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Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Use of Peer Assessment in External Exam-Dominated Writing Classes

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Abstract: Several studies on peer assessment (PA) have highlighted significant benefits for the learning process such as increased student motivation, enhanced collaborative learning (especially in terms of EFL writing) and improved reflection skills. Research on secondary school teachers' perceptions of PA is lacking, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) external-examination-dominated contexts. The current study presents an in-depth exploration of 40 EFL Greek Cypriot teachers' perceptions of the use of PA in secondary education to address adolescent learners' poor writing performance, low motivation, and exam failure. Teachers used PA of writing for one whole school year with more than 400 students after receiving training in PA methods and continuous support throughout this implementation. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to explore EFL teachers' attitudes towards PA after implementing it in their classes. Findings indicated that teachers were initially reluctant to use PA with their students but changed their minds during its implementation and reported that PA facilitated learning by making the educational process easier for learners. Given teachers' favourable attitudes towards PA after experimenting with it for a whole year and the benefits that they believe students (especially low-achieving) may gain from the implementation of PA of EFL writing in their classes, this study suggests that PA is a promising inclusive assessment method that caters to diverse learners' needs and fosters autonomy.

Keywords: peer assessment; inclusive assessment; teachers' perceptions; secondary education; student performance; student motivation; external exam-dominated secondary school contexts



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1. Introduction

Researchers recognise the central role of assessment in teaching and learning and claim that its use in the wider educational world has become endemic (Ndoye 2017). An understanding of language testing and assessment is crucial for applied linguists and teachers (Tsagari and Vogt 2017). Assessments that promote learning and improve teaching practices has attracted considerable interest among scholars (Mertens 2014). PA is defined by Topping (2017) as "an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners, then learn further by giving elaborated feedback and discussing their judgements with peers to achieve a negotiated agreed outcome". Current European and International Education tends to promote more active and responsible life-long learning as it encourages students to interact with their peers as they try to shape their own learning (Waring and Evans 2014). However, the process of PA, which fosters learner-centred assessment (Birjandi and Tamjid 2012), is not presented in a way that can be easily applied by teachers in the EFL writing classroom. PA is also associated with vague and incomprehensible language and is not similarly implemented or understood by teachers in secondary EFL writing classes (Chang 2016).

Moreover, there is not adequate encouragement in modern educational institutions for teachers to promote inclusive collaborative learning and assessment in a secondary

EFL classroom (Barril 2018; Butcher et al. 2010; Kim and McDonough 2011). In Cyprus, for instance, both EFL learners and writing instructors usually have restricted former experience of alternative assessment methods, e.g., PA (Meletiadou 2013; Meletiadou and Tsagari 2013), as assessments have traditionally been teachers' sole responsibility (Looney et al. 2018). Nevertheless, learners, instructors and parents complain that the majority of students face considerable problems in formal external exams of EFL writing and perceive writing and the assessment of writing in a negative way (Meletiadou 2011, 2012; Meletiadou and Tsagari 2012). These findings and viewpoints contrast with Greek Cypriot learners and teachers' attitudes towards writing in primary education or other subjects and students' performance in high- or low-stakes national internal exams, as other researchers have previously indicated in their studies (Brown et al. 2018, 2019).

In addition, English is widely used in Cyprus because it is the dominant second language that most students learn, speak, and write in their everyday life worldwide (Dearden 2014). Since writing is a vital component of most external high-stakes examinations, this has created a backwash effect which, as a result, has motivated teachers to focus on improving their EFL students' writing skills (Kirkpatrick and Zang 2011). As the role of writing in EFL learning becomes more prominent (Bitchener 2012), teachers' ability to train their learners to peer-assess each other's written scripts with the aim of improving their writing performance and motivation towards writing also becomes increasingly more significant.

