

Peer Assessment Practices in Indonesian Higher Education: *The Students' Views*

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Abstract

The shift of paradigm in English Language Teaching (ELT) has brought teachers and practitioners to seek ways to assess their students resembling to instructional activities in the classroom. Students are not only perceived as objects of assessment but they are given a role as subjects who have a big role and involvement in the assessment process. As a result, their perspectives are particularly essential because the power of assessment directly impacts on their motivation and attitudes towards schooling. This study attempted to investigate students' perception on the implementation of peer assessment in their process of learning English and the impacts of the assessments toward their language learning motivation and achievement. Its design was descriptive qualitative and involved 6 students of non-English Department. The data was collected through an intensive and in-depth interview. The result showed that the students have different dimensions of views toward peer assessment and they thought that the means of assessment implemented helped them gain their motivation and know better on what to achieve during their process of learning.

Keywords: peer assessment, students' views, higher education, ELT

Introduction

The shift of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from structural to communicative, humanistic, and learner-centered approaches, and in response to the impact of collaborative learning theory and to the notion of the teaching EFL in the postmethod era demands teachers to seek a means of assessment that more closely resembles to instructional activities in the classroom. The term "assessment", in this context, cannot be used interchangeably with "testing". The former is an ongoing process encompassing a much wider domain, like whenever a student responds to a question or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student's performance while the latter is a prepared administrative procedure occurring at identifiable times in a curriculum

and learners know that their responses are being measured and evaluated (Brown, 2004). It can be stated that testing is a part or subset of assessment.

The new paradigm in measuring the students' achievement and learning mastery has taken experts to identify the significance of many kinds of assessment in an instructional setting and it has led to a new way of assessing students' achievement called "alternative assessment". Alternative assessment has brought new insight into classroom practice due to the drawbacks of traditional assessment. The traditional form of assessment like the summative one has been known to perceive students to be passive actors rather than active learners in the new forms who acquire the ownership of their learning. It means that students are given the chance to have a stake in their own progress, assess their own work and that of their peers, and collaborate with their instructor in developing criteria and norms for their work (Chappuis and Stiggins, 2004). In relation to its effectiveness, experts showed that, among several methods and techniques through which the goals of educational assessment could be accomplished, the alternative means of assessment are considered most effective (Birjandi and Siyyari, 2007).

Highlights on alternative assessment have also been noted that it differs from the traditional assessment such as pen and paper test, in several ways. Brown and Hudson (1998) mentioned that the alternative means of assessment require the learners to perform, create, and produce in real-world contexts or simulations. Besides, the nature of these methods is nonintrusive and lets students be assessed on everyday class activities. The tasks used in these methods represent meaningful instructional activities concentrating on both the process and the product of learning. Higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills are also the indispensable tools for carrying out the assessment tasks, and the teacher's feedback about the task performance sheds light on both the strengths and weaknesses of the learners. In addition, human judgment rather than machine judgment, as well as open disclosure of standards and rating criteria are encouraged. It can be inferred that alternative assessment provides a more opportunity for the teachers to create meaningful learning.

Many kinds of alternative assessment have been implemented by teachers. Some of them include checklists, videotapes, audiotapes, teacher observations, journals, logs, scaffolded essay, conferences, portfolio, self assessment, peer-assessment, performance-based assessment, interview-based assessment, play-based assessment, and cooperative group assessment (Brown & Hudson, 1998; 2002; Herrera, 2007; McKay, 2006; O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). These forms of alternative assessment are also well known as authentic assessment, continuous assessment, or formative assessment.

Students' involvement in the process of assessing is very much influential. Chappuis and Stiggins (2004) noted that the involvement of the student in assessment helps them to project their future plans and learning goals. Given the criteria or rubrics prior to the assessment process, the students tend to be aware of their own goals and set their own strategies to achieve their target. In other words,

they learn to use it to manage their own learning and to learn to be responsible for their own progress. Furthermore, the involvement can lead not only to the students' skills but to their autonomy and motivation as well (Brown and Hudson, 2002; Liang, 2006). Since students are involved in the assessment process, teachers need to find out how they think and feel toward the assessment method. Students' views are particularly important because the power of assessment directly impacts on their motivation and attitudes towards schooling (Xiao & Carless, 2013).

In the teaching of English at Food Crop Production Study Program Politeknik Negeri Jember, English is offered in the second and fourth semesters which consist of theory and practicum classes. The theory class is a big class comprising more than eighty students and they are, then, divided into three groups of students in the practicum classes. The time allotment for the theory class is 50 minutes while for the practicum class is 120 minutes (for each class).

