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Using Peer Assessment to Develop Oral Language Skills in the EFL Classroom

A Review of Learning Implications

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Abstract

Although the amount of research has increased over the last three decades, peer assessment of oral language skills is still rather under-researched. Therefore, this review aims to investigate possible learning implications of using peer assessment in the language classroom.

Furthermore, the review's focus is peer assessment within English as a foreign language (EFL), since that is also an area that needs to be further explored. The paper will begin by presenting six aspects that can be considered to have positive influences on learning, as well as six challenges that teachers might come across when incorporating peer assessment into the classroom. Thereafter, a few learning implications that are particularly important for teachers to bear in mind, will be emphasized. This includes: an open and secure classroom climate, student created assessment criteria, preparation and training, and to avoid focusing on the reliability and validity of peer assessment. Finally, three research proposals, in need for further investigation, will be presented.

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1 Introduction

The Swedish National Agency for Education, claims that involving students in classroom assessment can bring positive effects to learning since it is highlighted both in assessment support material (Skolverket, 2011b) and, even more importantly, in the syllabus of English. In all three English courses for upper secondary school, it is stated that students should be able to work with oral and written performances, both on their own and with their peers, to improve and adjust to the purpose of assignments (Skolverket, 2011a). This implies that peer assessment should be incorporated in all English classrooms around Sweden. However, teachers need more knowledge about peer assessment and hopefully, this review can contribute by giving further insights about what different research says concerning learning implications of peer assessment.

When it comes to theory behind peer assessment, it is not crystal clear (Topping, 1998). Yet, some obvious links can be drawn to both metacognitive theory and the sociocultural perspective of learning. Metacognitive strategies have to do with planning, monitoring and thinking about your own learning (Hedge, 2000). By working and reflecting upon oral production of others, students can become more aware of their own oral production and discover features that were not visible to them before, which is something peer assessment may encourage. Furthermore, the Vygotskian concepts of *Scaffolding* and *Zone of Proximal Development* can be seen as a basis for peer assessment (Peng, 2009) which implies that people with higher capability and knowledge (e.g. teacher or peers) can support and guide the students into a new zone of knowledge which they could not have reached by themselves (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, peer assessment seems to be based on the beliefs that we learn when we interact with other people (sociocultural perspective) and when we get the possibility to reflect on our own learning (metacognitive theory). Moreover, peer assessment is one of the branches within formative assessment. As opposed to *summative assessment*, which focuses on measuring learner achievement, *formative assessment* is an ongoing process that aims to support the language learning for further development (Hedge, 2000). There has recently been a shift from a teacher-centered classroom environment towards a more student-centered situation. One way to empower students is to involve them in assessment and Falchikov (2005) claims that there are many ways to do this. However, one of the most frequently occurring forms is peer assessment.

Over the last three decades, a fairly substantial amount of research on peer assessment has been published. Although the body of literature on peer assessment is increasing, there are

aspects of it that still are rather underexplored. Within the research field of peer assessment you come across many different terms which mean approximately the same thing, such as, peer response, peer feedback, peer evaluation, peer assessment and so on. For this review, the term *peer assessment* will be used throughout. The angle of this literature review will be English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The term EFL, here, refers to a context where English is not an official language which is considered to be the case in Sweden. However, it is worth noting that the research included has a global range and, therefore, all literature is not within the sphere of EFL. In addition, some relevant studies on self-assessment will be investigated since peer assessment and self-assessment are close in nature and share many key features (Falchikov, 2005).

In this review, possible benefits and difficulties with peer assessment of oral skills will be presented. This will be followed by a discussion where the research included will be problematized and where a few learning implications, found especially important for teachers to bear in mind, will be highlighted. This paper will conclude by outlining three directions for future research. The question this review aims to answer is: What are the language learning implications of using peer assessment to develop oral language skills in the EFL classroom?

2 Aspects of Using Peer Assessment to Develop Oral Language Skills

In this section, aspects that can be considered to have positive implications on learning will be identified, followed by more problematic aspects that might bring challenges to teachers and students when using peer assessment.

2.1 Aspects with Positive Learning Implications

To involve students in classroom assessment is still quite novel and some teachers seem to question if peer assessment is really worth the time and effort that is needed. In the section below, six benefits that can be considered to have positive learning implications will be presented and discussed.

