

Book Review of Yu, S. (2024). *Peer Assessment in Writing Instruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peer feedback assessment: Taking stock of its basics

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Peer assessment¹ has emerged as a widely employed strategy to develop writing, particularly in higher education, and has seen significant growth as a research field in recent decades, as evidenced by two recent systematic reviews dedicated to peer feedback in English as a Foreign or Second Language EFL/ESL (Chang, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2016). The development of this field reflects contemporary changes, notably the integration of technology into peer feedback processes (Li, 2021). In this timely Cambridge Elements publication, *Peer Assessment in Writing Instruction*, Shulin Yu describes the multifaceted nature of peer assessment, exploring its development over recent decades and its diverse applications across various sociocultural and educational contexts. The book not only highlights prevailing themes and current research findings but also evaluates the efficacy of peer assessment within the assessment paradigms *of*, *for*, and *as learning*.

Shulin Yu, an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education University of Macau, China, brings extensive expertise in second language writing and classroom feedback and assessment in higher education. His contributions have been published in esteemed journals such as *Educational Research Review* and *Language Teaching Research*, and he serves on the editorial boards of *Assessing Writing* and *Journal of Second Language Writing*.

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The book is structured in eight parts: Introduction; Conceptual Framework: Peer Assessment of, for, and as Learning in Writing Classrooms; Peer Assessment in the L1 writing context; Peer Assessment in the ESL/EFL University Writing Context; Peer Assessment in the EAP/ESP Writing context; Peer Assessment in the ESL/EFL School Writing Context; Peer Assessment in Foreign Language Writing Contexts; Moving Forward with Peer Assessment in Writing Instruction: Possibilities for Future Dialogue. Our review of this book aims to provide a nuanced evaluation, examining its scholarly contributions and practical implications.

In the introductory chapter, Yu brings a working definition of peer assessment and delineates three distinct paradigms of this type of assessment, signalling the predominant focus on the formative role of Assessment *for* Learning (AfL). This approach encourages learners, after training, to suggest improvements to each other's texts based on predefined criteria or rubrics, a method shown to positively impact learning outcomes. In addition to AfL, the book explores two other dimensions of peer assessment: Assessment *of* Learning (AoL) and Assessment *as* Learning (AaL). While AoL serves a summative role in tracking progress, AaL represents a more recent development related to self-efficacy. Briefly, in the introduction, Yu examines how peer assessment can inform summative writing assessments.

Chapter 2 delves into his conceptual framework of peer assessment, elucidating the purposes and applications of the three paradigms: AfL, AoL, and AaL. Yu refrains from establishing a hierarchy among these paradigms, instead presenting them as interconnected and potentially leading to AaL, an ultimate goal, when learners apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies to self-regulate their writing. By synthesising existing research, Yu proposes a framework, presented in a figure, wherein peer assessment serves as a central mediator in enhancing writing performance, understanding writing as a process, and fostering critical reasoning skills.

Chapter 3 examines peer assessment in the L1 writing context, focusing on key studies conducted primarily in the USA. This section highlights the evolution of peer assessment research from a focus on product-oriented, AfL approaches, to investigations into AoL and AaL dimensions. Yu will follow this same order of approaches – AoL, AfL, AaL – when reviewing the literature on peer assessment in different contexts. This chapter highlights the importance of creating robust rubrics and providing detailed training for peer assessment. Most L1 studies had an AoL approach and used different design methods (e.g., correlational), investigated different types of feedback (e.g., direct vs. indirect) and started to research the incorporation of technology into peer assessment practices. Notably, learners often reported greater benefits from giving rather than receiving feedback, underscoring the value of engaging in the assessment process. Finally, the reviewed studies hypothesise that the active role of feedback-giver led to the development of cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Continuing with Chapter 4, Yu explores peer assessment in ESL/EFL university writing contexts, addressing challenges associated with implementing summative assessments – AoL – and exploring the potential of digital tools to enhance peer feedback practices. AfL is particularly challenging due to institutional constraints and the emotional burden of ESL/EFL students' grading. While some studies demonstrate promising results in fostering metacognitive awareness – Zheng et al. (2018), for instance, showed that synchronous peer feedback influenced this aspect –, further research is needed to fully understand how peer assessment contributes *as learning* – AaL.

