

Case 13

Using Peer and Self-assessment Practices to Assess Written Tasks

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13.1 Context

This case study has been undertaken with a group of students participating in a semester-long module, a total of 24 teaching hours, at University College Dublin. *Exposición Escrita* is a final-year, level-3 undergraduate option module offered to students of Hispanic Studies. The number of students taking this module is limited to 20.

The overall aim of this module is to develop the learners' communicative competence in writing Spanish. The teaching methodology adopted promotes the students' participation in class, and the teacher is perceived as a facilitator of learning. Four specific learning tasks form the basis to attain the overall aim of the module: written activities, a learning journal, a written portfolio and a written examination.

13.2 Learning Outcomes being Assessed

On successful completion of this module the participants should be able to:

1. demonstrate their familiarity with and application of the writing process, in terms of planning, elaboration and revision;
2. produce a variety of texts written in Spanish;

3. use appropriately and correctly a writing style that incorporates a range of vocabulary and complex linguistic structures;
4. engage in self- and peer-assessment of writing activities;
5. reflect on their learning process; and
6. have greater confidence in their ability to write in Spanish.

The case study presented here refers particularly to outcomes 4 and 5 stated above. It focuses on the assessment of a written task previously produced, by the students, as an answer to a fictitious writing competition for young writers. The assessment process requires students to:

- get involved in the development of assessment criteria;
- work co-operatively and negotiate among themselves;
- apply the agreed criteria to assess the work of their peers; and
- reflect about their learning.

13.3 Assessment Procedures/Details

The class is divided into groups of 4–5 students and each group is given the task of agreeing on the characteristics that they consider important in a short story. All groups report on their decisions and a list of characteristics supported by the whole class becomes the criteria that will be adopted to assess the written short stories they had previously produced. The teacher makes sure that essential characteristics are not missing.

Once the criteria are agreed, each student—still in groups of 4–5—is given an anonymous story to read, written by one of their peers. It is important to ensure that the groups receive stories written by other members of the class. The students' task is to read the 4–5 stories individually and decide, as a group, which one would obtain the prize for the best short story, as previously advertised. In a further review of the short stories, the story selected by each group is read by all of the students in order to agree on the overall winner.

The peer assessment exercise is followed by a linguistic activity based on the stories written by each learner. The teacher had previously photocopied the students' assignments and written feedback is provided to each student indicating both the strengths and limitations of the text written by the students. Inaccuracies, particularly in relation to linguistic features, are pointed out to the learners with suggestions on how to improve their texts. It is essential to provide them with constructive feedback that motivates them to improve their learning.

The writing experience concludes with a self-assessment task: a reflective entry in the student's learning journal based on the effect that the peer assessment task had on his/her learning process. This takes place outside of the classroom environment. Writing a reflective journal forms part of the tasks that characterise this module. Therefore, the students are already familiar with the criteria applied in the assessment of this learning instrument.

13.4 Strengths and Limitations

13.4.1 Strengths

- The first strength of this assessment exercise is that learners are involved in the development of the assessment criteria that will be applied to assess their written assignment (Jordan, 1999). Negotiation among the students generally helps them to internalise the criteria, and to become aware of their features.
- The peer assessment exercise is non-threatening because the names of the students have been removed from the assignments. Anonymity is also ensured by the fact that the assignments are all typed. Handwritten texts would provide clues as to the authors. The negotiation that students engage in tends to be quite sincere as they are not afraid to comment on anonymous assignments.
- The self-assessment reflection allows the learners to compare the standards achieved by the other learners against their own work (Cassany, 1999; Race *et al.*, 2005). It usually allows them to assess aspects of their work, such as, the range of vocabulary, originality, structure, etc., and to incorporate that reflection in producing a written text that incorporates the aspects being raised in their reflection.

13.4.2 Limitations

- The most obvious limitation of this type of assessment is the difficulty of implementing it with a large group of students, as the process of developing criteria may take too much time.
- Another limitation arises if the linguistic ability of learners in the group varies significantly. The weaker students usually need the support of the teacher to deal with their grammatical inaccuracies, in order to solve their problems. To benefit from the peer assessment exercise, a close look at the text between the students and the teacher may be necessary in order to address linguistic issues. This limitation does not apply to other disciplines where English is the language employed.

13.5 Contributor's Reflections on the Assessment

The involvement of learners in peer- and self-assessment practices can be adopted in many educational contexts where assessment is mainly of a formative nature. It is an excellent way to provide feedback that becomes feedforward, i.e., when learners have to act on the feedback received to improve their work (Brew, 1999). This type of formative assessment has a positive effect in summative assessment because learners are able to apply what they have previously learnt (Brown *et al.*, 1997). More importantly, peer- and self-assessment practices contribute to the enhancement of student learning regarding the development of life-long skills, meta-cognitive competencies or affective abilities (Brew, 1999; Topping, 2003). The following excerpts from the students'

journals (translated from Spanish into English by the teacher) are an indication of the above.

The peer assessment exercise made me think about the work of literary critics and about how they judge writers' work ...

I can transfer what I have learnt to other situations outside the university.

I found the peer assessment exercise very interesting. I realised that John and myself had developed the action of our stories in New York, however both stories were very different.

Learning and assessment have taken place in a very relaxed atmosphere.

Now I am conscious about what I write, and about the readers of what I write.

I was happy with the story I wrote. I did not make many mistakes and I think that my story was funny, original and it maintained the readers' interest. I also managed to achieve a good structure and style. There was one mistake that I did not understand. The teacher explained it to me and now I understand it.

Now I feel more confident about my ability to write and speak in Spanish

The case study presented here focuses on assessment for learning so that students can apply what they have learnt to another writing task, and to other activities outside of the university environment.

Above all, it is important to build trust among students and between the teacher and the learners to be able to create a relaxed atmosphere where collaborative learning and peer assessment can take place.

13.6 Bibliography

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