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Fostering active learner participation in higher education: An action research project

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Abstract: Social policies and educational policies are deeply interconnected, and educational policies shape the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of individuals in a society, which in turn influence social policies. Therefore, educational policies should be introduced to foster various social skills including lifelong independent and collaborative learning because such skills help individuals to thrive in an ever-changing world and competitive job market. It in this context that active learner participation becomes a cornerstone of effective pedagogy. Yet, students remain passive in classrooms, especially in language classrooms including English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms due to several reasons such as fear of making mistakes, teacher-centered pedagogical approaches, lack of confidence, and cultural influences. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the present study adapted Kurt Lewin's Spiral Steps for Action Research Model to investigate how different actions, namely evaluating peers and evaluating and offering feedback to peers during oral presentations enhanced active participation in an ESL classroom. In spite of some challenges such as student resistance, time constraints, friendship biases and lack of training in offering feedback, peer evaluation has the ability to empower pupils and foster not only a sense of responsibility and ownership for their own learning but also independent learning and collaborative learning with peers. Employing mixed methods approach, the study collected data from 48 participants enrolled in an ESL program at a university in Sri Lanka. Statistical analysis of student responses revealed a strong preference for peer evaluation with feedback. Qualitative data also confirmed that students preferred peer evaluation with feedback, which ensured active participation and accountability, enhanced learning opportunities, collaborative learning and knowledge sharing opportunities, increased attention and focus, motivation and confidence building. The findings emphasize the importance of incorporating peer evaluation with feedback as regular classroom practice. Educators can equip the students with the necessary peer evaluation skills to maximize the effectiveness of peer evaluation. Also, policy makers and ESL course designers can introduce peer evaluation to improve critical thinking, and create more interactive, engaging and reflective classroom environments. Overall, this study underscores the transformative potential of peer evaluation in ESL education to enhance independent evaluative skills, professional collaboration and teamwork, communication skills, negotiation skills and listening skills which play vital roles in the modern corporate world. Future research could explore the long-term effects of peer evaluation in diverse educational settings, cultural contexts, and subject areas.

Keywords: peer evaluation and feedback; self-efficacy theory; social skills; sociocultural theory; spiral steps for action research

Introduction

Active learner participation is a cornerstone of effective pedagogy, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. According to Ellis (2015), participation is not merely a reflection of student engagement but a critical factor which influences language acquisition, self-confidence, and academic success of the learners. In higher education, encouraging active involvement is still difficult where poor participation can negatively impact the learning environment. This problem affects both the individual student and the overall classroom dynamic, which may hinder the achievement of learning objectives (Sato, 2013).

The fear of making mistakes is one of the biggest obstacles to participating in ESL classes. As a result of fear being ridiculed or judged by their teachers and peers, students often hesitate to participate actively. Many students are discouraged from participating in class discussions by this anxiety as well as lack of confidence in their language skills (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). According to research, students who have lower levels of self-efficacy are more prone to engage in avoidance behaviors, which makes them even less inclined to participate (Bandura, 1997). Participation patterns might also be influenced by cultural variables. Students from collectivist societies, for example, where deference to authority and avoiding conflict are valued, could be less inclined to question or criticize ideas in class (Hofstede, 2001).

Another significant factor contributing to poor participation is inadequate language proficiency. According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), students who struggle with vocabulary or grammar may find it difficult to express themselves clearly, which could result in lower participation. Additionally, teacher-centered methods and unequal power dynamics can establish a passive or disempowered atmosphere in the classroom (Freire, 1970). Students who have trouble participating are further marginalized by the overemphasis on teacher talk time and lecture-based instruction, which frequently provides little opportunity for student interaction.

The implications of poor participation extend beyond the classroom. Individually, students miss opportunities to practice and refine their language skills, which are essential for their both academic and professional success. At the class level, poor participation can lead to a stagnant learning environment where ideas are not exchanged, and the benefits of collaborative learning are diminished (Vygotsky, 1978). This underscores the importance of identifying and addressing the root causes of poor participation in ESL classrooms to foster an inclusive and dynamic learning environment.

By employing targeted tactics to improve student engagement in higher education ESL classes, the present action research project seeks to address these challenges. One such tactic that will be discussed is peer evaluation, in which students assess the performance or work of one another. According to research, peer evaluation boosts students' self-esteem, empowers them, and promotes active participation in class activities (Topping, 2009). Peer evaluation gives students a sense of ownership and accountability by transferring some of the duty for feedback, which can increase participation rates. Research shows that students who participate in peer evaluation improve their critical thinking abilities and comprehend the material more thoroughly (Liu & Carless, 2006). Furthermore, peer feedback helps to create a collaborative learning environment where students feel supported and are less fearful of making mistakes.

Action research provides a useful and iterative method for addressing real-world problems because of its cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The purpose of this study was to investigate how different actions, namely evaluating peers and evaluating and giving comments to peers during presentations can ensure active participation and foster a culture of engagement in the ESL classroom. The goal of this research is to give educators and curriculum designers useful information by collaborating with students and teachers. Ultimately, encouraging active student participation through peer evaluation can improve the overall quality of education and provide students with the tools they need to study for the rest of their lives.

Literature Review

Active learner participation is important in fostering meaningful learning experiences in classrooms including ESL classrooms. Participation goes beyond answering questions; it encompasses all forms of engagement, including discussions, collaborative activities, and interactive problem-solving. It fosters a dynamic learning environment where students can practice the target language, develop confidence, and build their linguistic and cognitive abilities (Ellis, 2015). However, in higher education settings, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, poor participation is often identified as a significant obstacle to achieving desired learning outcomes. Addressing this issue is important as student engagement directly affects language acquisition, confidence building and overall academic performance.

The contribution that learner engagement makes to language acquisition is one of its main advantages. Active participation in class activities gives students the chance to use the language in relevant circumstances, which is crucial for internalizing vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Participation also fosters social contact, which is a fundamental component of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which highlights the importance of group learning for cognitive growth. Students improve their language abilities and learn to negotiate meaning through peer interactions and group discussions.