2.1.1 Motivation

A relatively large amount of research has chosen to focus on students' perceptions about peer assessment and the most common way to find out their opinions seems to be via surveys or questionnaires. One aspect found in several questionnaire-studies is that students, in general, think that peer assessment increases their motivation. In a study of 42 Iranian university students, Fazel (2015) investigated several different aspects of peer assessment and one of them was motivation. His findings concluded that 61% agrees, or tend to agree, that peer assessment activities motivated the students to learn. Peng (2009) asked two university classes in Taiwan, one high intermediate (HI) (41 students) and one low intermediate (LI) (41 students), about their attitudes towards peer assessment. She had the students answer the Likert scale-survey twice, both before and after the peer assessment activity and compared the results. One question in the survey concerned motivation and in agreement with Fazel's findings, Peng finds that motivation grows among students when using peer assessment. To complement the findings from the questionnaires, Peng also conducted interviews and asked students to write down reflections of peer assessment and the students reported motivation as one of the benefits. One student, for example, highlighted this aspect by claiming that "[u]nlike traditional assessment's passiveness and inflexibility, peer assessment can stimulate our learning and motivation" (p.112).

2.1.2 Participation and Attentiveness

In addition to the increased learning motivation, the findings of Peng's questionnaire study also indicated that peer assessment enhanced student participation. After comparing the results of the pre- and post surveys, the HI- and LI class reported that peer assessment increased their group participation. In addition to the surveys, she interviewed teachers after completing a peer assessment activity and included their opinions about peer assessment in the results. For example, one teacher argued that peer assessment activities enhanced students' in-class participation as well as out-of-class participation.

Increased participation is an aspect that Langan et al. (2005) also found. They investigated peer assessment of oral presentations with 41 students from two different universities in England. One of the features they discovered was that the requirement to assess peers increased the audience attentiveness compared to other assignments where non-speaking students could be more passive. Therefore, one effect of peer assessment was that students became more actively engaged and more challenged which in turn resulted in enhanced learning among students.

In comparison to other forms of peer assessment, the issue of timing might be a concern within peer assessment of oral skills. When working with oral skills, for example, oral presentations, the peer assessors only have one chance to listen, understand and assess the work, which demands high concentration and attentiveness. Langan et al. (2005) found that the peer assessors of their study became tired and bored after, approximately, twenty minutes of presentations which resulted in them giving poorer assessments to the presentations in the middle rather than the ones in the beginning or end of the session. According to Langan et al., these findings emphasized that the structure and order of presentations are of great importance and something that teachers need to consider. Consequently, they came to the conclusion that it would be most fair, for all parts involved, to reduce the number of presentations to a maximum of four presentations per session.

2.1.3 Peer Assessment Develops Understanding

For teachers, one major goal is to make students understand what is being assessed. Yet, curricula documents and assessment criteria are not always easy to translate into understandable elements for students. However, there is research suggesting that peer assessment can contribute to enhanced understanding, which in turn might have positive

effects on learning. For example, Isaksson & Tallefors (2014) used peer assessment of oral production on Swedish upper secondary school students and found that the awareness of what is being tested increased for the majority of students. Similarly, this is something that the students themselves stressed in Fazel's (2015) study where no less than 92.8% of the students participating agreed that peer assessment helps them understand, to a greater degree, what teachers expect and require of them.

One method that is considered helpful in gaining further understanding of what is being assessed, is to involve students in the process of the creating assessment criteria. Isaksson & Tallefors' (2014) examined this technique and started the process by discussing, with their students, the different levels of knowledge within the English syllabus of upper secondary school in Sweden. After discussing, they sat down together and decided what aspects that should be assessed during the oral performances. These points were later transferred into rubrics, which they used on the day of the oral presentations. In the end, Isaksson & Tallefors conclude that this way of working can enhance the understanding of what is being assessed as well as clarify the goals of the assignment. Isaksson and Tallefors (2014) are not the only authors claiming that it is beneficial to involve students in the making of assessment criteria. For instance, Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) found that if you wish for high agreement between peer and teacher assessment, it is essential to involve your students in this process. Furthermore, Falchikov (2005) states that the learning increases when students take part in deriving their own criteria. However, this statement is, not supported by Langan et al. (2005). Before conducting their study, they believed that participation in creating the criteria would enhance the students' ability to assess from it, nevertheless, no significance was found.