Course aims in the Cypriot educational system promote, and in certain fields even require, that teachers guide EFL learners into working more autonomously, collaborate, and actively engage in their own learning (Ministry of Education and Culture 2011). Research indicates that PA enhances students' autonomy, collaboration, inclusivity, and self-regulation (Thomas et al. 2011). Consequently, teachers' practices and perceptions of PA techniques must be explored to better understand the part that PA plays in the EFL learning process and reflect how instructors can enhance students' self-directed learning and assessment skills (Conley 2014). Most importantly, although the literature on teachers' attitudes towards PA is expanding in tertiary education (Adachi et al. 2018), little is known in the field of PA in the EFL context (Zou et al. 2018) and in the context of secondary education (Tsivitanidou et al. 2018).

The current article aims to add to the prevailing literature related to EFL teachers' attitudes towards PA of writing in secondary education. This paper presents part of the findings of a longitudinal study that explored the impact of PA of writing on secondary school EFL students' writing performance (Meletiadou 2021a), writing quality (Meletiadou 2021b) and attitudes towards writing and learning (Meletiadou 2022). The goal of this article is to address the following research question:

- What are secondary school teachers' general perceptions about implementing PA in their EFL writing classes?

To sum up, the goal of the present article is to explore Greek Cypriot public secondary school teachers' attitudes towards PA of EFL writing after using it in their classes and their perceptions of whether PA can improve adolescent students' writing skills and motivation and boost the advancement of more inclusive and, therefore, more equitable assessment practices which enhance EFL learning.

2. Literature Review

Research indicates that teachers view PA of EFL writing as a vital part of a process approach to writing and a valuable tool since students need to be able to review their work to correct errors and gradually become autonomous learners (Birjandi and Tamjid 2012). It is a common practice for knowledgeable instructors and students to use multiple teaching, assessment and learning techniques. Lu and Law (2012) claim that PA allows assessors to gain an insight into various written samples and ideas from assessees and improve their learning by enhancing their understanding of the instructions of the task and internalizing the relevant rules and assessment criteria. Classroom teachers favour PA because it saves

them time (Panadero 2016; Spiller 2012). When teachers instruct their learners how to depend on themselves and their classmates, they come to realise that an instructor is mostly a trainer. When learners are taught to rely on their own judgement and that of their fellow students, they may also perceive that a teacher is most importantly a coach who endorses and/or enables learners to make decisions about the quality of their work.

According to Magaly (2020), research on instructors' perceptions of PA is lacking, particularly in EFL contexts. Shulin (2013) reports that most teachers in his study employed peer review with their students, but not very frequently. Many instructors believed that PA was beneficial to their learners (also in Panadero and Brown 2017) because it helped them identify any common mistakes they had made with the help of their classmates. PA also helped them improve their writing performance, encouraged reflection and enhanced curiosity and incentives in EFL writing.

Duran (2017), who investigated teachers' attitudes towards PA, also stressed that assessment needs to involve the instructor and the learners in a cooperative process. Sometimes it might be challenging for instructors to refrain from being in control and create room for student autonomy in terms of the evaluation process. However, to be successful nowadays, you need to be flexible and independent. Consequently, learners should be leading the way in terms of their own learning (Boud and Molloy 2013). Self-reliant learning theories rely on the fact that learning is not forced but rather shaped by the learner. This idea shifts the instructional central point and stresses the individual techniques students use on their own to enhance their academic performance in any learning context (Ertmer and Newby 2013). Tai and Adachi (2020) admit that PA is the only educational innovation they are aware of that may have such impactful outcomes.

Vanderhoven et al. (2015), who explored double-blind PA in secondary schools, reported that the instructors in their study thought that students could assess one another if they were adequately prepared to employ rubrics with clearly defined assessment criteria anonymously. Moreover, research indicates that alternative assessment methods decrease the performance gap by significantly assisting low-performing learners. Regrettably, specific conventional paper-and-pencil summative assessment approaches are still promoted within educational institutions in the 21st century (Noddings 2013). Thus, changes in assessment techniques should be closely linked to school changes, which should aim to promote various formative assessment tools, such as PA, as these contribute significantly to the success and improvement of school programs (Tinto 2012).