Additionally, participation helps learners become more confident. A common obstacle in ESL settings is the fear of making mistakes, which is more likely to be overcome by students who actively participate in class activities (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Teachers can encourage students to take chances and develop confidence in their skills by fostering an engaging and encouraging environment. Ultimately learner participation is not just a measure of engagement, but a key factor in both academic and personal development. By realizing its significance, teachers can introduce tactics that encourage active engagement, making the ESL classroom more successful and inclusive.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in two key educational theories: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. These theories provide a solid foundation for understanding the relationship between peer evaluation, learner participation, and classroom dynamics in ESL contexts

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory places a strong emphasis on how social interaction affects language acquisition and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory holds that learning is a socially mediated process in which students acquire knowledge through interactions with peers and teachers who possess more knowledge. A key idea in this framework is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the difference between what a learner can do on their own and what they can do with assistance. In ESL classes, participation in the ZPD is especially advantageous since it enables students to cooperatively build their language and cognitive skills.

According to this theory, classroom participation is not merely a reflection of individual motivation but also a product of the social and cultural environment. Teachers play an important role in scaffolding learner participation by creating opportunities for meaningful interaction. For example, group discussions, role-plays, and peer feedback activities provide a supportive context for learners to practice language skills. Moreover, these activities align with Vygotsky's notion that language serves as a primary tool for thinking and communication.

In an ESL context, peer evaluation promotes participation by fostering interaction among students. Through this collaborative process, students not only practice using the language in meaningful contexts but also develop critical thinking and analytical skills. Additionally, scaffolding, another core principle of Sociocultural Theory, becomes evident during peer evaluation. When students provide constructive feedback, they scaffold each other's learning by offering guidance and support, gradually leading to greater autonomy in the learning process.

The social nature of peer evaluation encourages participation by creating a less intimidating environment compared to teacher-led assessments. As students engage with their peers, they develop confidence and a sense of community, which can reduce anxiety and enhance motivation. This aligns with Vygotsky's idea that learning is inherently social, and that collaboration can facilitate deeper engagement and understanding.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Another lens for understanding learner participation is Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which focusses on how confidence shapes behavior (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's own ability to perform a particular task successfully; in the context of ESL classrooms, students who have high self-efficacy are more likely to participate actively, take risks, and persevere in the face of challenges while those who have low self-efficacy are more likely to engage in avoidance behaviors, such as remaining silent or staying away from class activities. In the context of peer evaluation, self-efficacy influences both the ability of students to provide meaningful feedback and their willingness to participate actively in the process.

The substantial relationship between participation and self-efficacy is supported by many studies. For instance, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) discovered that language learners who are anxious about making mistakes frequently have elevated anxiety levels, which undermines their confidence and willingness to participate. This anxiety is particularly noticeable in higher education settings where students may feel pressured to demonstrate their proficiency. To solve this problem, a classroom culture that accepts mistakes as a necessary component of learning must be

established. Teachers can help students develop self-efficacy by giving them constructive feedback, celebrating small achievements, and setting achievable goals for learners.

Self-efficacy theory also emphasizes how crucial peer influence is in determining participation. When students engage in peer evaluation, they develop a sense of competence and ownership over their learning. Providing feedback requires students to critically analyze their peers' work, which enhances their confidence in their ability to evaluate and improve their own performance. This process of mastery experience which is one of the primary sources of self-efficacy, helps students feel more capable and engaged in the classroom.

Moreover, observing peers successfully complete tasks during the evaluation process can serve as a vicarious experience, another important source of self-efficacy. As students witness their peers' progress and receive constructive feedback, they are more likely to believe in their own abilities to achieve similar success. Positive reinforcement during peer evaluation further enhances their self-efficacy, encouraging active participation in future classroom activities.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

Combining Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how peer evaluation can enhance learner participation in ESL classrooms. While Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning, Self-Efficacy Theory underscores the role of individual confidence and motivation in fostering engagement. Together, these theories emphasize that active participation is both a social and individual process, shaped by the interplay between internal beliefs and external interactions.

In the context of action research, these theories also guide the iterative process of improving peer evaluation practices. For instance, educators can design activities that promote scaffolding and collaborative learning while also incorporating strategies to build students' confidence and self-efficacy. This dual focus ensures that interventions are both socially meaningful and personally empowering, leading to sustained improvements in learner participation.

Factors Contributing to Poor Participation

Participation in ESL classrooms is influenced by a multitude of factors, many of which are interconnected. Understanding these factors is essential to designing interventions that effectively foster engagement. The following sections explore key contributors to poor participation, including fear of mistakes, cultural influences, lack of confidence, and teacher-centered pedagogical approaches.

Fear of Making Mistakes and Language Anxiety

One of the main obstacles to classroom participation among ESL students is their widespread fear of making mistakes. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), language anxiety is a unique type of anxiety caused by the challenges of learning and using a second language. During class activities, this anxiety can be frequently seen as hesitation, avoidance, or complete silence. Particularly in situations where language ability is viewed as a measure of intelligence or competence, learners may be afraid of being judged by their teachers or classmates (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Studies have indicated that speaking activities, which include spontaneous language generation, are particularly affected by language anxiety. According to research by Liu and Jackson (2008), students who experience higher levels of language anxiety are more likely to shy away from talks, which further reduces their chances of developing their speaking abilities. The high stakes environment of higher education where students frequently feel under pressure to perform perfectly, contributes to this fear.

Cultural Influences on Participation

The attitudes of students towards involvement are greatly influenced by cultural norms and values. The cultural dimensions theory of Hofstede (2001) emphasizes how collectivist societies, like those in Asia, value harmony within the community over individual assertiveness. Students may be reluctant to stand out in these situations by disputing ideas or posing questions because doing so can be interpreted as impolite or disruptive. Connor and Asenavage (1994) too held a similar view and claimed that students from collectivist cultures (such as Asia) avoid questioning and giving critical comments in order to maintain interpersonal harmony, cooperation and consensus between friends.

Furthermore, students may be discouraged from speaking up by the hierarchical teacher-student interactions that are typical in some cultures. Teachers are seen as authoritative characters in these settings, and their knowledge should

not be challenged. According to Cheng (2000), this dynamic frequently leads to passive learning, in which pupils concentrate on taking in knowledge rather than actively interacting with it.

