle may not be a suitable online platform for peer assessment because the names of peer reviewers cannot be hidden. Besides, students should be randomly assigned with at least two peer assessors by the teacher, and each assessor should not be able to see the comments given by other assessors so as to avoid having any bias or simply repeating others' comments. To make the peer assessment more interactive and make the peer feedback more helpful, students should be allowed to respond to the comments given by their peers. For example, if a student receives a comment that some words are not clearly pronounced, then he/she can ask the peer assessor which words are not pronounced clearly so that he/she can pay attention to those mistakes and improve.

Moreover, in future studies, the 'neutral' option should be eliminated from the Likert scale (Johns, 2005). Johns (2005) and Krosnick et al. (2002) believe that the respondents' real opinions may not be obtained if the 'neutral' option is given as there will be a higher possibility for them to select this option. Therefore, a 4-point scale with only the options 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree' would be more appropriate.

Finally, as in many other previous studies (e.g., Buana, 2016; Cheng & Warren, 1997; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Kaufman & Schunn, 2011; Lladó et al., 2014), this study focused on students' responses to (online) peer assessment, in which peer assessment was implemented to assess peers' oral skills (reading aloud and oral presentation). In future studies, the effect of peer assessment on students' language learning should be investigated. This can be achieved by conducting an experimental research study in which the language learning performance of subjects randomly assigned to either an experimental group (with the use of peer assessment) or a control group (without the use of peer assessment) is compared.

Notes

[1] UGC-funded universities refer to the eight government-funded universities in Hong Kong. [back]

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Appendix 1: Rubrics for Assessing Students' Reading Aloud

Grading Criteria for Prose Passage Reading Aloud

	Outstanding A+/A/A-	Good B+/B/B-	Satisfactory C+/C/C-	Pass D
Vowels and consonants	* the reader always or almost always consistently pronounces vowel and consonant sounds accurately	* the reader usually consistently pronounces vowel and consonant sounds accurately	* the reader often pronounces vowel and consonant sounds accurately	* the reader attempts to pronounce vowel and consonant sounds but with many errors
Syllables	* the reader consistently divides words into correct syllables	* the reader regularly divides words into syllables, with only a few errors	* the reader regularly divides words into syllables but some errors can be found	* the reader often arbitrarily divides words into syllables
Stress	* always accurately places the stress on the correct syllable within a word	* usually accurately places the stress on the correct syllable within a word	* often accurately places the stress on the correct syllable within a word	* rarely accurately places the stress on the correct syllable within a word
	* always or almost always can stress on particular words (louder tone) in a sentence to reflect the meaning	* often can stress on particular words (louder tone) in a sentence to reflect the meaning	* sometimes can stress on particular words (louder tone) in a sentence to reflect the meaning	* rarely can stress on particular words (louder tone) in a sentence to reflect the meaning
Intonation	* the reading is characterised by variation of tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text and the grammar of sentences	* some evidence of variation of tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text and the grammar of sentences	* little evidence of variation of tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text and the grammar of sentences	* almost no variation of tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text and the grammar of sentences
Phrasing	* the reading is well-phrased mostly in clauses and sentence units, which augment	* the reading contains some pauses in the middle of clauses or sentence units, though	* the reading contains pauses and breaks at unexpected times, and	* the reading is done word-by-word with little sense of punctuation, and

Grading Criteria for Prose Passage Reading Aloud

	Outstanding A+/A/A-	Good B+/B/B-	Satisfactory C+/C/C-	Pass D
	clarity of meaning and expression	clarity of meaning is generally not affected	meaning is sometimes affected	meaning and expression are lost
	* attention is paid to punctuation	* attention is paid to punctuation	* little attention is paid to punctuation	
Smoothness	* generally smooth reading with no breaks	* generally smooth reading with minimal breaks	* occasional breaks in smoothness caused by difficulties with specific words and/or structures	* extended pauses, hesitations, or repetitions are frequent
Pace	* consistently appropriate	* mixture of fast and slow reading	* moderately slow or inappropriately fast	* slow and laborious
	* meaning is enhanced	* meaning is not affected	* meaning is impeded sometimes	* little meaning is conveyed

*F (A failing grade fails to meet the minimal criteria detailed above for a passing grade)