However, numerous studies highlight the fact that certain EFL instructors may not be familiar with the benefits of using PA to enhance student learning. Therefore, they discourage student involvement in PA and potential improvement that may occur due to peer communication and evaluation in their EFL writing classes. Consequently, teachers need training in PA (Fernández-Ruiz and Panadero 2020) and interaction with colleagues to become aware of its usefulness. More knowledgeable colleagues and/or experts in the field need to provide guidance and support regarding the use of formative assessment methods in their classes. Many instructors also complain about the lack of time required for the successful implementation of PA and the need to enhance students' learning rather than fulfil the demands of the syllabus (Retnawati et al. 2016). Nevertheless, teachers often avoid or are unwilling to use PA because they do not know how much effort (Chang et al. 2012) and time (Li et al. 2016) they should devote to its implementation. EFL teachers seem to be unaware of techniques to engage learners in the evaluation process via PA due to insufficient familiarity with PA methods (Meletiadou 2012).

Öz and Derin (2017) also argued that many teachers complained about the use of PA because learners were not able to review each other's work effectively. Peterson and Irving (2008) discussed students' tendency to mistrust their peers as they thought their classmates were not capable of providing insightful comments out of fear of conflict when PA was not anonymous. Gao (2009) also reported students' resistance to assume teachers' responsibilities in terms of assessment. Even though some scholars doubt whether learners can make equitable and honest evaluations of themselves and their peers, the challenge of implement-

ing PA attracts more and more attention in educational circles (Adachi et al. 2018). It is crucial for instructors to stimulate learners' motivation and restore their self-esteem when they feel intimidated by the learning process. Even though some educators claimed that PA was advantageous for their students' learning (Harris and Brown 2013), they preferred not to use it in their classes due to its complexity.

Ekşi (2012) states that teachers are often doubtful or even averse to this new approach for various reasons. Sometimes, they feel that learners are not experienced enough to conduct the assessment or are afraid that students will collude and provide more generous grades to their peers due to, for example, friendship bias. Therefore, further research and experimentation are necessary to enhance the widespread application of PA. Vogt and Tsagari (2014), who examined the assessment literacy of 739 EFL instructors in Europe, stated that almost half of the participants did not use PA. This clearly indicates that although the curricula in Europe foster the use of 'assessment for learning' methods, i.e., PA or self-assessment, these are scarcely used even if research indicates that they can considerably increase the speed and effectiveness in which students master their own learning process (Brown and Race 2013).

To sum up, findings in the literature regarding teachers' attitudes towards PA of writing are mixed. Some writing instructors believe that PA is not worthwhile and question learners' ability to assess their peers' essays. However, PA is believed to enhance instructors' awareness in assisting learners to attain educational goals, detecting learners' needs, and adjusting their teaching practices to meet individual learning goals (OECD 2007). Although PA holds numerous benefits for teachers, few scholars have explored EFL instructors' perceptions of using PA of writing (Wanner and Palmer 2015) and they report a lack of research related to EFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of anonymous PA (Rotsaert et al. 2018), particularly in secondary education. Addressing the demand for more knowledge and experimentation in the field of PA (Florjančič 2020), this study allowed EFL teachers to present their opinions, observe and reflect on their students' experiences of PA, depict their challenges and provide insightful recommendations for its successful implementation.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Description of the Study

Reciprocal anonymous PA of writing was used in 6 public secondary schools in Cyprus for a whole school year (October to June). More than 400 adolescent (13–15-year-old) EFL learners and 40 teachers took part in this study voluntarily (see Meletiadou 2021a). This was a convenience sample and students were randomly allocated to groups. The participants and their guardians signed a consent form (including ethics approval by the Ministry of Education in Cyprus) and were ensured confidentiality and anonymity (Huertas-Abril et al. 2021). Both teachers and students were trained in PA methods and teachers received weekly coaching and mentoring throughout the procedure (one hour per week for the whole school year during school hours) to ensure that they could overcome any challenges they faced (Meletiadou 2021b). Students were involved in the PA procedure twice a week for 90 min. They used a checklist based on the module's assessment criteria to provide structured feedback to their peers (see Meletiadou 2021b). The checklist was negotiated among learners and teachers to enhance learners' feelings of ownership of the assessment criteria.