Lack of Confidence and Motivation

Two important factors that influence learner participation are motivation and confidence. Self-efficacy, or the belief that one can succeed in particular tasks, is closely related to self-confidence (Bandura, 1997). Due to some negative prior language learning experiences or a sense of inferiority against their peers, many ESL students suffer from poor self-efficacy. Avoidance behaviors like skipping out on answering questions or taking part in group discussions are frequently the result of this lack of confidence.

Another important factor is motivation. Dornyei (2001) distinguishes between two forms of motivation: extrinsic (motivated by incentives from outside sources) and intrinsic (motivated by internal fulfilment). Low intrinsic motivation might cause learners to become disengaged because they believe that learning a language has little impact on their personal goals. External factors, such as monotonous teaching methods or a lack of immediate application for the language, can further diminish motivation and participation.

Traditional teacher-centered approaches

Traditional teacher-centered teaching methods frequently limit opportunities for active participation. The teacher serves as the primary source of knowledge in these classes, and pupils are supposed to listen in and take information passively. Interactive and cooperative activities, which are crucial for language acquisition, are limited by this dynamic (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Participation can also be aided or hindered by the overall environment of the classroom. Environments that are unsupportive or overly critical discourage student participation whereas environments that are inclusive and friendly boost confidence and participation. Failure to provide a secure and welcoming environment may put teachers at risk of alienating their students, especially those who are already dealing with anxiety or self-doubt.

Effects of Poor Participation

Individual-Level Effects

Low participation limits practice and feedback opportunities, which directly impacts language acquisition. Learning a language is an active process that needs meaningful communication (Ellis, 2015). Students miss important opportunities to improve their speaking, listening and collaborative skills when they choose not to participate. Additionally, a vicious cycle of disengagement may result from non-participation. For instance, students who avoid speaking due to their lack of confidence would get less encouragement and feedback, which would just serve to confirm their perception that they are not capable of succeeding. This loop may eventually lead to low academic achievement and long-term disengagement.

In addition to linguistic challenges, low participation can have a negative impact on students' emotional and social well-being. Students develop their interpersonal skills and develop relationships in the social setting of the classroom. Limited participation leads students to become isolated and hinders their ability to build relationships with teachers and peers. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), this loneliness can contribute to anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of inadequacy.

Classroom-Level Effects

Poor participation has an impact on the entire learning environment in the classroom. Low-engagement classrooms frequently lack the energy and teamwork required for engaging and productive learning. Establishing a collaborative learning environment where students can benefit from each other's perspectives and knowledge requires active participation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Discussions become less diverse when a small number of students dominate the discussion. Quieter students may feel overshadowed or underappreciated as a result of this imbalance, which also reduces the depth of classroom interactions. Since limited participation offers little insight into students' comprehension and needs, teachers may also find it difficult to assess the efficiency of their instruction in such settings.

Long-Term Implications

Beyond the classroom, low participation has an impact on students' future academic and career achievement. In both workplaces and higher education, where people are frequently expected to present ideas, work in teams, and participate in discussions, effective communication skills are essential. Students' job possibilities and professional development may be limited if they are unable to adjust to these expectations during their education (Chamot, 2005).

Limited participation in educational environments can also contribute to the continuation of larger social injustices. For example, students from under-represented groups who encounter extra obstacles to involvement may suffer from compounded social and academic disadvantages. To address these disparities, specific interventions that support diversity and equity in the classroom are needed.

Peer Evaluation: Concept, Benefits, and its Role in Enhancing Participation

Peer evaluation is a teaching method in which students evaluate one another's performance or work according to predetermined standards. This technique, which has its roots in collaborative learning, creates an atmosphere in which students actively assess, criticize, and offer constructive feedback to their peers. Peer evaluation gives students more authority and makes them active participants in the learning process, compared to traditional teacher-centered assessment (Topping, 2009).

The ability to empower pupils is one of the main advantages of peer-evaluation. According to Liu and Carless (2006), students who participate in the evaluation process improve their critical thinking abilities, their ability to provide constructive feedback, and their understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, giving peers feedback encourages students to evaluate their own work and identify their own areas of potential and development. This metacognitive awareness is essential for self-regulated learning, which helps students in both academic and lifelong learning situations (Zimmerman, 2002).

Additionally, peer evaluation fosters in students a sense of responsibility and ownership. Students feel a greater responsibility to participate actively in class activities when they are involved in evaluating their peers. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, aligns with this. Students participate in meaningful discussions, negotiate meaning, and co-construct knowledge through collaborative evaluation (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition to improving their language proficiency, these exchanges boost their self-esteem and willingness to participate actively in the lessons.

Peer review can be an effective strategy to reduce barriers to participation in ESL classrooms. One of the most common challenges that ESL learners encounter is a lack of confidence and a fear of making mistakes (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Peer evaluation provides a supportive environment where feedback is delivered by fellow students rather than authoritative figures, reducing the intimidation factor. According to research, students are more open to peer criticism because they believe it to be more relatable and less judgmental (Falchikov, 2001). This encourages active engagement by establishing a collaborative environment where students feel free to express themselves and take risks.

Empirical research shows how well peer evaluation helps learners increase engagement. Topping (2009), for instance, discovered that students who participated in peer evaluation showed greater levels of enthusiasm and engagement than those in conventional teacher-led classes. Similarly, Liu and Carless (2006) noted that as peer feedback requires students to critically assess and analyze their peers' contributions, it motivates them to engage with the course content more deeply. These results imply that peer evaluation enriches the overall classroom dynamics in addition to enhancing individual performance.

Peer evaluation also addresses the issues of power dynamics in the classroom. Students frequently view themselves as passive users of knowledge in traditional teacher-centered techniques, which can hinder participation, particularly for those who lack confidence (Freire, 1970). Peer evaluation democratizes the classroom and gives students an active role in their education by allowing them to participate in the assessment process. The ideas of action research, that put an emphasis on collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge to meet real-world situations, are in line with this participatory method (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Incorporating peer evaluation in ESL classes also fosters a collaborative and respectful environment. Learners gain empathy and appreciation for the distinct perspectives as they assess each other's work. In addition to improving social cohesiveness, this fosters a supportive learning atmosphere where students are motivated to help one another (Liu & Carless, 2006).