Appendix 2: Rubrics for Assessing Students' Oral Presentation

Grading Criteria for Oral Presentation

	Outstanding A+/A/A-	Good B+/B/B-	Satisfactory C+/C/C-	Pass D
Pronunciation & Delivery	* Can project the voice appropriately. * Can pronounce (almost) all sounds/sound clusters and words clearly and accurately. * Can speak fluently and naturally, with no hesitation, while using suitable intonation to enhance communication.	* Can project the voice mostly satisfactorily. * Can pronounce most sounds/sound clusters and all common words clearly and accurately; less common words can be understood although there may sometimes be articulation errors (e.g., dropping final consonants).	* Volume may be a problem. * Can pronounce all simple sounds clearly but some errors with sound clusters; less common words may be misunderstood unless supported by contextual meaning. * Can speak at a careful pace and use sufficient basic intonation conventions; hesitation is sometimes present.	* Volume may be a problem. * Can only pronounce simple sounds and/or sound clusters; common words can be understood. * Can use appropriate intonation only in the most familiar words and phrases; hesitation is often present.
Communication Strategies	* Can use appropriate body language (e.g., eye contact, hand gestures, etc.) to show focus on audience and to engage interest. * Can judge timing (about 4 minutes for each presenter) in order to complete the presentation. * Can present without use of notes, but may glance a note card/PowerPoint occasionally.	* Can use appropriate body language (e.g., eye contact, hand gestures, etc.) to display audience awareness and to engage interest, but this is not consistently demonstrated. * Can use the available time to adequately cover most of the essential points of the topic. * May refer to a note card/PowerPoint but is not dependent on it.	* Can use a restricted range of features of body language, displaying occasional audience awareness and providing some degree of interest. * Can present some relevant points but has difficulty sustaining a presentation mode. * Needs to refer to a note card/PowerPoint quite often.	* Body language may be intermittently present, but communication strategies appropriate to delivering a presentation are absent. * There is no evidence of audience awareness, as the presenter just simply reads aloud the note card/nearly always refers to the PowerPoint.

Vocabulary & Language Patterns	* Can use a wide range of vocabulary accurately and appropriately. * Can use (almost) entirely accurate and appropriate language patterns; minor slips do not impede communication.	* Can use mostly accurate vocabulary. * Can use language patterns that are most often accurate; and without errors that impede communication.	* Can use simple vocabulary and language patterns appropriately, and with errors that only occasionally impede communication. * Can choose a level of content and language that enables audience to follow a main point.	* Can only produce a narrow range of simple vocabulary. * Can only use a narrow range of language patterns in very short and rehearsed utterances.
Ideas & Organisation	* Can convey relevant information and ideas clearly and fluently. * Can elaborate in detail on some appropriate aspects of the topic, and can consistently link main points with support and development. * Can be followed very easily.	* Can present relevant ideas clearly in an organised structure. * Can expand on some appropriate aspects of the topic with detail or explanation, and can sometimes link these main points and expansions together effectively. * Can be followed without much effort.	* Can make an attempt to express simple relevant information and ideas. * Can sometimes link main and supporting points together. * Can be followed with effort.	* Can express a main point in a way that is partially understandable. * The presentation is wholly dependent on a note card/ PowerPoint.
Dress Code	* Dress code is appropriate, and makes the presenter look smart and professional.	* Dress code is appropriate, and makes the presenter look smart.	* Dress code is barely appropriate.	* Dress code is inappropriate for a formal presentation.

*F (A failing grade fails to meet the minimal criteria detailed above for a passing grade)
Pronunciation & Delivery: Does not produce any comprehensible speech.
Communication Strategies: Does not attempt a presentation.
Vocabulary & Language Patterns: Does not produce any recognisable words or phrases.
Ideas & Organisation: Does not express any relevant or understandable information.
Dress Code: Not aware of the appropriate dress code for a formal presentation.

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

1. Do you have any experience in peer assessment prior to taking this course? If yes, could you tell me something about it?

2. What are your feelings about the use of peer assessment?

3. Do you think that the use of peer assessment can enhance your learning? Why/Why not?

4. Do you think that the use of peer assessment can allow you to have more reflection on your learning? Why/Why not?

5. Do you think that the use of peer assessment can develop your critical thinking skills? Why/Why not?

6. Do you think that the use of peer assessment can make the learning process become more interactive?

7. Do you think that the use of peer assessment can make you become active participants in the learning process? Why/Why not?

8. Do you think that the feedback given by your peers can benefit your learning? Why/Why not?

9. Apart from giving feedback, if your peers could also give you marks for your coursework, what do you think about this?

10. What do you prefer? Peer assessment or teacher assessment? Why?

11. Do you have any other comments about the use of peer assessment?