2.1.4 Advantages with Peer Assessment versus Teacher Assessment

Although there might be reasons to believe that teachers' assessments have greater quality than assessments from peers, it is not self-evident that students will learn more from teacher assessment. Jönsson (2010) claims that students might understand each other better than they understand the teacher since they are, to a greater extent, at the same level of knowledge and use more similar language. It is also argued that students explain more thoroughly what they mean and that their assessments concern areas that can be transferred into a wider range of tasks. Therefore, he comes to the general conclusion that it can be beneficial for students to receive assessment from peers. Furthermore, teachers always have a power position over

students since they work as both learning guides as well as a summative assessors in the classroom (Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014). At the end of the term, the teacher sets the final grade in the course, which makes the relationship between peers and teachers complicated. The power position teachers have over students is a reason why it might be preferable to exchange some of the teacher assessment to peer assessment (Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014). Topping (2009) argues that the reaction of students might differ between assessments from teachers versus peers. He claims that the latter might provide richer assessment that is more open to negotiation. Additionally, he pinpoints another interesting aspect; there is only one teacher in the classroom but the number of students is greater and this factor enables more immediate and individualized feedback. In other words, peer assessment opportunities are plentiful in comparison to teacher assessment.

2.1.5 Student Responsibility

When involving students in assessment they transition from being passive receivers to becoming more active in their own learning process. “Peer assessment is believed to enable learners to develop abilities and skills denied to them in a learning environment in which the teacher alone assesses their work. In other words, it provides learners with the opportunity to take responsibility for analysing, monitoring and evaluating aspects of both the learning process and product of their peers” (Cheng & Warren, 2005, p. 94). Fazel (2015) asked students if they felt that peer assessment activities increased the sense of participation in the classroom. 47.6% agreed and 35.7% tended to agree that the level of participation increased. In total, that means that 83.3% of the students expressed a feeling of enhanced participation and with an increased level of participation comes greater responsibility. According to Falchikov and Magin (1997) and Langan et al. (2005), it is therefore crucial that the students take the responsibility given to them with a serious mind. The fact that students might not take peer assessment activities seriously is a potential risk. This indicates that in order for peer assessment to work, students must fully understand the learning purpose of the activity and be committed to the task. If students do not take it seriously enough, peer assessment is doomed to fail (Falchikov & Magin, 1997).

Furthermore, by integrating peer assessment in classrooms the role of the teacher is changed and the focus is moved from the teacher to the students. This type of change can have positive effects on learning for both teachers and students. Teachers learn more about their own way of teaching and students are demanded to take more responsibility for their

own learning process (Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014). Similarly, Saito (2008) claims one benefit with involving students in assessment, is that students can develop an enhanced feeling of shared responsibility between students and teachers. In short, peer assessment brings students directly into their own learning process, enhancing both the sense of ownership and responsibility (Topping, 1998) To simplify even further, peer assessment holds a huge potential for learning (Falchikov, 2005).

2.1.6 Interaction

Interaction between teachers and their peers is crucial for the learning outcome of students. Peer assessment does not only strengthen the student voice in the classroom, it also helps to increase the level of interaction between teachers and students about the learning processes of students (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliams, 2003). This increased level of interaction might help learners to recognize and communicate their own learning needs to teachers. Peng (2009) investigated the aspect of interaction in her study and asked students if peer assessment activities increase the interaction between teachers and students. Especially, the HI class reported on enhanced communication between teachers and students in peer assessment activities. In the pre-survey, 34% of the students answered that peer assessment increased the interaction compared to 70% in the post survey. During the interviews, students supported this view by commenting: “[i]f topics were not clear to me, I asked the teachers” (p.83) or “Yeah yeah. I talked to [the teacher] very often” (p.83).

In comparison to Peng’s (2009) findings, Fazel (2015) discovered contrasting results regarding interaction. Within his study, only 23.7% of the students believed that the interaction with the teacher increased during peer assessment activities. On the other hand, he spotted another area of increased interaction, namely, the one between students themselves. In the same survey, 18 out of 42 students reported that peer assessment resulted in enhanced communication between peers. Increasing communication between peers could be one of the objectives behind peer assessment since we want students to inspire and help each other to reach higher levels of knowledge. Yet, teachers have to highlight this learning opportunity for students. Isaksson and Tallefors (2014) found that it was not obvious for students to learn and benefit from their peers’ oral presentations and that this learning opportunity has to be more clearly pinpointed in the future by teachers.

2.2 Challenges with Peer Assessment

As seen above, a great amount of research has found that using peer assessment to develop oral skills can be beneficial for learning. However, it has also been stated that there are some challenges involved when using it. In the following section, some of the obstacles found in research will be presented.