3.2. Participants

Forty secondary school EFL teachers participated in the current study, and their demographic data are presented in Table 1. Using opportunity and snowball sampling processes (Sharma 2017), interviewees were found by tapping into the researcher's professional network due to time, money, access constraints and lack of funding. The sample included instructors who were predominantly 30–39-year-old females. They were EFL learners, held both a B.A. and an M.A degree in English Language and Literature and had 7–10 years of experience. Taking into consideration the fact that few studies have explored EFL teach-

ers’ perceptions of PA by using detailed semi-structured interviews in such a challenging external exam-dominated context (Sach 2012), this study aimed to present the instructors’ viewpoints when PA is used in their EFL writing classrooms to foster learning.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participating teachers (N = 40).

Measure and Items	N	Percentage
Gender		
Male	0	0%
Female	40	100%
Age		
20–29	4	10%
30–39	32	80%
40–49	2	5%
50+	2	5%
Experience		
1–3 years	4	10%
4–6 years	24	60%
7–10 years	4	10%
11–14 years	4	10%
15 and above	4	10%
Educational qualifications		
B.A.	4	10%
M.A.	36	90%
PhD	-	-
Previous experience of teaching at B1 level (CEFR)		
Yes	36	90%
No	4	10%

3.3. Teachers’ Semi-Structured Interviews

Pounders et al. (2016) state that interviews allow researchers to get an insight into the ways people think, their awareness of a specific subject matter or topic and their principles. The researcher chose to use interviews in this study to further personalise it and allow the voice of instructor participants to seep through the study’s findings. To strengthen the internal validity of the current study, the interviewer asked the same questions—more or less—to all participants. Consequently, instructors’ portrayal of the strengths and shortcomings of the implementation of PA of writing will hopefully provide all possible stakeholders in the education and assessment world with the foresight to reflect on the challenges and identify measures that may improve the implementation of PA of writing and the impact it may have on students’ performance and motivation.

Towards the end of the implementation of PA in these secondary school EFL classes, the 40 instructors were interviewed for 30–45 min. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine various issues, i.e., teachers’ attitudes and past experiences of PA or if instructors changed their attitudes towards PA after its implementation in their classrooms. The researcher adapted several questions, which previous researchers such as Cheng and Warren (2005), Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) and Patri (2002) have used in terms of similar interviews. The researcher used these informal interviews to gain further insights into the significance of PA training for students and teachers, and the impact of PA on students’ writing performance and instructors’ teaching effectiveness based on these educators’ perceptions of the implementation of PA of EFL writing. The researcher recorded and transcribed all data and used thematic analysis to analyse and identify common themes through Atlas.ti. The researcher coded all data and their assistant coded 20% of the data to ensure the reliability of the text analysis of the researcher. An intercoder reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic was used to determine consistency among coders. The interrater reliability was found to be Kappa = 0.81 with $p < 0.001$ which, according to

Artstein and Poesio (2008), displays a good level of agreement which is also statistically significant. Specific basic pre-determined questions (Appendix A) were used to examine in-depth information probing depending on the ways the interviews moved forward. This permitted elaboration within certain constraints.

As Cohen et al. (2013) suggested, the researcher first made teachers feel comfortable, then involved them in a short informal conversation and finally informed them of the goal of the study. Even though the interview was viewed as an interaction that inevitably involved bias (Cohen et al. 2013), this was controlled by showing instructors their interview transcripts to check whether these matched their actual feelings. They could therefore check if what the interviewer had written accurately reflected their ventures.

4. Results and Discussion

The current article explored EFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of PA on themselves as instructors and on their students' learning (more specifically on the development of their writing skills) and motivation. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' attitudes towards PA after using it for a whole year. Teachers in the current study strongly believed that PA makes students more careful and attentive to detail in their own texts and develops their higher order skills. Instructors stated that classrooms should be teacher-centred and that teachers must focus more on providing feedback to the learners themselves. This revealed that they were reluctant to grant their learners more freedom, thus allowing them to assume responsibility for their own learning. Teachers thought that PA was time-consuming but indicated that it was not hard to monitor. Instructors also complained that they were not offered many opportunities for professional development. The most prominent themes (included in more than 30 out of 40 teachers' responses to the interview questions) identified by the thematic analysis and accompanied by sample comments from participating teachers can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Major themes emerging from the thematic analysis.

