Tutor-learner Collaborative Assessment for Learning

Juliana Chau

Abstract

Theories of cognitive psychology have been influential in raising awareness and understanding of how learning develops in human interaction. Vygotsky's concept of "zone of proximal development", for instance, points to the significance of tutor-learner interaction in the learning process that allows the tutor to identify what the learner can do unassisted, to achieve what s/he is capable of with scaffolding by experts and, to *explore* learning progress within it. What is disheartening, however, is the diminishing value accorded to this *exploratory* dimension in the current educational and assessment landscape. Of note is group-administered standardised testing designed to produce quantifiable results tend to dominate most pedagogic considerations. Researchers argue that this mode of assessment has the effect of subjugating higher-order strategies (e.g. analysis and evaluation) to rote-based, low cognitive skills (e.g. recall of knowledge and facts believed to be more easily observed and measured). This has prompted calls for an alternative assessment framework which has the capacity to scaffold and sustain learner development and interaction without detracting from its evaluative characteristics.

This paper describes a study designed to find out the effects of tutor-learner collaboration in assessment on language and learner development in a university setting. Findings of the study show learner growth in three domains, namely, cognitive, linguistic, and meta-linguistic, suggesting that a collaborative tutor-learner relationship can be incorporated into assessment for learning.

Introduction

Proponents of a social dimension of learning have often drawn from theories of cognitive psychology to hone the ways in which assessment is understood and conducted for optimal learning. Vygotskian approaches (Vygotsky, 1962) view learning as characterized by tutor-learner interaction. The much-cited "zone of proximal development" emphasizes the main role of the tutor as one that seeks to identify what the learner can do independently, to scaffold him or her to move towards a higher level of performance and, to *explore* learning progress within it (Black, 1999). However, this *exploratory* dimension is accorded diminishing value in the prevailing educational and assessment landscape. In assessment, impersonal, group-administered standardized testing to generate quantifiable results underpins most major pedagogic considerations. Researchers contend that this mode of assessment tends to subjugate higher-order strategies (e.g. analysis and evaluation) to rote-based, low cognitive skills (e.g. recall of knowledge and facts believed to be more easily observed and measured). Calls for an alternative assessment framework ensue (Zessoules & Gardner, 1991; Gardner,1999; Hansen, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2015) – a framework with the capacity to scaffold and sustain learner development and interaction without detracting from its evaluative characteristics.

In this paper I will depict a study undertaken to ascertain the effects of tutor-learner collaboration in assessment on language and learner development in a Hong Kong university. Findings of the study indicate learner development at the cognitive, linguistic, and meta-linguistic level, with implications that collaborative assessment with a developmental dimension is feasible and potentially beneficial for learners.

Design and Context of Study

Participants included fifty-one second-year university students completing an *English in the Workplace* course with three-hour weekly meetings over a 14-week semester. These students were from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and were placed in three seminar groups which I taught.

Before assessment, I drew students' attention to the six criteria for writing: content; organization, cohesion, coherence; register; grammatical structures, vocabulary; range of grammatical structures and vocabulary; and adherence to workplace writing conventions. These were explained to students in detail. The purpose was to raise students' awareness of how their writing would be judged and to offer a basis for subsequent discussion and /or negotiation of their work and grade with me as their teacher. Students were required to produce a 450-word report in class which described and interpreted data in workplace contexts.

Post-assessment tutor-learner interaction followed *five* steps:

1. I collected the completed reports and marked them. Grades and comments were withheld from students at this point, but provided on a separate feedback form.

2. The reports (with neither grades nor comments) were returned to students to self-grade against the six writing assessment criteria explained earlier. The self-assessed grade would then be entered on to a log sheet (Fig. 2).

3. The feedback form with my grade and comments was then distributed to individual students.

4. Students would then re-visit their writing in the light of teacher feedback and might consider revising their self-assessed grade. This second self-assessed grade, be it the same as or different from the first one, would be recorded in the log sheet.