2.2.1 Time Consuming

One argument against using peer assessment in the classroom is the issue of time. Teachers want to know that incorporating peer assessment in the classroom is worth the time, otherwise, it can be spent on another activity that also can increase learning. Both teachers and students highlight the time challenge in different studies (Cheng & Warren 1997; Peng 2009; Topping 1998). In a study by Cheng and Warren's (1997), 52 university students were asked about their attitudes towards peer assessment. By comparing the results of the pre and post surveys, they tried to investigate if any shifts in attitude had occurred after the peer assessment activity. Students, in their study, claimed peer assessment as 'being time-consuming' and during Peng's (2009) interviews, especially the LI students stated the same. One of the teachers also emphasized the issue of time in Peng's study. According to the teacher, peer assessment was time-consuming mostly due to the discussion between students, which is a crucial component in peer assessment activities. Therefore, small groups of students are favorable if peer assessment is to be incorporated effectively (Peng, 2009).

Since peer assessment is a supplementary process rather than a substitution for teacher assessment, more time will be required (Peng, 2009). In a meta-analysis study, Topping (1998) came to the conclusion that "there might be no saving of time in the short to medium term, since establishing qualitative peer assessments requires time for organization, training and monitoring" (p.256). Equally, Jönsson (2010) argues that in the long run, this way of working can have an unloading and facilitating effect for teachers and according to Falchikov (2005), the potential benefits are greater than the challenge of time which makes the venture worthwhile.

2.2.2 Anxiety and Pressure

Peer assessment is a complex and sometimes challenging activity. Teachers have to bear in mind that both assessors and assesses can experience anxiety for different reasons at an initial

stage of the peer assessment process (Topping, 2009). Some students experience greater pressure receiving assessment from peers than from the teacher. This feeling may not be a surprising consequence since we ask our students to become more open and public for assessment, which can be threatening (Falchikov, 2005). Some of the reasons for feeling anxiety could be embarrassment, threats to self-image, not wanting to hurt their friends when assessing their works and discomfort when encountering work better than their own. Dragemark Oscarson (2009) investigated self-assessment practice of upper secondary students in Sweden, yet, some aspects concerning peer assessment were included in the study. For instance, students in her study reported that both positive and negative comments from peers could be embarrassing to receive.

On the contrary, Cheng and Warren's (1997) study, investigating students' shifts in attitude after participating in peer assessment activities, found that students, in general, did not experience anxiety or pressure, even if there were expectations. Moreover, the number of students that initially felt uncomfortable with assessing their peer's shifted in attitude to becoming comfortable. Therefore, they came to the conclusion that by incorporating more peer assessment activities the number of students who stay uncomfortable will reduce, more and more, every time.

Because research has found that peer assessment activities can increase pressure, stress, and anxiety in students, it becomes relevant to look further into what can be done to combat such feelings. Topping (2009) states that one way to decrease these anxious feelings is to start with bringing up positive aspects and later move on to areas that need more improvement. By starting off positively, the acceptance of negative comments might increase which in turn will be helpful for learning. Falchikov (2005) also provides a couple of suggestions for what teachers can do if peer assessment is questioned due to the possible risks associated with stress and anxiety. She argues for the importance of ensuring that students gain satisfaction from the increased responsibility and power that is given to them. Moreover, she believes that explicit instruction can produce positive results and that teachers have to make sure that the organization and criteria are well planned and executed.

The classroom climate plays an essential role in making the students feel comfortable and wanting to participate in peer assessment activities. The never-ending process of creating an open classroom climate has to start long before the peer assessment activity itself. In fact, it starts the very first day you meet your new students and from that point in time (Løkenstgard Hoel, 2001). The foundation of a good classroom climate includes tolerance and that students

feel safe and if these two factors exist it will enable thoughts and opinions to be transferred between students. However, a good classroom climate has no one-way solution. Suggestions from different research, on how to establish such surroundings, are not transmittable from classroom to classroom and, therefore, every teacher has to find their own way. All classrooms work differently and every class needs their own rules and norms to follow (Løkensgard Hoel, 2001).

2.2.3 Bias Problems

Unlike other forms of peer assessment the issue of anonymity becomes highly relevant in the discussion of peer assessment of oral language skills (Langan et al., 2005). In other peer assessment contexts, for example writing, there is a possibility of being anonymous, both for the peer being reviewed and the peer reviewer. However, when conducting peer assessment of oral skills, we cannot be anonymous in the same manner, which makes a discussion of bias crucial to include. Both gender bias and friendship bias will be discussed, starting with the issue of gender.