In conclusion, peer evaluation is a versatile tool that has several advantages for raising student engagement in ESL classroom. It overcomes major obstacles to participation while encouraging active engagement by encouraging critical thinking, boosting self-esteem, and establishing a collaborative learning environment. Peer review, when executed effectively, can change the classroom into an inclusive setting where students feel encouraged to participate, which will ultimately improve both individual and collective outcomes.

Challenges in Implementing Peer Evaluation

Peer evaluation has gained a lot of attention as a way to increase students' active engagement in the classroom. Peer evaluation encourages accountability and teamwork by letting students evaluate one other's work (Topping, 2009). Nevertheless, despite its potential, educators have to address the difficulties associated with implementing peer evaluation. Action research offers a useful and iterative framework for overcoming these obstacles, enabling teachers to modify peer evaluation techniques to suit the unique requirements of their students.

Student resistance is one of the main challenges in establishing peer evaluation. Students may find it uncomfortable to criticize their friends because of concern for possible social repercussions or because they perceive the procedure as punitive rather than helpful (Falchikov, 2001). Cultural influences can also affect how students perceive and participate in peer evaluation. Students may be reluctant to give candid criticism in collectivist communities where preserving peace and avoiding conflict are valued (Hofstede, 2001). This hesitation may compromise the validity and efficacy of the evaluation procedure.

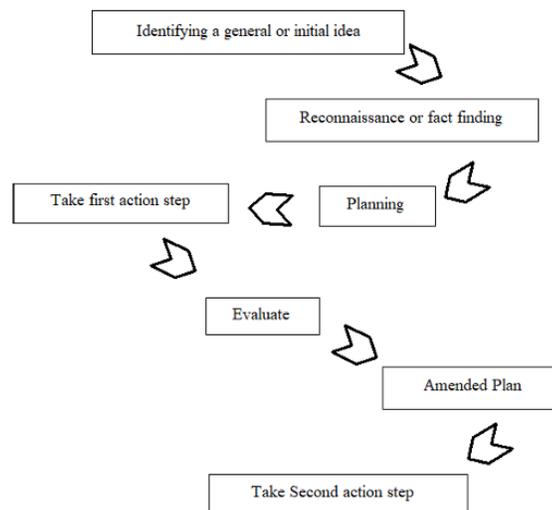
Another significant challenge is the lack of training and understanding among students about how to provide constructive feedback. Without proper guidance, peer evaluations can become superficial or overly critical, causing anxiety among learners (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Additionally, some students could question the validity of peer review since they believe that peers are less qualified than the teachers to evaluate their work. This perception can limit the trust and value placed on the feedback process (Topping, 2009).

Additionally, logistical difficulties and time constraints may make it more difficult to execute peer evaluation effectively. With a busy academic calendar, teachers may find it difficult to find enough time for training, evaluations and feedback reviews (Liu & Carless, 2006). Peer evaluations must be carefully planned and monitored to ensure consistency and fairness, which can increase the effort for both teachers and students.

Action Research as a Framework

In light of these difficulties, action research provides an adaptive and iterative method for dealing with the difficulties of putting peer evaluation into practice. Action research is a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting that is based on the principles of collaboration, reflection, and practical problem-solving (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in action research, introduced spiral steps for action research (Smith, 1996).

Figure 01: Diagram of Lewin's Spiral Steps for Action Research (Smith, 1996)



Using this approach, teachers can identify the problem, plan appropriate action to resolve the problem, take action and evaluate the action to amend it before introducing the second action.

Involving students in the process's conception and execution is one method action research might assist in overcoming the difficulties associated with peer evaluation. Teachers should ensure that the peer evaluation process is open and inclusive by gaining insight into students' preferences and concerns through collaborative planning sessions (Freire, 1970). For instance, teachers and students can collaboratively develop rubrics that clearly and mutually agree upon the assessment criteria. This cooperative method not only boosts student support but also demystifies the process, lowering resistance and anxiety.

Action research also emphasizes the importance of training and preparation. Educators can use the iterative nature of action research to pilot small-scale peer evaluation activities, provide students with constructive feedback training, and gradually expand the scope of the process. By observing and reflecting on each cycle, teachers can identify areas for improvement and develop targeted interventions to enhance the effectiveness of peer evaluation (Zimmerman, 2002).

Furthermore, action research promotes a culture of reflection and continuous improvement among both teachers and students. By integrating peer evaluation into the broader framework of participatory learning, educators can create a supportive environment where students feel empowered to take risks and engage actively. Reflective practices, such as journaling or group discussions, can help students to internalize the value of peer evaluation, fostering a growth mindset and improving their confidence (Vygotsky, 1978).

While the implementation of peer evaluation in classrooms presents several challenges, action research provides a practical and adaptive framework to address these barriers. By emphasizing collaboration, iterative problem-solving, and reflective practices, action research not only enhances the effectiveness of peer evaluation but also fosters a participatory learning environment. Ultimately, this approach equips educators with the tools to transform peer evaluation into a meaningful and impactful strategy for improving learner participation and engagement.

Research Gap

There are still some gaps in the research, especially when it comes to ESL classes and higher education in Sri Lanka, despite the expanding corpus on encouraging student participation and the value of peer evaluation in educational settings. Numerous studies conducted worldwide emphasize the advantages of peer evaluation in increasing student participation; nevertheless, the majority of these studies focus on developed or Western educational institutions (Topping, 2009; Liu & Carless, 2006). These systems frequently deviate greatly from Sri Lanka's resource-constrained and test-focused educational environments where teacher-led learning often takes precedence over student-centered strategies (Wijeratne & Perera, 2020).

One notable gap is the limited exploration of how cultural factors unique to Sri Lanka, such as hierarchical teacher-student relationships, collectivist social values, and the emphasis on avoiding confrontation can impact the implementation of participatory methods like peer evaluation. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory suggests that in high power-distance societies, students may hesitate to critique their peers or express divergent views (Hofstede, 2001). In Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, this cultural norm can inhibit the effectiveness of peer evaluation as a tool for fostering active participation.

