Peer Assessment in L2 Pronunciation Instruction in Russia: Students' Attitude Research

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Abstract

The literature review shows that the current educational paradigm with the shift to a student-oriented model has transformed the roles of both the teacher and the student, where the latter takes a more active and conscious part in educational processes. Peer assessment has proven to have a positive impact on L2 learning and teaching, having various benefits for both the teacher and the student, and its usefulness and efficiency has been supported by various research. While educators are aware of such positive impact, students' attitudes towards peer assessment may vary. This study aims to examine the attitudes towards peer assessment in an L2 phonetics class of first year undergraduate students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University. Thirty-four participants responded to a questionnaire, the main aim of which was to explore their attitudes towards peer assessment and its effectiveness in terms of developing their phonological competence and also their preferences regarding oral and written peer assessment in class. Responses were analysed through JASP software. The results of the study prove students' awareness of the significance of peer assessment and their positive attitudes towards it with approximately 85% of the participants regarding it as a useful component of constructive feedback and approximately 91% of the participants acknowledging the usefulness of peer assessment for the development of their own phonological skills. The study also offers a pronunciation peer assessment scale to contribute to teaching and learning L2 phonetics.

Keywords: peer assessment, L2 learning and teaching, phonetics, students' attitudes, Russian students

Introduction

Teaching phonetics, being interdisciplinary by nature, is inextricably linked to second language acquisition processes, speech sciences and L2 pedagogy (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2016). Therefore, new studies in the field of L2 learning and teaching, especially from the lingua franca perspective, ignited particular interest to second language pronunciation research, which resulted in publication of special journal issues devoted to pronunciation (e.g. Cardoso & Trofimovich, 2014), a pronunciation-focused conference in the USA (Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 2015) and the foundation of the Journal of Second Language Pronunciation in 2015.

Recently, teaching L2 pronunciation in Russia at the level of higher education has also been receiving close attention. It attracts interest and inspires discussion regarding the contents of curricula and syllabi, requirements concerning L2 phonological competence development (Kolesnikova, 2015; Lavrova, 2017) in the view of worldwide use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and the re-orientation of L2 teaching (Jenkins, 2005). Additional attention is given regarding the methods of assessment following the changes introduced to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), namely, a new set of descriptors which now focuses not on "nativeness" but on intelligibility of the primary construct of phonological control. Thus, the question of assessing students' performance in L2 pronunciation instruction is quite urgent, which justifies the need for further research.

Assessment in Pronunciation

According to Isaacs and Trofimovich (2016), "there is no dedicated book on assessing L2 pronunciation in the foundational Cambridge Language Assessment series" (p. 4). Assessing L2 pronunciation has shown to be highly problematic in terms of designing and implementing pronunciation scales with "descriptors suffering from inconsistences, vague language, conflated constructs and unclear trajectory" (Harding, 2013, p.14). Investigation into the usability of the CEFR Phonological control scale (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 117) by Harding (2013) explicated its limitations in ensuring valid interpretation and consistent application by raters and thus questioned the effectiveness of the scale for L2 pronunciation assessment.

Therefore, the 2001 scale of Phonological Control, which was continuously applied in Russian linguistic higher education to measure students' phonological competence development, (Kolesnikova, 2016) appeared to be, according to the Phonological Scale Revision Process Report,

> fully unrealistic when it comes to issues such as accent, or progression, … is not consistent as it mixes such diverse factors as stress/intonation, pronunciation, accent and intelligibility without providing clear indication of progression in any of these factors specifically, … is not complete which results in jeopardizing its applicability and usefulness (Piccardo, 2016, p. 9).