Generally speaking, no consistent pattern is discovered when it comes to the role of gender bias in peer assessment learning environments (Langan et al., 2005). Research has found both its presence and absence in peer assessment outcomes. However, Falchikov & Magin (1997) state that, “It would be reassuring to conclude that gender bias is absent from peer assessments, but such a generalised conclusion is unwarranted” (p. 393). As this quote suggests, no major difficulty concerning gender bias is found in research. On the other hand, it is not something we can ignore since there are findings indicating gender bias in peer assessment. In other words, it is an important area to watch out for.

De Grez, Valcke and Roozen (2012) investigated the agreement between professional assessment and peer assessment of oral presentations skills. In addition, they also examined gender as a potential source of bias and discovered results that signaled gender bias. They found that male assessors tended to praise female presenters more than the female assessors did. This could be due to many reasons but they see two as the most probable. Either the female assessors underestimated same-sex presenters or the male assessors were, to some degree, biased towards the female students and gave them higher marks than they deserved. However, De Grez et al. conclude by emphasizing the importance of further investigation on this topic.

Moving on to friendship bias, students have argued that peer assessment can be a strange experience if the peers also are their friends (Falchikov, 2005). One question asked in Cheng and Warrens' (1997) study concerned the topic of objectivity, in wondering if the students felt that they were able to make a fair and responsible assessment of their peers. Out of the 19 students who answered "Yes" in the pre-survey, 8 changed their answer in the post-survey to "No" or "Not sure". To find out more about why the students changed in attitude, the researchers interviewed those students. The interviews found that some students doubted their own objectivity in the peer assessment activity due to friendship bias.

In another study by Cheng and Warren (2005) concerning peers' feedback on language proficiency, it was also found that friendship bias occurred. In this study, 4 out of 51 students argued that it was complicated and difficult to give assessments to peers that they had a close relationship to. These four students agreed upon the fact that the assessment they gave their close friends was not given entirely responsibly and fairly. According to the students, this was because they did not want to hurt their peers' feelings or embarrass them. However, there is an issue of homogeneity concerning this study. Out of 51 students in total, 49 of them were male and according to the authors, this is an aspect we should bear in mind when we interpret the results.

2.2.4 Teacher Assessment is Higher Valued

As stated above, there are studies suggesting that students both prefer and learn more from peer assessment than assessment from teachers. However, there are other studies that claim the opposite. Harris and Brown (2013) conducted a survey-study in New Zealand consisting of three teachers and their respective classes. The students, aged between 10 and 14 years old, were asked to answer questions about the usage and implementation of peer assessment and self-assessment in the classroom. The results indicated that students found it hard to trust their own ability to give assessments and, consequently, found it hard to value their peers' assessments. Therefore, the students of this study tended to value teacher assessment higher than assessment given by their peers. In addition, it has been found that students might experience greater pressure when assessment comes from peers rather than from the teacher. This could partly be caused by students having to act confident towards their classmates to avoid being humiliated and feel ashamed (Falchikov, 2005).

2.2.5 Proficiency of EFL Students

Since EFL students are not native speakers of the English language, one might think that EFL students have a lower level of language proficiency. Some even consider it relevant to ask if EFL learners are proficient enough to assess themselves and each other. This is an aspect highlighted by Cheng and Warren (2005), who investigated peer assessment of language proficiency in the EFL context of Hong Kong. According to them, a large number of the university students felt that they were unqualified to assess the language ability of their peers for two principle reasons. First, students felt unsure what proficiency in language actually was and what represented high and low language proficiency. Half of the interviewed students felt that they lacked experience in how to assess language proficiency and wished for more practice in the future on this specific task. Secondly, students thought that their own level of linguistic competence did not live up to the requirement of the task. This was also found in another study Cheng and Warren (1997) conducted at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In that study, it was suggested that the insufficient proficiency level of students was one of the reasons why students' attitudes towards peer assessment shifted from being positive into becoming more negative. Students felt that they were unqualified to assess one another's language and therefore it was hard for them to judge their peers correctly. In similarity with these results, Harris and Brown (2013) noted that student tended not to trust their own ability to make accurate judgments.

2.2.6 Reliability and Validity

An ongoing debate among researchers is the reliability and validity of peer assessment. Large amounts of research are, therefore, investigating the correspondence between teacher and student assessment on different assignments. Such a comparison was made by Cheng and Warren (1999), who looked deeper into this agreement in three different classes of electrical engineering students within an English language program at a university in Hong Kong. This was done to find out whether these EFL students were capable of assessing their peers in comparison with their class teacher. They examined three different tasks within the study, seminars, written reports and oral presentations, to see if there was any difference in correlation between the three assignments. After analyzing the results, they came to the general conclusion that the peer assessments of this study, are not reliable enough to be used as a supplement to teacher assessment due to inconsistency between the two sets of assessors.