5. Students could discuss with me their thoughts on the grade and comments and provide reasons for a grade review. Grade revision would be possible, subject to reasons given and their alignment with the writing assessment criteria.
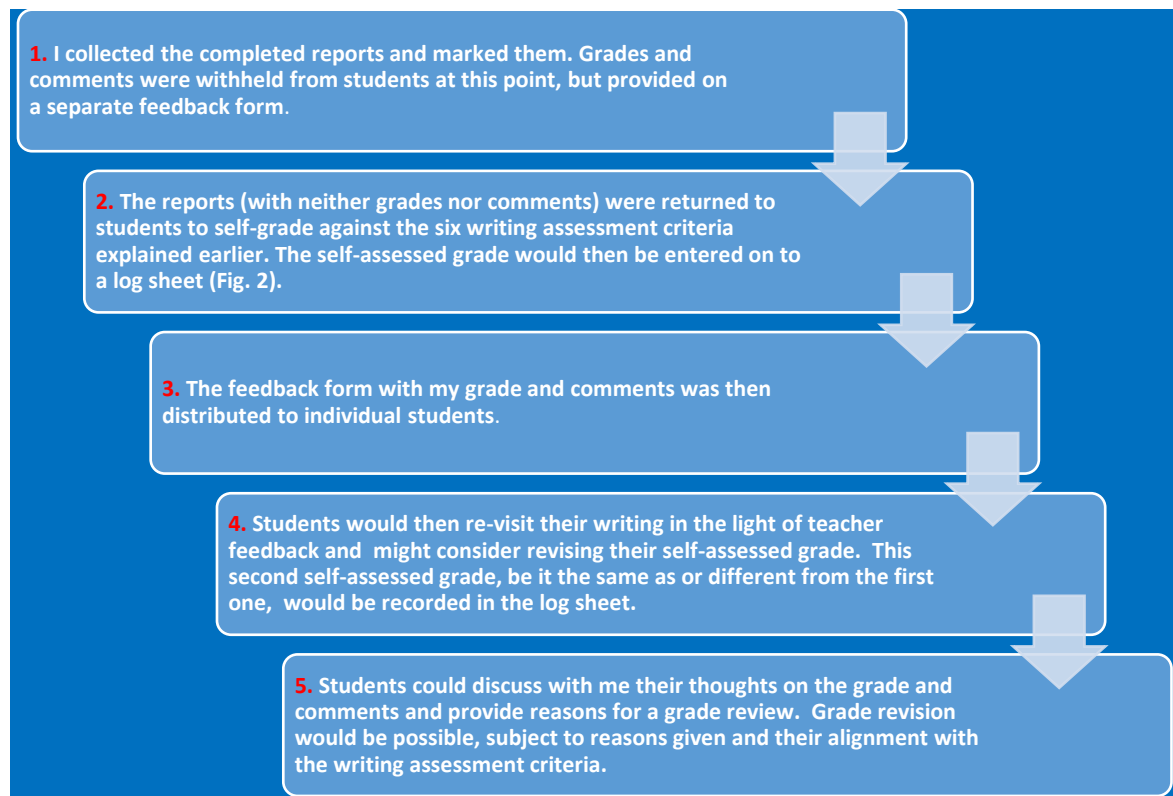
Fig. 1 Five-step post-assessment tutor-learner interaction

As shown in Figure 1, tutor-learner interaction, referred to as collaborative assessment in this study, comprised tutor input (Steps 1 and 3), learner self-evaluation (Steps 2 and 4), tutor-learner discussion (Step 5), tutor-learner negotiated outcome (Step 5). The student's log sheet (Fig. 2, next page) was designed to record interactions with the tutor and their reflection on the assessment.

My Log Sheet

Name: _____   Student No. _____

Self-assessed grade (*before* teacher feedback)	Teacher's grade	Self-assessed grade (*after* teacher feedback)	Revised grade, if any (*after* discussion with teacher)

My reasons for a revised grade

What's good or *not* so good with my writing
> i)   **content**
> ii)   **organization, cohesion, coherence**
> iii)   **register**
> iv)   **grammatical structures and vocabulary**
> v)   **range of grammatical structures and vocabulary**
> vi)   **adherence to workplace writing conventions**

My thoughts on the discussion with teacher (e.g. what I have learnt from it, whether or not I'm happy with the outcome and why)

Fig. 2 A student's log sheet

Data collection for the study included firstly, retrospective techniques by way of post-study semi-structured face-to-face interviews or email responses and, secondly, notes from students' log sheets done in class. A total of 23 students were successfully interviewed. The meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Another 18 participants responded by email. All fifty-one log sheets were returned. The interview, face to face or via email, was meant to solicit students' views on three key areas:
> i)   aspects of collaborative assessment (or tutor-learner discussion/negotiation) they found most helpful, especially in areas of language improvement;
> ii)   aspects of collaborative assessment (or tutor-learner discussion/negotiation) they found not so helpful or had difficulty with; and
> iii)   overall comments or suggestions for future implementation

Results and Discussion

This study sought to find out the effects of collaborative assessment on language development and learners in the context of an *English in the Workplace* course at university. Data drawn from the interviews, email responses and reflective entries in log sheets suggest positive outcomes in three areas:

1. cognitive ability
2. language
3. meta-language

1. Cognitive ability

Cognitive theory advocates have identified three main characteristics of successful collaborative learning, namely, negotiability, interactivity, and choice and control (Sadovnik, 1995; Dillenbourg, 1999). Each of the characteristics is discussed in turn in the ensuing sections with reference to the study findings.