The Phonological Scale Revision Process Report by E. Piccardo, which was then followed by a series of consultations and validation in 2017, comprised the study of more than 50 publications on L2 pronunciation teaching, learning and assessing over the last 50 years, including the works of Derwing, Harding, Isaacs, Jenkins, Munro, Trofimovich, and others, who have been studying the impact of ELF concept on L2 instruction in general and on teaching phonetics in particular, and whose findings formed the base of the modified phonology

descriptor scales and CEFR spoken language descriptors (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 171). There has been a groundbreaking and long indispensable shift from "nativeness" to intelligibility which "is generally identified by pedagogical specialists as the most important outcome of pronunciation instruction" today (Derwing & Munro, 2005, p. 384). The newly created scales provide the basis for teachers of phonetics to include appropriate objectives for phonology in their teaching and to develop assessment criteria appropriate to the levels concerned and particular students expressing specific needs (Kolesnikova & Maslova, 2019).

Peer Assessment

Why Peer Assessment?

Traditionally, while teaching phonetics, an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher is supposed to give feedback to students' performance in the classroom, being viewed as the only competent individual to objectively assess the progress and/or results. However, as the focus has shifted from nativeness to intelligibility, this role of the teacher fades.

On the other hand, Russian federal state educational standards along with European educational documents (Council of Europe, 2018) emphasize the active engagement of students in their own learning, learner responsibility, metacognitive skills and a cooperative, collaborative model of teaching and learning. CEFR

> takes an innovative stance in seeing learners as language users and social agents, and thus seeing language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to study. In so doing, it proposes the analysis of learners' needs … it also clearly suggests planning backwards from learners' real life communicative needs (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 25).

Assessment processes in which the teacher holds all the power and makes all judgements limit the potential for learner development in all of these aspects. This is especially true of L2 pronunciation instruction, since teacher-student collaboration might be beneficial not only for mastering one's pronunciation skills, but also for developing listening and social skills.

There is a strong need to rethink L2 phonetics assessment system that will align more closely with the ideals of collaborative and action learning. In this respect, peer assessment can play an important role, as students' active participation in assessment design, choices, criteria and making judgments is a more sustainable preparation for subsequent working life (Boud & Falchikov, 2006), which might result in a real paradigm shift in both course planning and teaching, promoting learner engagement and autonomy. The main objective of the process of education has long been the emergence of self-determining persons, who can set learning objectives and self-assessment criteria to assess their own performance and progress to shape their own vector of development. Skilled and flexible learners are formed not by total control of educators but by an inclusive system of assessment where peer assessment would be a perfect model.

Peer Assessment in L2 Instruction

Falchikov (1995) defines peer assessment as "the process whereby groups of individuals rate their peers, who are students of equal status to one another" (p. 176). He also underscores that "peer assessment requires students to provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product or a performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining" (Falchikov, 1995, p.132).

Peer assessment is considered as "an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of the learning of peers of similar status" (Topping, 1998, p. 250). In this process students have to "reflect upon, and perhaps suggest grades for the learning of their peers" (Roberts, 2006, p. 80), and being judged for the quality of the appraisals made (Davies, 2006). This type of alternative assessment brings teachers and students into close collaboration in the development of critical thinking of the latter. Both teachers and learners being engaged in assessment affords a degree of mutually advantageous control over the assessment methods, outcomes, and their underlying rationale (Cheng & Warren, 2005).

There is much scientific evidence that peer assessment is quite beneficial in L2 teaching and learning, especially in writing. Cheng and Warren (2005) found that peer assessment has been more commonly incorporated into English language writing instruction where peers give feedback to each other's written works. Peer assessment in teaching speaking has also been recognized as being efficient (Luoma, 2004; Matsuno, 2017; Okuda & Otsu, 2010), and it seems to be quite promising to implement in teaching phonetics, a possibility the current research seeks to discover.