Based on the result of interview with a lecturer teaching English at Food Crop Production Study Program Politeknik Negeri Jember, she mentioned that the students were taught more various materials and activities integrating four different language skills. With a smaller number of students in each class, the lecturer could implement more teaching strategies including the ways to assess the students. The lecturer could also pay closer attention and a deeper analysis of the students' learning progress. Several kinds of alternative assessments have been implemented by the teacher in the teaching of English for students of Food Crop Production Study Program, such as student-teacher conference and peer assessment.

Related to the students' views on the implementation of peer assessment in Indonesian language classroom settings, there have been quite a few studies about how they perceive and respond to the assessment, especially in tertiary level. Xiao & Carless (2013) conducted a study on students' perceptions of English language assessment in Chinese secondary schools. They revealed that the students had different response dimensions, both positive and negative ones. What makes this study interesting is that they used a draw-a-picture technique as a means of eliciting students' perceptions. Another study by Yigzaw (2013) on English teachers' and students' perceptions, attitudes and actual practices of continuous assessment in Ethiopian secondary school showed that the students perceived positively toward the assessment and both teachers and students believed that continuous assessment enhances students' social interaction, emotional changes, and intellectual development skills.

This study aimed at finding out the students' views on the implementation of peer assessments in an ESP classroom setting. To be more specific, its objectives were to find out the students' experience and perception on peer assessment in their process of learning English as well as the impacts of the assessment toward their language learning motivation and achievement.

Method

This study employed descriptive qualitative designs. To obtain qualitative data, the

researcher conducted intensive and in-depth interviews with students of Food Crop Production Study Program, Politeknik Negeri Jember. The researcher first introduced the topic of the study to the subjects and made sure that they were willing to volunteer and participate in the interviews. This study involved 6 subjects out of 84 students taking Applied English course. These nine subjects were assigned into an upper group (Subject 1, Subject 2), average group (Subject 3 and Subject 4) and lower group (Subject 5 and Subject 6) based on their English scores at the beginning of the semester.

The interview was conducted twice with each of the subjects and focused on finding out two main topics, the students' experiences and perceptions on peer assessment implemented in their English classes and the impacts of the alternative assessment toward their language learning motivation and achievement. It was conducted in Politeknik Negeri Jember after their Applied English practicum classes and at appointed times. The data were then analyzed descriptively. Before being analyzed, the data were classified based on the topics of discussion. For the triangulation, the researcher used triangulation with the source of data.

Findings and Discussion

Students' Experience and Perception of Peer Assessment in Their Process of Learning English

The answer to the first research question was obtained from the students' definitions and respond to assessment implemented in the classroom. The definitions were varied and they actually represented the students' experience in being assessed using certain kinds of alternative assessment. The students expressed their idea by discussing forms and purposes of certain assessment in different classroom activities and environment.

In terms of assessment purpose, the students interviewed mostly thought that assessment is a process or an activity conducted by the teacher to check whether they comprehended the materials or not, or in other words, to check their mastery during learning. The respondents were aware that, during learning, they were actually being assessed and found out that the assessment process was conducted to ascertain their learning progress. One respond from Subject 5 was "The teacher wanted to know our progress in learning in her class and, therefore, she tried to check our comprehension using those kinds of "scoring ways" from time to time in a whole semester. Though it is stated in different ways, it has the same meaning and it is in line with the concept of assessment proposed by Linn and Miller (2005) that assessment of student learning is a systematic process of collecting information about student progress towards the learning goals

When asked about forms of assessment other than the traditional assessment like pen and paper test in the summative test, the response of the students vary. Some of the translated quotes are:

Subject 1:

Yes, I definitely remember. I made a video report and my lecturer and my classmates met, very often, yes..to discuss how far we did the assignment and gave feedback and solution to the obstacles we face in doing it. She asked for lots of things (smiling). And, I also work with my peer together to check and give feedback on his writing assignment.

Subject 4:

Umm.. I was asked to write an application letter. Umm... the lecturer provided us with an example of it and a sheet of explanation..yes, it is for my peer...to correct, no, to give feedback to my assignment. I forget what it is called (smiling).

From the interview, it can be inferred that they experienced in being assessed using alternative assessment. There alternative assessment mentioned was peer assessment. It was used to assess the students' writing skill.