- *negotiability*

In most Asian settings, Confucian heritage and values are believed to impinge significantly on students' perception of the teacher as an erudite scholar (Bond, 1991; Winter, 1993; Biggs & Watkins, 1993). Such observations have often led Western researchers to conclude that Asian students are compliant and submissive and prone to use rote-based, low cognitive strategies in learning (e.g. Biggs, 1996). A number of other studies (Biggs, 1996; Marton et al., 1996; Littlewood, 2000) have demonstrated otherwise, however.

In this study, participants' evolving role as "negotiator" is a case in point. Two students articulated these comments:

'I think I should get a better grade than C+ in content. I mention the action taken and explain the case quite clearly. Then there are linking words and headings and I follow the format of letter writing. I should overall get a B at least.'

'I know I am careless, but I use good vocabulary.'

Implicit in these short remarks is the role of the negotiator who first proceeds to identify areas to be discussed ('content… language'), then elicits and elaborates evidence to support a point ('I mention the action taken and explain the case quite clearly') and finally sums up the argument ('I should overall…'). Of note is the use of language demonstrating confidence ('I <u>know </u>I am careless…'), tact (admitting weakness first, then pointing out strength as justification for re-grading -'I know I am careless, <u>but I use good vocabulary</u>'), and assertiveness ('I <u>think I should get a better grade..</u>'). In this instance, the role of "negotiator" is invested with meaning (to negotiate for a better grade, with some form of control over assessment) is not only to maximize the need to use higher-order procedures such as elaboration, organization, comprehension-monitoring (Dart & Boulton-Lewis, 1998; Dillenbourg, 1999; Murphy, 1999). It also makes apparent to the learner the effect of using these strategies in performance and feedback (Evans, 1991; Prichard, 2002).

- *interactivity*

Several factors are reported to facilitate or impede learning, for example, the attitudes and motivation of the learner, the availability of time and opportunities to learn, and the chance to use language in meaningful interaction (Vygotsky, 1962; Crystal, 1991). As illustrated by the findings of this study,

students showed perceptible inclination to initiate contact with the tutor and experiment with different ways to improve language ('I negotiate with the tutor in English'; 'discuss in English'; 'use new words '), displayed a high level of motivation, and felt encouraged by the positive outcome of discussion ('I think the grade is fair'; 'tutor seem to listen'). In essence, it can be inferred that this study offers fertile ground for meaning-driven language practice and interaction - for negotiation with the tutor and for critical analysis of one's writing ability ('It lets me know what problem I have and understand the requirement better.'). The latter is evidenced by students' ability to decipher assessment criteria ('Sometimes may be difficult to understand the requirement of each assignment…the discussion help me to understand my weakness and strength'), examine critically his/her deficiency (' I know my grammar mistake'), explore and develop meta-language ('Then there are linking words and headings and I follow the format of letter writing.'). This process can be likened to self-discovery activated by tutor-student interaction, leading to increased linguistic competence and awareness.

- *choice and control*

To monitor progress, to make either an explicit or implicit decision to continue, and to change or terminate an activity are regarded as schemas that call into play intellectual resources and specific procedures by which a learner performs a learning task (Evans, 1991). Findings of this study suggest that students are able to mobilize their meta-cognitive skills (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1993) to evaluate their writing ('I find the sentences in my writing are too short'), make a decision to explore and adopt appropriate remedial measures ('I used the dictionary, English, not Chinese, more…paid more attention to English words.. '), and monitor progress ('My English is poor, but I made a appointment with a Writing teacher…feel more relaxed and used new words in my discussion and writing').

Such specific procedures, mainly the deployment of meta-cognitive strategies in this context, foreground a visible degree of choice and control by students over firstly, selection of strategies used, secondly, timing or duration of chosen strategies, and finally, evaluation, linguistic or otherwise, of their progress. In a sense, this corresponds to Bernstein's famed inquiry into "framing", denoting the degree of control teacher and learner possess over the selection, organization, practice and timing of the curriculum (Sadovnik, 1995). It can be said, therefore, the ability to exercise control and self-evaluate occupies a pivotal role in scaffolding and stimulating learner growth.