Benefits of Peer Assessment in L2 Pronunciation Instruction
According to Matsuno (2017), assessment

> is quite a burden for teachers. Especially when they must evaluate their students' oral performances, it may cause some troubles since they can often see those performances only once unless they record them. In those situations, peer assessment can be an additional assessment method. Peer assessment involves students in making judgments of their peers' work. (p.1292)

Peer assessment via providing and receiving feedback seems a rather powerful meta-cognitive tool, which might bring fruitful results in an L2 pronunciation classroom since it can:

- encourage collaborative teaching and learning as required by the modern educational paradigm;
- balance teacher-student control over the learning process, "students thus feel the ownership of the assessment (and learning) process rather than alienated or victimised by it" (Nulty, 2008, p. 3), which ensures stronger motivation and engagement in learning;
- give students "an important sense of responsibility for their fellow students' progress, but also forces them to concentrate on the skills during their own presentations" (Brown, 1998, p. 67).
- ensure a higher level of validity and reliability when structured marking schemes are used (Sadler & Good, 2006);
- develop listening skills along with pronunciation skills, as being engaged in assessing requires much attention and listening effort;
- inculcate the "intangibility conception";
- develop confidence in one's pronunciation skills and reduce stress levels compared to teacher-centered assessment;
- "allow teachers to be more relaxed during speaking tests as they know that they have the peer assessment to support their own grading." (Okuda & Otsu, 2010, p. 42)
- encourage reflective learning through observing and commenting on others' oral performances;

- "allow teachers to share some of the rating responsibility with their students, and it is especially useful in speaking assessment, which is time-consuming if rated by one person only" (Luoma, 2004, p. 189).

Thus, peer assessment is a highly productive tool for L2 classes, being beneficial for both the teacher and students when designed and used efficiently by both sides of the educational process.

Research Questions

The studies cited above make it clear that in terms of the new educational paradigm the value of peer assessment in L2 pronunciation instruction cannot be overestimated. However, the students' reaction is not easy to predict. As Azarnoosh (2013) puts it,

> The impact of peer assessment on language learning is promising, but its efficacy seems to depend on many factors including students' attitudes, language levels, familiarity with the assessing criteria, the type of skill being assessed, and the possible presence of bias such as gender and friendship (p. 3).

Analyzing students' opinions is a widespread type of research in foreign institutions (Derwing, 2010; Wach, 2011; Coskun, 2011; Chien, 2014) which, unfortunately, has not proved to be as popular in Russia yet. Still, within the learner-oriented approach to English teaching, which has been widespread in Russia since the end of the twentieth century, students were surveyed in order to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1. How useful do the students find peer assessment in terms of providing and getting constructive feedback?
> RQ2. How useful do the students find peer assessment in terms of developing their own phonological skills?
> RQ3. Which form of peer assessment do the students find more convenient?
> RQ4. Which form of peer assessment do the students find more useful?

Methodology

The participants in this study were 34 first-year undergraduate students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University. Of the 34 participants, 19 majored in intercultural communication, 7 in English language teaching, and 8 in cultural studies. All the participants had attended or were still attending compulsory English pronunciation classes, where peer assessment was regularly practised. All the participants were administered an anonymous questionnaire (Appendix 1). Anonymity was ensured due to ethical considerations.

The main aim of the questionnaire was to explore the participants' attitude towards peer assessment and its effectiveness in terms of developing their phonological competence and also their preferences regarding oral and written peer assessment in class.

The questionnaire consisted of four questions. Questions 1 and 2 were based on 7-point Likert scales, as scientific evidence suggests that 7-point scales are "optimal" for measuring most constructs (Krosnick & Presser, 2010, p. 271) and they "seem to be best in terms of reliability, percentage of undecided respondents, and respondents' ability to discriminate between the

scale values" (Schwarz, Knauper, Hippler, Noelle-Neumann, & Clark, 1991). Each scale point was labelled by the researchers in order to minimise inaccuracies stemming from individual interpretation of numbers. One of the possible limitations of a 7-point scale is the existing tendency for participants to choose the mid-point (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). However, in this opinion study the presence of the mid-point with a neutral position was unavoidable, as the respondents would have been pushed otherwise to adhere to a certain viewpoint, not necessarily corresponding to their own, as a result of the absence of the neutral option, which would have influenced the quality of the research data. Questions 3 and 4 presented the respondents with a binary choice. Question 3 enquired whether it was more convenient for students to use the oral or the written form of feedback; Question 4 asked which of the two was more useful.