Even though the oral presentations were the task that showed the greatest agreement between students and teachers, the findings indicated that peer assessment was narrower in range compared to teacher assessment.

Falchikov (2005) conducted a meta-analysis on the same topic and found a few variables that can affect the agreement between teacher and peer assessment. Firstly, the nature of the assessment task seems to have an influence. For example, traditional academic tasks such as, oral presentations and essays, appeared to be an area with a higher level of reliability. Secondly, ownership of and familiarity with the criteria used have a tendency to enhance peer assessment validity and reliability compared to criteria constructed by teachers. The explicitness of the criteria was also suggested to have an impact on the agreement between teachers' and students' assessments.

In contrast with the results identified by of Cheng and Warren (1999), Patri (2002), found conflicting results. He examined the agreement of teacher and student assessment of oral presentation skills and concluded that the assessment of peers is comparable to those of the teachers. When assessment criteria are firmly and clearly set, teacher assessment could be supplemented by peer assessment. Additionally, he argues that peer assessment might have helped in improving the correlation between teachers and peer assessments.

However, there are ways of solving the challenge of low validity and reliability within peer assessment. Many researchers claim that training and preparation are crucial if students are to be involved in classroom assessment effectively (Cheng & Warren, 1997, 1999; De Grez et al., 2012; Falchikov, 2005; Peng, 2009; Saito, 2008; Topping, 1998). Therefore, teachers cannot expect students to be thoughtful assessors without helping them to gain that knowledge. Students need help and support in order to learn how to assess, in the exact same way as teachers needed to in the beginning of their education and carrier (Falchikov, 2005). Topping (2009) provides teachers with a couple of suggestions on how this can be done. He claims that qualitative training can make a great difference and, consequently, students need to be informed about both their own and the teacher's role during the process. To clarify, students need to know what is expected of them. Moreover, students have to be shown how to do it and Topping (2009) proposes that teachers could use a role-play between two adults to make it clearer what will happen. Finally, students need to be monitored during a test activity where the teachers can give individual attention, personalized feedback, and support to students. Jönsson (2013) presents additional ways in which students can train their ability to assess. Since oral presentations will “disappear” right after they are conducted he

recommends teachers to record a presentation that they can use to practice. By practicing peer assessment, students are provided with opportunities to elaborate, think, and discuss different assessments with both peers and the teacher.

3 Discussion

When interpreting the findings of this review, there are some aspects that need to be taken into account. Firstly, the analyzed research has a global range, which can have both positive and negative impacts on the findings. A possible benefit with international research is that it can contribute to presenting a more holistic picture of what is generally known about peer assessment. For instance, the findings of this review have shown that students' perceptions and attitudes towards peer assessment are generally positive (Cheng and Warren, 1997, 2005; De Grez et al. 2012; Fazel, 2015; Peng, 2009). Although there is a global range, a majority of the studies within this review come from Asian countries, which needs to be taken into consideration. First of all, the different education systems around the world are not identical and, therefore, methods that work effectively in Asian schools might not work the same way in other educational settings. Also, there are significant cultural differences between Asian countries and, for example, Sweden, which could signal that these two groups of students might respond differently toward peer assessment due to their different cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, a vast majority of the literature included is conducted within the context of higher studies. Considering the different ages and maturity levels of students from different stages in the educational system, one might question the relevance of what has been stated in this review. As previously mentioned, it is of great importance that students take the extended responsibility given to them seriously and see peer assessment as a learning opportunity (Falchikov and Magin, 1997; Langan et al., 2005). Older students might be more likely to take the task seriously since they have reached a higher level of maturity. With this in mind, the findings of this review might not be completely applicable to all school levels due to the reason that most research is based on higher education. Thirdly, two of the studies reviewed have revealed the issue of gender homogeneity concerning the participants. In Fazel's (2015) study, 36 out of 42 students were female and in Cheng and Warrens' (2005) study it was the opposite, with 49 male participants and 2 female. As mentioned before, gender can have an impact on peer assessment activities. With that in mind, the results of these two studies might need to be interpreted with a bit of caution. Additionally, six of the studies included in this review (Ceng & Warren 1997,1999; Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014; Patri, 2002; Peng, 2009; Saito, 2008) do not mention the sex of their participants at all. Because the authors do not raise this aspect, one can assume that the gender of the participants was balanced and did not have any impact on the results of the studies. However, since gender has been stated as a variable that can influence the results, it is unexpected that these studies do not mention it.