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Sample Comment
1. T-centred approach to assessment	34/40	Teacher 4: I think it is the teacher's job to undertake assessment. The teacher should be in control of the whole procedure and have the final word.
2. Need for careful planning and Ts*' mastery of PA**	40/40	Teacher 1: Teachers should use PA for several years. Students should also start from junior classes to become gradually familiar with it. PA should also be present in our syllabus.
3. Challenges of PA: Time constraints, monitoring, Ss***' resistance	32/40	Teacher 3: At first, students thought it was awkward and useless, but then they realized what was happening and they liked PA. They even checked their work before handing it in.
4. PA impact on learning: High-achieving vs low-achieving Ss	38/40	Teacher 5: Students should be actively involved. They discover things and we guide them step by step. They experiment, make mistakes, and ultimately learn how to write and help their classmates, especially the less proficient ones.
5. PA of writing: An investment of time and effort	40/40	Teacher 2: At first, they were reluctant to engage in PA. Then, they became more willing to experiment. They needed time to realize that by correcting each other's work they also learn from their peers' mistakes.
6. Challenges: the use of PA by low-achieving Ss	38/40	Teacher 15: Some EFL students tried to assess their classmates responsibly, but some low-performing students could not. They did not assess their classmates in a fairly. It was not their fault. They just could not.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Sample Comment
7. The use of anonymous PA	40/40	Teacher 11: Some of them insisted that their essay should be anonymous because they had made a lot of mistakes. Highly proficient students didn't care, but they were curious to learn how their classmate assessed their work.
8. Fostering Ss' attention to detail while writing	31/40	Teacher 7: Students paid attention to things they normally ignored, like paragraphs and punctuation, precisely because of the embarrassment they feel when they receive PA.
9. PA of writing: Its positive impact on both Ts and Ss	37/40	Teacher 30: Lessons change for the teacher and the learner. They become more interactive and engaging. The blame is not only on us, teachers. We share responsibilities and learners become more independent.
10. Necessity of changes in the teaching and learning context to promote PA	34/40	Teacher 22: I only felt pressure from other things that I had to do. It was difficult as I had to deal with time pressure and low-achieving students. PA is not stressful. It is the context that bothers me . . .

Ts* = teachers, PA** = Peer assessment, Ss*** = students.

Moreover, our findings indicated that instructors were able to grasp the main concepts that are closely related to PA after the relevant training they received before implementation and the coaching sessions the researcher provided—depending on the individual teachers' needs—at regular intervals during implementation (see [Meletiadou 2021a](#), [2021b](#) for more details). Instructors also believed that PA was appropriate for all students (high and low-achieving ones) to develop their writing skills.

The contribution of the current article lies in the fact that it revealed Greek Cypriot secondary school EFL teachers' attitudes towards this innovative approach as they received training, guidance and support while they implemented it in their classrooms with the hope to improve students' writing performance and overall engagement and remove some of the burdens they carry by allowing students to take a more active role in terms of their own learning process. The current study produces rich findings which both confirm and refute previous research adding to the literature related to the two research questions of the study.

Reflecting on these teachers' experiences, colleagues, researchers and senior management teams of educational institutions can take their comments, suggestions and recommendations into consideration as they try to plan how to implement PA into their own classrooms to enhance their students' motivation and improve their academic performance. Several researchers ([Adachi et al. 2018](#); [Edwards 2013](#); [Ndoye 2017](#)) have identified gaps in the literature in terms of exploring teachers' attitudes of formative assessment methods—i.e., PA—and ways in which PA can be successfully implemented in the classroom. In the following subsections, the findings of this study in terms of teachers' attitudes towards PA of EFL writing are going to be presented according to the major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis.