When the study was conducted, all participants were provided with detailed oral and written instructions as to what was going to happen during the experiment. The participants were asked to give oral consent or choose to opt out of the study. There were no instances of a student who refused to participate, however. The identity of the students was fully anonymized. The questionnaires were securely kept upon submission and access to them was controlled at all times.

Results

In order to analyse the data, the participants' questionnaire responses were entered into Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP) software, which is an open-source free platform for statistical analysis (Wagermakers, 2019). Responses for Questions 1 and 2 were treated as scale variables with possible integer values (1 to 7) corresponding to the questionnaire scale points. The descriptive statistics of the gathered data (N = 39) can be seen below in table 1:

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the gathered data.

Descriptive statistics (1)	Q-2	Q-1	Descriptive statistics (2)	q-4	q-3
Valid	34	34	Std. Error of Skewness	0.4031	0.4031
Missing	0	0	Kurtosis	-0.6645	-0.4393
Mean	6.000	5.676	Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.7879	0.7879
Median	6.000	6.000	Minimum	4.000	3.000
Mode	7.000	7.000	Maximum	7.000	7.000
Std. Deviation	0.9847	1.199	Sum	204.0	193.0

RQ1. How useful do the students find peer assessment in terms of providing and getting constructive feedback?

For Question 1, most students stated that they found peer assessment "extremely useful" (n=11), followed by "quite useful" (n=10) and "really useful" (n=8). See figure 1. Three students were not certain about the usefulness of peer assessment and two respondents stated that peer assessment was "more useless than useful". Generally, on the basis of this descriptive data, it can be concluded that approximately 85% of the participants in this study regard peer assessment as a useful component of constructive feedback.
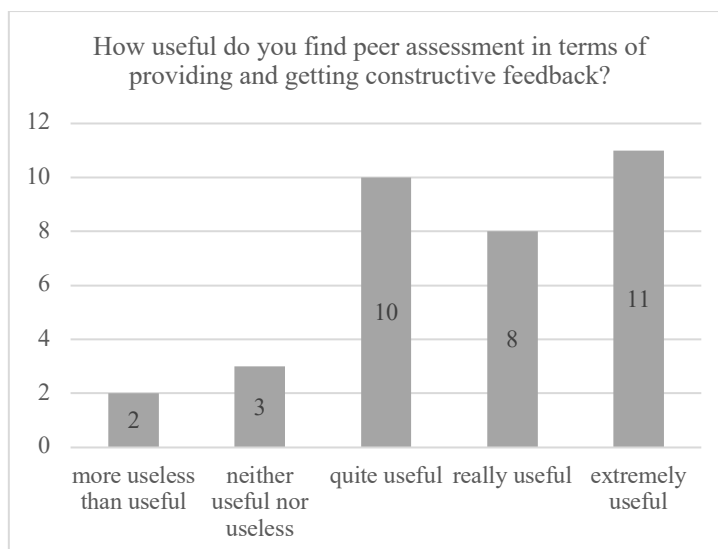
Figure 1: Students' responses to question 1.

RQ2. How useful do the students find peer assessment in terms of developing their own phonological skills?

In Question 2, most students stated that they found peer assessment "extremely useful" (n=13), followed by "really useful" (n=11) and "quite useful" (n=17). See figure 2. Three students were not certain about the usefulness of peer assessment. Generally, it can be concluded that approximately 91% of the participants in this study acknowledge the usefulness of peer assessment for the development of their own phonological skills.
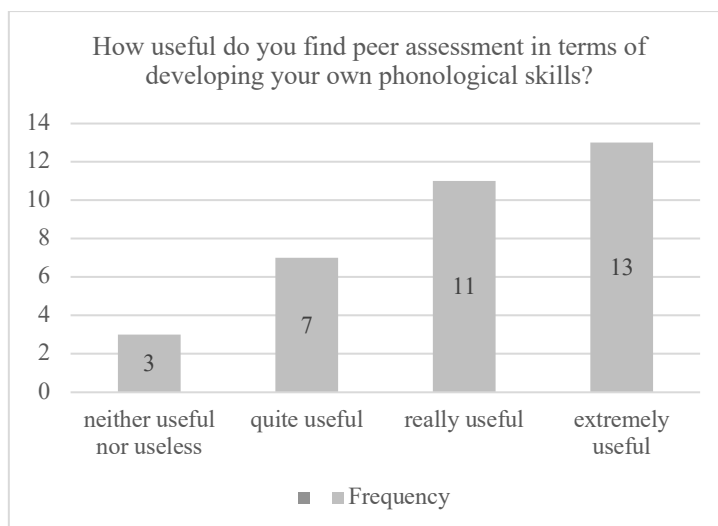

Figure 2: Students' responses to question 2.