Considering that peer feedback is an emotional-laden experience (Li & Reynolds, 2021), Chapter 5 focuses on peer assessment in the EAP/ESP writing context, bringing to the fore the emotional aspects of peer feedback and its implications for learners of English for Academic Purposes/English for Specific Purposes. Research in this context also indicated benefits for domain-specific knowledge. Additionally, the chapter underscores the importance of tailored peer feedback activities and highlights the role of teachers in creating and facilitating meaningful peer assessment experiences, suggesting that peer assessment should not be incorporated as a one-off activity by teachers. It also mentions the need to raise awareness that experiencing positive and negative emotions due to peer feedback is a valid reaction. Yu finishes the chapter by talking about studies in which the process of peer assessment led the participants to develop critical skills, which allowed them to be better at self-evaluating their own writing.

Chapter 6 discusses peer assessment in ESL/EFL school writing contexts, particularly focusing on formative assessment approaches. While Yu acknowledges the limited research in this area, a few studies reviewed call for a student-centred approach to avoid learners merely replicating teacher feedback. Although only a few studies were reviewed, the benefits of peer feedback in secondary schools were found to be similar to those in higher education, extending beyond just the improvement of students' texts. In the primary setting, there is a bigger challenge to avoid perfunctory peer feedback as well as the implementation of technology for peer assessment. Despite the challenges involved, Yu highlights the potential for further peer feedback research in ESL/EFL school settings, particularly the development of metacognitive strategies and critical thinking with secondary learners (AaL).

Yu starts chapter 7 by praising the growth in research with languages other than English in foreign language contexts. The main focus of research in peer assessment in these contexts has also been on formative assessment, and whatever evidence there is in terms of summative assessment – AoL, it is not enough to validate peer grading as compared to teacher grading. Likewise, research on AaL is scarce, though there are indications that engaging with peer assessment might lead to learner autonomy and better social skills. On the other hand, the robust body of evidence in AfL for the beneficial impact of peer assessment on students' writing

development highlights the importance of deep discussions between peers as well as mutual social support (including social and cognitive acknowledgment). While *giving* feedback has been found to be particularly valuable for advances in writing, such benefit might only be reaped when learners are affectively, cognitively, and behaviourally engaged with feedback.

Chapter 8 ends the book by indicating aspects of peer assessment research that are worthy of more attention. One of them is the possibility of peer assessment (and even grading) being used in summative assessment. More research is also needed in contexts of foreign – rather than second – language learning, and especially with languages other than English. Yu suspects the existing inconsistent findings regarding the positive/negative impacts of peer assessment might be better understood by considering the context where the studies were conducted (e.g., teacher-centred classrooms) and individual differences among learners (such as L2 proficiency level, for example). Lastly, more study is also needed in terms of preparing teachers to face the challenges of implementing peer assessment in their classrooms and fostering feedback literacy in their students so that they may engage effectively, cognitively, and behaviourally in peer assessment activities.

In assessing Yu's book, it is possible to praise a number of its characteristics while also pointing out potential areas for improvement. While the exploration of peer assessment in writing instruction across diverse settings is commendable, there are notable drawbacks. For instance, the systematic review of studies lacks a transparent set of criteria guiding the selection process for the reviewed papers. On this note, geographically, most studies reviewed are from the USA, Europe and China, which leaves several contexts and, thus, studies in the world overlooked (e.g., Díaz Galvez, 2010). Moreover, for a future second edition, enhancing the book's organization with the inclusion of tables summarizing key details (such as participant demographics, methodology, etc.) for each study could enhance clarity and facilitate comparisons.

Despite these aspects, Yu's book offers a significant and current examination of peer assessment in writing instruction in different contexts and with different purposes: of learning, for learning, as learning; bridging theoretical insights with practical implications. By touching on the complexities and nuances of peer assessment paradigms, the book serves as a valuable first-step resource for educators and researchers alike, prompting further dialogue and exploration in the field. Particularly, chapters of the book could be worked on individually in undergraduate and graduate programmes together with recent papers on the specific topic of the chapter, with the chapters setting the background.

Note

1. While Yu equates the concepts of peer assessment, peer feedback, peer review and peer evaluation in this book, such broad equivalence is not agreed across the field. For a discussion that theorises feedback as a concept and deals with some conceptual differences see Dann (2019).

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