In a similar vein, a general sense of empowerment and enhanced confidence permeates students' responses:

> 'I have the right to negotiate with tutor'; 'every student would happy with the grade that they agreed with the tutor'; 'fair and I feel better'; 'I know more about my performance, know what to do to make it better'; 'understand what was wrong in the assignment and discuss the correction of the assignment directly with the tutor'; 'improve my negotiation skills'; 'my English is not so bad'.

2. Language

In Hong Kong, university students have relatively greater access to computer resources for learning than their secondary school counterparts. The use of technology to support learning and teaching is widespread at university (e.g. lecture notes accessed on-line). Of interest here, however, is the academic and linguistic dimension added to e-mail communication, as seen in this study where students were encouraged to discuss their writing and grade with the tutor either through face-to-face

consultation or e-mail, whichever they deemed appropriate for the purpose. This is particularly worthwhile for learners inhibited by their fear of failure or low spoken English proficiency in face-to-face meetings.

Increased use of English by students with the tutor both in and out of class is also evident as additional language practice is provided through grade negotiation. In this study, there was conscious effort to incorporate a visible oral component into the course, which perhaps accounts for students' inclination and ability to use English as the medium of communication within and beyond the confines of the classroom.

Other students attributed deepened awareness of their strengths and deficiencies in writing to discussion with the teacher:

> 'students understand why they get such grade and can discuss their weaknesses so as to find a way to improve their studies'; 'I can have a discussion with my tutor and she can give me comment, then I can try to improve my assessment'; 'students have the chance to express their opinion (in English), understand the problems of the assignment'; 'many people like me don't know their level of English, sometimes we overestimate or underestimate our level. From this, we can understand our level from the tutor; 'two-way communication'; 'I like to talk with teachers in English to do some practice'.

3. Meta-language

Much research (Dickinson, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 2015) has shown tutor-learner interaction can prompt critical thinking on the students' part about the target audience and standards by which their writing is judged and understood. Several other studies (Porto, 2001; Chau & Cheng, 2012; Cheng & Chau, 2013) reveal the value of reflection in fostering active exploration of and engagement with the various aspects of the writing process. Evidence from this study signals students' expanding meta-linguistic repertoire through reflective practice and collaboration:

> 'I think there is grammar mistake'; 'my vocabulary is not enough, I don't know what word to use'; 'the sentences are too short in my writing and the ideas do not connect'.

Self-identification of remedial measures is also noted:

> 'I focus only on my the grade before, but now I know how I can improve overall English'; 'speak English more' ; 'I can use more linking words'; ' I should read South China Morning Post more and go to CILL (a self-access facility at university) more often'; ' I used the dictionary (English, not Chinese) more and paid more attention to English words and their use'; 'I talked with a WAP teacher (one-to-one consultation to address writing concerns) about my writing- not just grammar, but other things'.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has reported a study which sought to investigate the impact of tutor-learner collaboration in assessment in the context of an *English in the Workplace* course at university. Key findings suggest expanded deployment of strategies by students in the cognitive, linguistic and meta-linguistic domains. Admittedly, attitudes of participants towards such collaborative style of assessment,

compounded by administrative constraints, may cast doubt on the feasibility of its implementation. Yet this study underlines the view that collaborative assessment can be an *experiential journey* and a *process* of *development* for participants, without detracting from assessment its evaluative characteristics. Where the former is characterised by purposeful exchange of ideas through exploring a range of roles and strategies, the latter amalgamates constant search for means of fulfilling tasks with reflective practices. A future line of inquiry can probe how technological affordances could broaden the palette of learners and tutors in collaborative assessment, especially the ways technologies invigorate tutor-learner synergy by capturing and making visible such experiences for language development.

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About the Author

Dr. Juliana Chau
BA, MEd, PhD

Dr. Chau is a former senior teaching fellow at the English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where she worked for 18 years. She is the recipient of five major awards: two President's Awards for excellence in teaching and services, two Faculty Awards for outstanding teaching and services, and one DARE Award for outstanding research. Her main research interests comprise second language learning and technology-enhanced learning. She has a strong research record, with publications in international peer-reviewed journals, including the *British Journal of Educational Technology, Australasian Journal of Educational Technology,* and *English Language Teaching Journal.* She has played an active role in leading and co-ordinating research projects that have made a significant impact on many aspects of teaching and learning in the academic community.

Dr. Chau is currently teaching English at Macquarie University, Australia.

Email: juliana.chau@mq.edu.au