Furthermore, although a lot of research has been done on psychological barriers to participation, like the fear of making mistakes (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002), there is limited research on how these barriers interact with language proficiency challenges specific to non-native English-speaking countries like Sri Lanka. Peer evaluation, for example, may be seen as threatening rather than empowering by students who lack confidence in their English proficiency, which would further hinder their participation.

Moreover, there is a lack of action research on the use of peer evaluation as a tactic to address low involvement in ESL contexts in Sri Lanka. This disparity emphasizes the necessity for regional research that takes into account the particular opportunities and challenges found in Sri Lankan classrooms. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute actionable insights for fostering learner participation in culturally relevant and context-specific ways.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an action research approach to explore the impact of peer evaluation on learner participation in an ESL classroom. Action research is a cyclical and reflective process that involves planning, implementing,

observing, and analyzing changes to improve educational practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Given its iterative nature, this approach was considered appropriate for addressing the issue of passive learner participation by introducing peer evaluation as a tool for engagement.

Participants

The study was conducted with 48 participants enrolled in a Diploma in English program at a state university in Sri Lanka. The participants were adult learners with varying levels of English proficiency, reflecting a diverse learning environment. All participants were given an overview of the study, and informed consent was obtained before data collection.

A total of forty-eight participants were selected for this study for several reasons. First, it ensured adequate representation of learners enrolled in the Diploma in English program at a state university in Sri Lanka. This number was considered sufficient to obtain meaningful and reliable data while maintaining the manageability of the intervention and data analysis processes. The group size also reflected the natural class composition of the program, allowing the research to take place in an authentic instructional setting without disrupting normal classroom dynamics. Moreover, the inclusion of adult learners with varying levels of English proficiency provided a diverse sample, enabling the study to capture a range of perspectives and experiences related to peer evaluation. Thus, selecting forty-eight participants ensured both practicality and representativeness within the context of the study.

Procedure

The study was implemented over three phases, represented as three concentric circles of action research. These circles reflected gradual intervention strategies to enhance participation through peer evaluation. The process was structured around a debate activity on the topic, “*Facebook has a positive impact on relationships*”. The debate format required three members in a team, with a total of sixteen teams participating.

Phases of the Action Research

Phase 1: Observation (Circle 1)

In the first phase, two groups at a time participated in the debate while the remaining students observed. The primary objective of this phase was to assess how attentively students watched and engaged with the ongoing debate. The teacher closely monitored students' reactions, engagement levels, and attentiveness to their peers' arguments. Additionally, observational notes were taken to document students' body language, note-taking behavior, and non-verbal cues indicating engagement. No formal peer evaluation was introduced at this stage; instead, the goal was to identify the natural level of learner participation in a passive observer role and determine the baseline level of attentiveness before any interventions were applied.

Phase 2: Peer Evaluation Without Feedback (Circle 2)

Based on observations from the first phase, the second phase introduced peer evaluation. Students were asked to assess their peers' debate performances using a rubric collaboratively developed by both the teacher and students. The rubric included criteria such as clarity of argument, fluency, body language, coherence, and use of evidence. Each student assigned numerical scores (e.g., 1–5) to their peers' performances without providing verbal or written feedback. The purpose of this phase was to analyze whether the act of evaluating others' performances would increase engagement levels and attentiveness compared to the first phase.

Phase 3: Peer Evaluation with Feedback (Circle 3)

In the final phase, peer evaluation was extended to include feedback. Students were required not only to assign scores based on the rubric but also to provide constructive feedback on their peers' performances. Selected students were asked to verbally explain their evaluations, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. This stage aimed to assess whether engaging in evaluative discussions would further enhance active participation and critical thinking.

Throughout all three phases, classroom observations were conducted to document changes in student engagement levels. The teacher kept detailed observation notes to capture behavioral patterns, attentiveness, and interactions among students.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of peer evaluation on participation.

Classroom Observations

Observational data were collected in all three phases. The teacher noted students' level of engagement, attentiveness, and willingness to participate in discussions. Changes in behavior across phases were documented to assess the effectiveness of peer evaluation interventions.

Questionnaire

At the end of the intervention, a questionnaire designed to capture participants' experiences with peer evaluation was administered to forty-eight (N = 48) students, of whom forty-seven provided valid responses. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions:

- **Quantitative Data:** Closed-ended questions required students to rate their level of engagement, confidence, and perceived benefits of peer evaluation using a Likert scale.
- **Qualitative Data:** Two open-ended questions allowed students to describe their thoughts on how peer evaluation influenced their participation and whether they encountered any challenges during the process. While forty-seven participants responded to the first open-ended question, only forty-two provided responses to the second.

The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, ensuring ease of access and data collection efficiency.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze the collected data.

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics were used to analyze numerical data from the closed-ended questions. This included calculating mean scores, percentages, and frequency distributions to identify trends in student perceptions of peer evaluation.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Responses from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to identify recurring themes, challenges, and perceptions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to categorize student responses into key themes, such as increased confidence, engagement, and perceived fairness of peer evaluation.

Mitigation of Internal Biases

Since the present study involved multiple forms of data such as feedback and discussion (verbal), questionnaire responses (textual), and classroom observations (visual), several measures were taken to reduce potential internal biases and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. First, the researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the three phases of the study. After each classroom session, notes were taken to critically examine personal assumptions, feelings, and expectations that could influence data interpretation. This reflexive practice helped minimize subjectivity by increasing awareness of potential researcher bias during data collection and analysis. Second, triangulation was used to ensure the reliability of the findings. The study combined multiple data collection methods including classroom observations, quantitative questionnaire results, and qualitative open-ended responses to cross-verify patterns. Convergence among these different data types strengthened the validity of the conclusions and reduced dependence on any single data form. Next, students were assured that the anonymity of their data would be protected to minimize response bias in verbal and textual data. Also, participation in all data-collection activities was voluntary, and the participants were assured that their participation or non-participation would not have any impact on the final grades of the course. When evaluating the peers, a collaboratively developed common assessment rubric was used by both peers and instructors. This ensured that evaluations were based on transparent and agreed-upon criteria rather than personal opinions. Consistency in evaluation criteria helped control subjective variation among peer-evaluators and the researcher. Thus, by incorporating several strategies such as reflexivity, triangulation, anonymity and standardized pre-prepared collaborative rubrics, the study minimized internal biases in verbal, textual, and visual data. These strategies collectively enhanced the trustworthiness, validity, and transparency of the research process and outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed to ensure the integrity of the research process. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses, and students were assured that their peer evaluations would not affect their academic grades.