In terms of authenticity, transparency, and practicality of the assessment, the students perceived the implemented alternative assessment differently. A student in the lower group (Subject 6) stated her opinion on the assignment and the way the lecturer assessed her learning progress. she said, "Well, I was nervous, at first. My English is not good and I had to do an assignment with it. And... fortunately the assignment was still related to my field of study, I know what to do.." This suggests that even the weakest student see a connection between his assessment in his class and his daily life activities. A good task in the test situation must include a real-life situation. Therefore, the tasks must be made authentic. An authentic test is the one that reproduces a real-life situation in order to examine the students' ability to cope with it (Doye, 1991).

In relation to transparency, the students interpreted the alternative assessment as a "fair" way to assess their language learning since they found it clearer about the requirements of an assessment task and the way their work is assessed compared to the other scales. One student from the average group (Subject 3) said "I feel like I am measuring a certain amount of fertilizer for my plants. If I want to grow them well, I need to follow the instruction and put the right amount of fertilizer on it. Like when I did the English assignment, I need to put the right amount of effort as what is stated in the assessment guidelines and rubrics given by the lecturer. If not, then I know that I will not get the expected result. And, we could know the result right after we have finished our assignment."

Meanwhile, a slightly different perception appeared when the students were asked about the practicality of the implemented alternative assessment. Some students thought that it was practical but some were not. One student (Subject 2) noted that the assessments were practical since she was assessed continuously during the teaching and learning process. In addition, She found out that the assessments were not nerve-wracking and could reduce her anxiety in learning. "Though it took a lot of time and effort, it was still practical. I felt I am not wasting

my time just sitting and answering the questions on a blank sheet of paper. Hmm, I also need more training on that assessment, peer assessment." On the other hand, Student 9 perceived one of the assessments, student-teacher conference, as not practical enough to be implemented in the classroom. She mentioned, "Hmm.. It was time-consuming.. It was quite hard for me to check my friend's work and I got problems in understanding my friend's feedback. But, I am happy, I can improve my skill, but still, it is not practical."

These different dimensions of the students' perception become a way for the teachers to review and reflect their ways of assessing their students. In assessing the students' skill, what matters most is the validity and reliability of the assessment itself. Validity and reliability of alternative assessments may not be put into a question since they can be considered valid and reliable in that they genuinely and consistently assess a student's classroom performance (Cooper, 1999).

The Implication of the Alternative Assessments toward the students' language learning motivation and achievement.

To answer the second research problem, the data obtained from the interview were analyzed descriptively. There was some evidence showing that the alternative assessment put some remarkable implications toward the students' language learning. Based on the result of the interview, some of the students mentioned that the alternative means of assessment elicit their motivation and reduce their anxiety. They were aware that they were being assessed while learning but they felt like they were not assessed. In addition, they said that they completely understood what aspects and how they would be assessed but they still felt comfortable with the process, unlike when they did pen and paper test. They admitted that it then raised their motivation to learn and increase their language proficiency in the classroom.

In addition, the result of the interview showed that most of the respondents were satisfied with their final result and they wanted to apply it in other courses. When the students did a peer assessment on an application letter written by their peers, for example, they argued that it was a hard procedure to follow and they could barely manage to comprehend the instruction. With the teachers' guidance and a clear set of checklists and criteria, they finally understood what needed to be assessed in their peer's work and they diligently learned how to give feedback. They admitted that it also affected their ways of doing their own assignment. They could also try to re-read and check their feedback given to the peer in the classroom, later, at home. In other words, the students started to learn independently. If the students are able to internalize it, they can become autonomous learners in terms of evaluating their own learning progress.

One thing to be noted by teachers that the assessment chosen should reflect a growing interest in self-regulated learning and a conceptual shift from teacher-

centered instruction to learner-centered instruction (Dann, 2002; Nunan, 1988). And, in this study, it can be seen from the students' responds that alternative means of assessment has been successful in promoting their motivation in learning and drew them to be aware of what actually learning is. An alternative assessment like self- and peer- assessment has been proven to be effective in leading to learner autonomy and higher motivation (Brown & Hudson, 2002). The students need to know that assessing is not merely a process of scoring and judging their achievement based on numbers.

Conclusion

The implementation of alternative assessment has brought a new atmosphere in the classroom. Students are not only perceived as the object of assessment. They also play a vital role in setting their objective and result of learning. This study was conducted in an English for Specific Purpose classroom setting with the purpose of identifying students' experiences and perceptions on alternative assessment implemented in their English classes and the impacts of the alternative assessments toward their language learning motivation and achievement. The result showed that the students perceived peer assessment differently in terms of the practicality of the assessment. Meanwhile, they did not show much different opinion on the implementation of the alternative assessment in general. The students were also aware that the assessment promotes their learning motivation. A further study on investigating more on the effectiveness of specific kinds of alternative assessment and teacher training on implementing alternative assessment are suggested.

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