RQ3. Which form of peer assessment do the students find more convenient?

Most students preferred oral peer assessment (n=21, 61%) to written peer assessment (n=13, 39%) in terms of personal convenience and comfort. See figure 3.
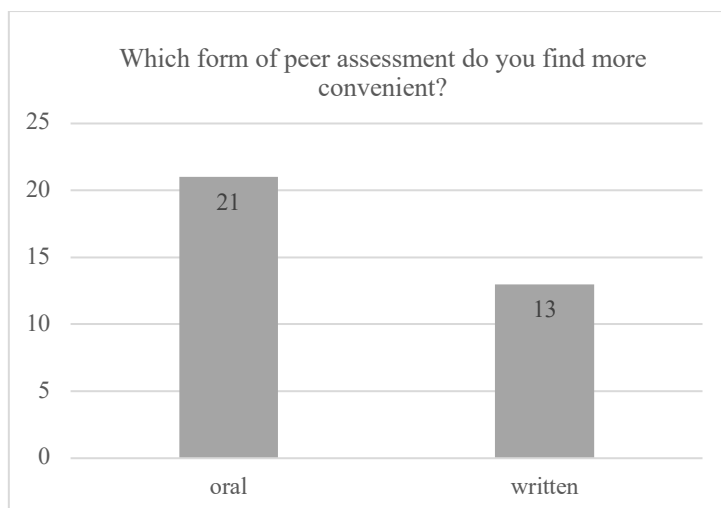
Figure 3: Students' responses to question 3.

RQ4. Which form of peer assessment do the students find more useful?

Most students stated that oral peer assessment (n=23, 67%) was more useful than written peer assessment (n=11, 33%). See figure 4.
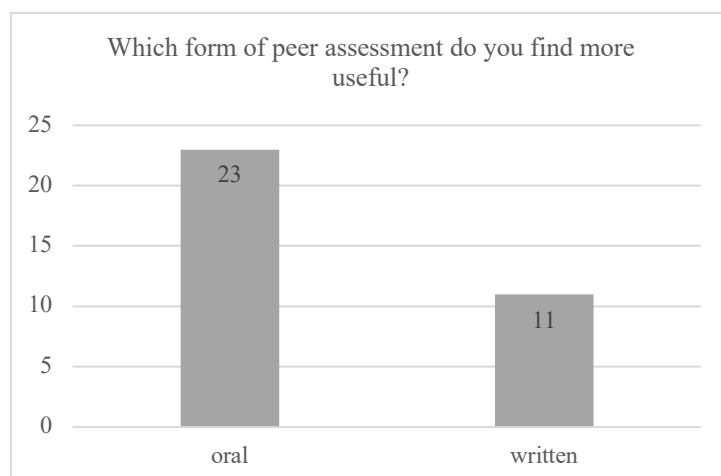

Figure 4: Students' responses to question 4.