Regarding ethical issues with using peer assessment of oral skills, there are factors that need to be considered. Surprisingly, a minority of the studies included in this review, problematize ethical issues of peer assessment on a deeper level. Discussions about classroom climate, for example, are fairly absent among the research behind this topic. As Løkensgard Hoel (2001) states, the classroom climate has to fulfill certain criteria in order for peer assessment to work effectively as a learning tool. First, peer assessment requires an open attitude from both teachers and students in order for opinions to be expressed and transferred without creating anxiety. Secondly, the assessment of oral skills is sometimes perceived more personal, compared to other forms of peer assessment (Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014). When assessment becomes too personal, it can draw attention away from the task itself. This is crucial for teachers to bear in mind since the focus of peer assessment, and assessment in general, should be on the task and not made personal. To clarify, peer assessment activities demand an open classroom climate where students can feel safe without having to worry about being personally insulted by the assessment from peers.

Furthermore, in an ideal situation, there would never be a concern about teachers having good intentions for their students. However, we cannot ignore the possibility that peer assessment can be used unethically. By involving students in alternative assessment, such as peer assessment, we are asking them to become more public for assessment as well as expose themselves and their peers to the teachers (Falchikov, 2005). As suggested by Dragemark Oscarsson (2009), a risk with alternative assessment could be that students are involved in the grading procedure in a negative manner. Instead of empowering students, which should be the main objective with alternative assessment, the teacher's power over students might be reaffirmed. Thus, the additional knowledge gained about students through peer assessment activities has to be used by teachers in order to benefit students rather than suppressing them. Teachers have to structure the assessment activities "to maximize ethical behavior so that the power relations between the assessor and the assessed are shifted" (p. 58). Unexpectedly, ethical issues like these are not discussed to a desirable degree in the reviewed research.

Some of the benefits with peer assessment identified within this review have a direct link to the Swedish steering documents. For instance, the increased level of student responsibility is an aspect that is also stressed in the Swedish curriculum of upper secondary school by saying that "[s]tudents should develop their ability to take ... responsibility, and to work both independently and together with others" (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 5). We want our students to become active learners who take further responsibility for their own learning

process and, as suggested by the findings of this review, peer assessment seems to be one way to accomplish this. Moreover, this review has found that peer assessment activities might enhance the level of interaction both between students and teachers as well as between students themselves. Communication and interaction between students is also stressed in the steering documents for Upper Secondary School in Sweden. The syllabus of English states that English teaching "should aim at helping students to develop knowledge of language and the surrounding world so that they have the ability, desire and confidence to use English in different situations and for different purposes. Students should be given the opportunity, through the use of language in functional and meaningful contexts, to develop all-round communicative skills" (Skolverket, 2011a, p.1). If peer assessment can contribute to more opportunities for interaction among students, then maybe, teachers should consider using it more in the language classroom since it is in accordance with the communicative language approach of Swedish schools today.

Most of the research behind peer assessment of oral skills seem to agree that in order to incorporate peer assessment effectively in the classroom, it is necessary that students are prepared and trained in how to conduct peer assessment (Cheng & Warren, 1997, 1999; De Grez et al., 2012; Falchikov, 2005; Peng, 2009; Saito, 2008; Topping, 1998). In the same manner as teacher trainees have to practice assessment, students also have to be provided with opportunities to practice peer assessment before attempting it on their own. (Falchikov, 2005). We cannot ask our students to be rewarding and useful assessors without supporting, involving and preparing them for the task. Previously, the discussion of training concerned the reliability and validity of peer assessment, however, the reliability and validity are not the only elements which can be enhanced by solid preparations. Also other aspects, such as students' levels of anxiety and understanding of the task could be affected in a positive manner. At first, this process and adaption might be time-consuming since qualities such as objectivity can take a long time to acquire (Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014). However, even if peer assessment initially requires a lot of time it is worth the time seen over a long-term perspective (Falchikov, 2005; Jönsson, 2013; Topping, 1998). Furthermore, "if peers can be involved in the task of assessment teachers' time could be utilized more productively on issues related to improving their teaching techniques" (Patri, 2002, p. 125). The fact that teachers might gain more time by involving students in assessment is a relevant benefit with peer assessment since Swedish teachers today often experience a lack of time for teaching

(Skolverket, 2015). However, as Peng (2009) argues, teachers have to remember that peer assessment should be supplementary to teacher assessment rather than a substitution.