Thus, the methodology adopted in this study outlines a structured approach to examining the role of peer evaluation in enhancing learner participation. By implementing a phased action research model, this study systematically analyzed how peer evaluation influences student engagement in an ESL classroom. The combination of classroom observations, rubric-based evaluations, and student feedback provided a holistic view of the impact of peer evaluation on participation, ensuring that the findings are both robust and contextually relevant.

Results

Overview of Findings

The findings from this study indicate that incorporating peer evaluation, particularly with feedback, significantly enhanced student engagement and participation in the ESL classroom. Quantitative data from the questionnaire, as well as qualitative responses and classroom observations, highlight a clear shift in student attentiveness, involvement, and overall perception of peer evaluation as a learning tool.

Quantitative Results

The statistical analysis of student responses reveals a strong preference for peer evaluation with feedback over other methods. Specifically, 93.6% of students (figure 02) reported that this method was more effective in improving their engagement and learning experience. Additionally, 87.2% of students (Figure 03) expressed a preference for this approach, stating that they liked peer evaluation with feedback and found it beneficial.

Figure 02. Which method is most effective to increase engagement

Which method is most effective to increase engagement and attention?
47 responses

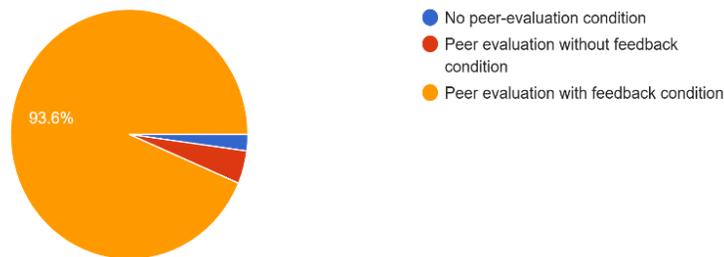
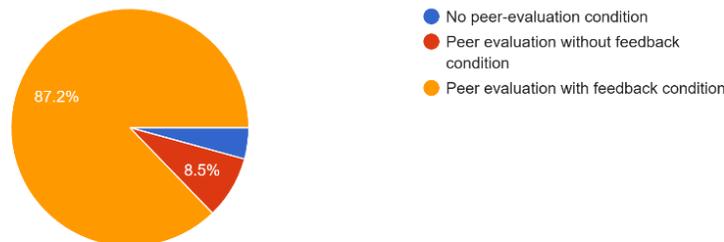


Figure 03. Which method did you like most?

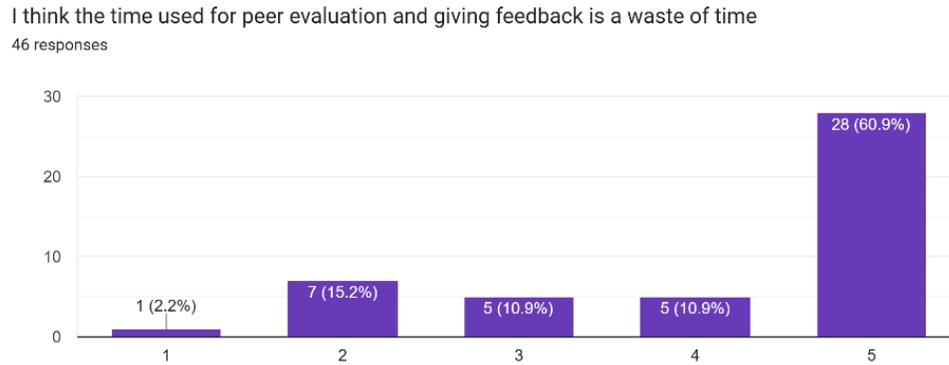
Which method did you like most?
47 responses



Five-point Likert scale, where 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree, was used to find out if the time used for peer evaluation and giving feedback was a waste of time. More than 70% of the participants agreed that peer

evaluation with feedback was valuable and not a waste of time (Figure 04). This indicates a general consensus that the process was meaningful and contributed to their learning experience.

Figure 04. I think the time used for peer evaluation and giving feedback is a waste of time



In addition to preference ratings, the data indicated a measurable improvement in student participation. A comparative analysis of classroom engagement before and after implementing peer evaluation with feedback shows a noticeable improvement in active participation, as measured by student responses, note-taking behavior, and contributions to discussions. This suggests that students were not only more engaged but also more invested in the learning process. Moreover, confidence in speaking is also increased due to this process.

These findings provide quantitative support for the effectiveness of peer evaluation with feedback, reinforcing the idea that structured peer assessment fosters active learning and deeper engagement. The statistical analysis of student responses reveals a strong preference for peer evaluation with feedback over other methods.

Qualitative Results: Emerging Themes

The open-ended responses provided by students reflected several key themes regarding the impact of peer evaluation with feedback on student engagement. The analysis of these responses led to the emergence of the following themes:

Active Participation and Accountability

Students reported a heightened sense of responsibility and engagement when they knew their peers would be evaluating their work. Some of the responses included:

- *"I paid more attention because I knew my friends would evaluate me."*
- *"When we give feedback, we have to listen carefully to our peers, so it keeps us involved."*
- *"Everyone was engaged in the process because we had to contribute something."*

This suggests that peer evaluation fosters a culture of active participation and accountability, as students feel more invested in both their own performance and that of their peers.

Constructive Peer Feedback as a Learning Tool

Many students highlighted that receiving feedback from their peers helped them recognize and correct their mistakes. Some of the responses included:

- *"If we get feedback, we can reduce mistakes as well."*
- *"Giving feedback is a good way to correct mistakes."*
- *"I also got the opportunity to understand my grammar mistakes."*

This indicates that peer feedback serves as an effective learning tool, enabling students to develop self-awareness and refine their language skills through constructive criticism.