Discussion and Limitations

This study set out to explore students' attitudes towards peer assessment in L2 pronunciation instruction. The obtained results showed that most students regarded peer assessment as a component useful both as a means of providing constructive feedback and as an opportunity for developing personal phonological skills. The fact that the participants in this study spoke in favour of the peer assessment means that depriving students of the possibility to comment on the pronunciation of their peers would limit their learning opportunities. Moreover, the fact that most students preferred oral assessment to written assessment seems to be rather surprising, as the study hypothesis stated that providing written feedback to peers might be less friendship-biased and thus considered by students more effective or preferable. Perhaps, the respondents should have been offered more choices, including "both written and oral" and "none". The binary choice might have limited the students and forced them to make a not

completely genuine choice. Moreover, including the qualitative component, that is, giving the respondents the opportunity to verbally explain their choices, could have made the data in this study richer and more informative.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following assessment criteria can be suggested for the development of peer assessment practices in EFL pronunciation classes (Table 2). The grading system relies on the concept of *English as a lingua franca* and sees an intelligible, rather than a native-sounding speaker, as the model. The criteria might be altered depending on the specialisation of the EFL students, as the students majoring in English teaching, for instance, might want to be assessed against native-speaker pronunciation as a yardstick (Coskun, 2011; Chien, 2014; Maslova, 2017).

Table 2: Suggested pronunciation peer assessment scale

Mark	Criteria	What can be improved	How to improve
5	pronunciation is flawless, no correction needed; all the requirements for the task have been satisfied		
4.5	pronunciation is completely intelligible but needs minor correction (1 mistake*); all the requirements for the task have been satisfied		
4	a few mistakes are present (2-3); the student is showing considerable effort but more work is needed to make speech more intelligible; all the requirements for the task have been satisfied		
3.5	many mistakes are present (4-5); the requirements for the task have been satisfied only partially; the student is showing considerable effort but is not yet intelligible.		
3	many mistakes are present (more than 5); the requirements for the task have been satisfied only partially; the student is showing little effort and is not yet intelligible.		
2	the student is showing very little effort, the requirements for the task have not been satisfied, the speech is almost unintelligible		
1	the student is present but not prepared, the student is showing no effort		
0	the student is not present		

A mistake is an act of mispronunciation that makes the word unintelligible / easily confused with another word (e.g. sick/seek, back/bag)

As the generalisability of the study results is subject to certain limitations due to the small sample size, more studies, both in Russia and in other cultural and educational contexts, are needed to explore the question of students' attitudes towards written and oral peer assessment in the L2 phonetics classroom. Students can also be employed to test the peer assessment pronunciation scale suggested by a teacher or develop a new one in cooperation with the teacher, which might result in motivation and a responsibility boost. Moreover, it would be

beneficial to employ data triangulation by including qualitative research methods into similar studies in order to gain better understanding of the matter.

Conclusion

The significance of an objective and effective assessment as an integral part of the teaching-learning cycle is apparent to many educationalists. Assessment has been varying along with the changes of the theories and models of L2 learning and teaching, especially today when the concept of teaching English as a lingua franca has become well-known and well-studied which, in terms of teaching phonetics, has drastically changed the way phonological skills are viewed and assessed.

Constructive teaching and learning, the shift to a student-oriented model and the need to situate collaborative and inclusive life-long learning have brought assessment to the centre of researchers' attention, revealing that the roles and types of assessment have changed. The teacher is no longer the centre of assessment but the students cooperating with teachers and sharing responsibilities can achieve greater results through practising such an interactive type of assessment as peer assessment (Wikstorm, 2007).

The conducted research has indicated students' positive attitude toward peer-assessment and their willingness to cooperate with the teacher in assessment, thus showing an awareness of their active role in educational processes.

Appendix 1
Questionnaire administered to the participants

Answer the following questions by choosing from 1 to 7 (Q 1,2) or choosing one option (Q 3,4):

1. **How useful do you find peer assessment in terms of providing and getting constructive feedback?**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Completely useless	Useless	More useless than useful	Neither useful nor useless	Quite useful	Really useful	Extremely useful

2. **How useful do you find peer assessment in terms of developing your own phonological skills?**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Completely useless	Useless	More useless than useful	Neither useful nor useless	Quite useful	Really useful	Extremely useful

3. **Which form of peer assessment do you find more convenient? Choose one option.**
   ☐ Oral form (the form of discussion)
   ☐ Written form (writing commentaries)

4. **Which form of peer assessment do you find more useful? Choose one option.**
   ☐ Oral form (the form of discussion)
   ☐ Written form (writing commentaries)

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