Another aspect, which has turned out to be an essential factor for peer assessment, is that students should be a part of creating the assessment criteria (Cheng & Warren, 1997, 2005; Falchikov, 2005; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Falchikov & Magin, 1997; Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014; Jönsson, 2013; Patri, 2002; Peng, 2009; Topping, 1998, 2009). By solely looking at the massive amount of research that has stated the importance of this process, one cannot ignore that teachers might need to consider utilizing this in the classroom. One of the benefits with involving students in this process could be that the criteria elements will be clearer and further understood by students (Isaksson & Tallefors, 2014). In addition, it might develop the understanding of teacher requirements, which is not only preferable to the peer assessment activity as such, but for all assignments in school throughout the different subjects. Steering documents can be confusing and hard to interpret, and if involving students in the process of creating assessment criteria can benefit the students' understanding of steering documents, then teachers should prioritize this process in their classrooms.

There is a general focus in research on the agreement between teacher and student assessment and, consequently, the reliability and validity of peer assessment (Cheng & Warren, 1997, 1999, 2005; De Grez et al., 2012; Falchikov, 2005; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Falchikov & Magin, 1997; Langan et al., 2005; Patri, 2002; Topping, 1998). This summative approach of peer assessment could be problematic since “reaching high validity and reliability is not the main goal of peer assessment” (Peng, 2009, p. 156). Instead, the main objective behind incorporating peer assessment should be to support students with their learning and to focus on the process rather than the outcome. Therefore, the decision if teachers should include peer assessment in the classroom “should not solely be based on the level of agreement between peer and teacher marks, but should rather be made after consideration of the positive impact peer assessment can have in other respects” (Cheng & Warren, 2005, p.111). Similarly, Jönsson (2013) states that peer assessment should be used cautiously for summative purposes since the main goal with involving students in assessment activities should be to aid the learning process. As stated in the introduction, peer assessment is a branch within formative assessment and, therefore, summative aspects such as validity, reliability, comparisons with teacher assessment and marks should be excluded from the debate.

4 Conclusion

Altogether, peer assessment of oral skills is not entirely unproblematic. In fact, it is a complex process which involves both advantages for learning as well as challenges. However, many studies seem to agree that there are benefits which can have positive effects on learning. Some possible benefits with using peer assessment found in this review are increased student motivation and participation and enhanced understanding of assessment criteria. Also, it has been stated that the level of interaction between both students and teachers as well as between peers themselves, might be increased and that peer assessment can contribute to greater student responsibility and learning outcome compared to teachers assessment.

However, this review has also identified challenges with peer assessment of oral skills. Some of the research indicated, for example, that peer assessment could be time-consuming and might increase the level of anxiety and stress among students. Additionally, there are challenges concerning gender- and friendship bias and some students seem to value teacher assessment more than assessment from peers. Also, the reliability and validity of peer assessment is questioned since there are results indicating a low correspondence between assessments of teachers and students.

There are a few learning implications that this review has found particularly prominent and important for teachers to bear in mind when it comes to peer assessment of oral skills. First of all, validity and reliability of peer assessment should not be in focus since the objective of peer assessment activities should be on the learning process rather than the outcome. Moreover, in laying the foundations for understanding the task and enhancing learning outcomes, training, preparation, and students' ownership of the assessment criteria, have been stated as critical factors. Last but not least, the classroom climate plays an essential role for the learning outcome of peer assessment. In order for our students to feel safe and to ensure ethical behavior, the classroom setting in which we practice peer assessment has to be open, objective and secure.

When bringing together all of the aspects found in this review one can conclude that there are risks and challenges with integrating peer assessment in the classroom. However, if teachers consider the pedagogical implications listed above, the conclusion should be that the potential benefits outweigh the difficulties and challenges with peer assessment.

Finally, some suggestions for future research will be presented in order to build on to the already existing knowledge. Firstly, there is a gap to fill when it comes to the school levels in which studies are conducted in. A majority of research is based on higher studies

and, therefore, future research could look into a greater variety of school levels, for example, upper secondary school. Secondly, it would be interesting to look at research from a European context, ideally Sweden. We know that teachers around Sweden are using peer assessment and that the Swedish steering documents stress the importance of incorporating alternative assessment methods, such as peer assessment, in teaching. However, we know less about the actual implementation. Since a majority of research on peer assessment of oral skills is conducted in Asia it might be interesting to replicate some of the Asian studies in another environment to see if the outcome is the same. Lastly, more studies, in general, on peer assessment of oral skills have to be conducted, with priority given to studying the formative use and learning outcomes of this method.

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