Collaborative Learning and Knowledge Sharing

Students acknowledged that peer evaluation allowed them to gain new insights, expand their vocabulary, and enhance their understanding through discussion and feedback. Key responses included:

- *"I can learn more things, new words, and ideas. Also, I can share my ideas with others and listen to my friends' ideas."*
- *"It is useful for understanding and making good connections."*
- *"The debaters had the chance to talk, and the audience had the chance to give their opinions. Both were engaged in it."*

These responses suggest that peer evaluation creates an interactive classroom environment where students can learn from each other, fostering collaborative learning.

Increased Attention and Focus

Another significant theme was the increased level of attention and concentration due to peer evaluation. Some noteworthy comments include:

- *"It will help to capture students' attention effectively."*
- *"It's good for memorability."*
- *"So that all the students in the class will not be distracted, they will be concentrating."*
- *"I think peer evaluation with feedback is better because we can seriously concentrate on the program."*

These responses reinforce the idea that incorporating feedback into peer evaluation sustains students' focus and minimizes distractions, leading to deeper engagement with the material.

Motivation and Confidence Building

A recurring sentiment among students was that peer evaluation provided encouragement and motivation for active participation. This was particularly evident in statements such as:

- *"Students can correct their mistakes based on peer feedback."*
- *"The debaters had the chance to talk, and the audience had the chance to give their opinions. Both were engaged in it. It was an encouragement for the team."*
- *"I strongly believe that this method enhances engagement because I personally paid significantly more attention to my peers' responses compared to previous classes."*

These insights suggest that peer evaluation with feedback creates a supportive environment where students feel motivated to participate and build confidence in their language abilities.

These emerging themes demonstrate that peer evaluation with feedback plays a crucial role in fostering active engagement, enhancing learning, and creating an interactive and student-centered learning environment. Thus, the open-ended responses provided by students reflected several key themes regarding the benefits of peer evaluation with feedback:

Observational Findings

Classroom observations further supported the quantitative and qualitative data, illustrating a noticeable improvement in student engagement across the three phases of the study.

Phase 1: Observation (Minimal Engagement)

During the initial phase, where students merely observed the debate without any evaluation component, engagement was notably low. Most students were not particularly attentive, and only a few demonstrated active listening. Passive participation was evident as many students did not take notes or contribute to discussions. Some were visibly disengaged, chatting with peers or distracted by external factors. This phase highlighted the need for a structured approach to enhance student involvement.

Phase 2: Peer Evaluation Without Feedback (Moderate Engagement)

In the second phase, with the introduction of peer evaluation using evaluation rubrics, student engagement increased. A greater number of students paid attention to their peers' arguments, actively assessed performances, and took the evaluation process seriously. While some students were still hesitant in their participation, the majority demonstrated improved attentiveness compared to the first phase. This phase demonstrated that even without feedback, the act of evaluating peers contributed to better attentiveness and involvement.

Phase 3: Peer Evaluation with Feedback (High Engagement)

The final phase, where students not only evaluated but also provided feedback, resulted in the highest levels of engagement. Students were not only listening attentively but also taking notes to provide meaningful feedback. The inclusion of feedback encouraged critical thinking, as students were required to articulate their observations constructively. This dual role of evaluation and feedback reinforced active participation, deepened their understanding of the learning material, and created an interactive, student-centered learning environment.

Student Suggestions for Improvement

Several students provided constructive suggestions for improving the peer evaluation process:

"I think it's better to continue such peer evaluation sessions with feedback rather than just learning and writing."

"This is a very important learning method. Using activities like this, we can learn more and improve many English language skills."

"This method is very interesting."

"I think peer evaluation with feedback is good."

"The lecturer can check whether the students are paying attention by asking random questions."

These suggestions indicate that students found the method highly beneficial and believe it should be incorporated more frequently into the learning process.

The results of this study provide strong evidence that peer evaluation with feedback is an effective strategy for enhancing learner participation in the ESL classroom. Quantitative data show a clear preference for this method while qualitative responses reveal key benefits such as improved error correction, knowledge sharing, engagement, and motivation. Observational findings further confirm that student attentiveness and participation increased significantly as the study progressed.

Given these insights, integrating peer evaluation with feedback into ESL learning can be a powerful tool for fostering active engagement and collaborative learning. The overwhelmingly positive student responses suggest that such methods should be continued and refined to maximize their effectiveness in future classroom settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that peer evaluation, particularly when combined with structured feedback, significantly enhances student engagement in ESL classrooms. The results align with previous research indicating that student-centered assessment methods encourage active learning, foster collaborative skills, and improve motivation (Topping, 2018; Nicol et al., 2014). This section discusses the key themes that emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data, linking them to relevant literature and providing examples from the study.

Active Participation and Accountability

The study found that peer evaluation with feedback fostered higher levels of participation and accountability among students. This aligns with previous research indicating that students are more engaged when they play an active role in their learning process (Topping, 2009). The data revealed that there is a significant increase in their active participation, reinforcing the notion that structured peer assessment promotes student involvement.

For instance, students reported that they felt more responsible for their contributions when they knew their peers would evaluate them. One student noted, *"I paid much more attention to what my peers said because I knew I had to provide feedback."* This observation supports findings from Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000), who argue that peer assessment increases students' sense of ownership over their learning.

Additionally, classroom observations showed that students who were previously passive became more engaged during the process of peer evaluation and providing feedback. This suggests that peer assessment not only motivates active learners but also encourages traditionally less engaged students to participate. By promoting accountability, peer evaluation can serve as an effective tool for enhancing overall classroom engagement.

Constructive Peer Feedback as a Learning Tool

One of the most significant findings of this study was the role of peer feedback in fostering learning. Many students emphasized that receiving feedback from their peers helped them to recognize and to correct their mistakes, particularly in grammar and content organization. This supports research by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), which highlights the importance of formative feedback in learning.

For example, one student remarked, *"Giving feedback is a good way to correct mistakes. I understood my grammar errors better when my peers pointed them out."* This aligns with Gielen et al. (2010), who found that structured peer feedback enhances students' ability to identify weaknesses and make necessary improvements.

Moreover, the study revealed that students benefited from both giving and receiving feedback. While receiving feedback helped them refine their work, providing feedback improved their critical thinking skills. This reciprocal nature of peer evaluation is consistent with findings by Liu and Carless (2006), who argue that students develop a deeper understanding of assessment criteria when engaging in peer feedback processes.

Collaborative Learning and Knowledge Sharing

The findings indicate that peer evaluation fosters collaborative learning by encouraging students to engage in knowledge-sharing activities. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interactions in learning.

Students reported that peer evaluation provided opportunities to exchange ideas and perspectives. One student noted, *"I can learn new words and ideas by listening to my friends."* Similarly, another student commented, *"The debaters had the chance to talk, and the audience had the chance to give their opinions. Both were engaged in it."* These responses illustrate the collaborative nature of peer evaluation, where students become both learners and teachers.

Furthermore, research by Van Gennip et al. (2010) suggests that collaborative peer assessment can improve interpersonal skills, making students more open to constructive criticism and discussion. By facilitating dialogue and interaction, peer evaluation contributes to a more dynamic and interactive classroom environment.

Increased Attention and Focus

Another key finding was the increase in student attentiveness and focus when peer evaluation was introduced. The study found that students were less distracted and more engaged in classroom discussions when they knew they would be evaluated by their peers.

A student stated, *"All the students in the class will not be distracted - they will be concentrating."* This finding is in line with Prins et al. (2005), who argue that students are more likely to stay focused when they perceive an immediate purpose for their learning activities.

Additionally, classroom observations showed that students took more detailed notes and engaged more actively in discussions during the peer evaluation phase. These findings suggest that incorporating peer assessment can be an effective strategy for sustaining students' attention in ESL classrooms.

Motivation and Confidence Building

The results also indicate that peer evaluation enhances student motivation and confidence. Students felt encouraged when they received constructive feedback from their peers, which motivated them to improve their performance.

One student commented, *"I strongly believe that this method enhances engagement because I personally paid significantly more attention to my peers' responses compared to previous classes."* This is consistent with research by Topping (2009), which suggests that peer assessment provides a supportive environment that boosts student confidence.

Additionally, students reported that they felt more confident in expressing their ideas when engaging in peer evaluation. This aligns with findings by Cheng and Warren (2005), who argue that peer feedback reduces anxiety and promotes a sense of community in the classroom. By creating a non-threatening learning environment, peer evaluation helps students build confidence in their abilities.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications. First, they highlight the importance of incorporating peer evaluation with feedback as a regular practice in ESL classrooms. Given the demonstrated benefits in terms of engagement, learning, and confidence building, educators should consider integrating structured peer assessment activities into their lesson plans.

Second, teachers should provide clear guidelines and training on how to give constructive feedback. Research by Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001) suggests that students need explicit instruction on how to evaluate their peers effectively. By equipping students with the necessary skills, educators can maximize the effectiveness of peer assessment.

Finally, the study suggests that peer evaluation can be adapted to different learning contexts. While this research focused on ESL classrooms, similar approaches can be applied in other subject areas to foster student engagement and active learning.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study highlights the benefits of peer evaluation with feedback, it is not without limitations. First, the study was conducted within a single ESL classroom, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore peer evaluation in diverse educational settings, including different proficiency levels, cultural contexts, and subject areas beyond language learning.

Another limitation is the potential bias in peer feedback. Some students may have hesitated to provide honest critiques due to personal relationships, cultural expectations, or fear of offending their peers. This aligns with findings by Carless (2011), who noted that students in some cultures are less likely to provide critical feedback due to social harmony concerns. Future studies could examine ways to mitigate this issue, such as anonymous peer evaluation, structured feedback training and the use of comprehensive rubrics.

Additionally, the study primarily relied on qualitative data, with student engagement measured through self-reports and observations. While these methods provide valuable insights, future research, as Gielen et al. suggest, could incorporate more quantitative measures, such as tracking student performance over time or using eye-tracking and response time analysis to assess attentiveness during peer evaluation sessions (2010).

Lastly, while the study showed that peer evaluation enhanced engagement, it did not examine the long-term effects on students' learning retention and academic performance. Future research could investigate whether continued use of peer evaluation contributes to sustained improvements in language proficiency, confidence, and autonomy in learning.

By addressing these limitations, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how peer evaluation influences student engagement and learning outcomes in various educational contexts.

Additionally, while the study found that students benefited from peer feedback, some may have been hesitant to critique their peers due to cultural or social factors. Further research could examine strategies to encourage more critical and constructive feedback among students (Carless, 2011).

Conclusion

Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the present study adapted Kurt Lewin's Spiral Steps for Action Research Model to investigate how different actions, namely evaluating peers and evaluating and offering feedback to peers during oral presentations enhanced active participation in an ESL classroom. Data were collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods using classroom observations and questionnaire that consisted of open-ended and closed ended questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of peer evaluation on participation. Incorporating several strategies such as reflexivity, triangulation, anonymity and standardized pre-prepared collaborative rubrics, internal biases in verbal, textual, and visual data were minimized, and the trustworthiness, validity, and transparency of the research process and outcomes were enhanced.

This study provides strong evidence that peer evaluation with structured feedback enhances student engagement, promotes knowledge sharing, increases attentiveness, and fosters motivation in ESL classrooms. The findings align with existing literature, reinforcing the importance of student-centered assessment methods in promoting active learning.

Beyond immediate classroom benefits, the study highlights the potential of peer evaluation as a sustainable pedagogical strategy for fostering lifelong learning skills. By engaging in peer assessment, students develop critical

thinking, collaboration, and self-regulation skills, which are essential for academic and professional success (Nicol et al., 2014; Topping, 2018).

From an institutional perspective, integrating peer evaluation into ESL curricula could lead to long-term improvements in student learning outcomes. However, challenges such as the reliability of peer feedback, students' reluctance to critique their peers, and the need for adequate training must be addressed (Carless, 2011). Careful planning, comprehensive marking scheme and detailed rubrics can be used to overcome these challenges and enhance efficiency, effectiveness and reliability of peer evaluation. Future research could explore scalable models of peer assessment across different cultural and linguistic contexts to further validate its effectiveness.

Overall, this study underscores the transformative potential of peer evaluation in ESL education. By empowering students to take an active role in their learning, educators can create more interactive, engaging, and reflective classroom environments. Implementing structured peer feedback mechanisms can lead to significant improvements in student engagement, self-awareness, and motivation, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience.

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