4.1. Teacher-Centered Approach to Assessment

By analysing teachers' responses to the interview questions, the research team concluded that instructors were more positive towards the use of PA after the implementation. They were eager to experiment with new alternative assessment tools to address their learners' challenges in EFL writing. Nevertheless, they thought that writing classes must be teacher centred. Teachers were unwilling to allow too much freedom to their learners and expressed their wish to continue to dominate the classroom and choose which assessment methods to use and how to apply them (also in [McGarr and Clifford 2013](#)). This contradicts their own claim that they were willing to experiment with PA and allow their students to assume a more active role as learners. Several teachers indicated that they focused on

providing feedback and marks to the learners themselves although they also tried to engage learners in PA (Table 2). This article suggests that teachers who want to implement PA successfully in their classes should grant more freedom to their students, be willing to trust them and allow them to make mistakes and learn from them.

4.2. Need for Careful Planning and Teachers' Mastery of the PA Approach

Some participants also highlighted the fact that PA is a rather demanding task. Therefore, although all teachers were eager to participate in PA, most of them were quite unaware of the obstacles they might face when using it to enhance their learners' writing performance. Ongoing training and support for instructors and learners are necessary for the successful implementation of this innovative formative assessment method in EFL writing classes. The current study facilitated a deeper understanding of the fact that without a responsive policy environment, instructors and learners need more training and help to respond to the challenges of PA techniques (also in [Boud and Molloy 2013](#)). Careful planning is vital for this novel method to work (Table 2).

Moreover, teachers in the current study were rather confident about their understanding of key concepts related to PA, even though they confessed that they did not have enough chances to participate in professional development courses or seminars on PA or discuss it with their colleagues. Although the majority of participants stated that they had limited experience of PA, most of them seemed to be able to comment regarding its main aim and features. However, in their responses regarding the merits of PA, teachers were not able to show a deep understanding of what those were and describe them. The current study is in fact an educational intervention in terms of which teachers had continuous access to coaching and mentoring. Nevertheless, the current study confirmed that more training in PA skills is necessary for instructors to become aware of the advantages of PA and use it effectively with their students ([Panadero and Brown 2017](#)).

4.3. Challenges of PA: Time Constraints, Monitoring, Students' Resistance

Some teachers also stressed that PA was time-consuming, unreliable, invalid and hard to monitor. This attitude stems from the fact that instructors had limited experience with formative assessment methods and did not use PA consistently during the whole school year. Furthermore, both content-based and form-based feedback were used, as both were equally valuable ([Tahir 2012](#)), but these need considerable time to produce significant results. Instructors regarded some learners' low proficiency in EFL writing as one of the biggest challenges in the implementation of PA. Therefore, successful PA implementation relies on teachers' ability to prepare learners in the best possible way and prevent these issues (e.g., over/under marking and cheating) from happening. Some teachers, who participated in the semi-structured interviews, also referred to their students' unwillingness to use PA at the beginning of the intervention and their enthusiasm to learn how they could use it appropriately when they became conscious of the kind of benefits it may yield (Table 2).

Training learners to provide reliable and valid marks and feedback to one another may be time-consuming at first, but it is a precious lifelong skill that learners should master from an early age. Teachers need to train their students in PA skills in a systematic way because learners will be involved in some kind of PA at their workplace given that they will most definitely need to cooperate with other colleagues at some point in their career. Building this useful skill from a young age is considered an asset in any professional who is looking for a new position in a prestigious company and/or wants to have a successful career. This also facilitates teachers' work as students are willing to become agents of their own learning. They are then more actively engaged in the learning and assessment process and willing to take into consideration their peers' diverse needs and support them in promoting inclusion in their educational context ([Carter et al. 2015](#)). This finding confirms previous research in primary and secondary education, which indicates that PA involves and liberates teachers and learners, enhances students' self-monitoring and self-reflection,

boosts student interaction skills and develops students' understanding of the assessment criteria (Moss and Brookhart 2019). This further facilitates teachers' work as they can save time and effort to help less proficient students.

Moreover, instructors shared learners' view that PA helps students better understand their instructors' expectations and participate more actively in the teaching and learning process. They claimed that PA helped learners organize their thoughts and ideas better and improve the content of their written texts. The instructors' main aim was to enhance their learners' overall experience and increase their self-reliance. The long-term goal was to improve learners' writing performance. Zhao (2014) remarks that instructors often face extremely heavy workloads and reject innovative techniques which increase their responsibilities. Nevertheless, PA is an investment of time and effort which is very likely to alleviate part of instructors' burden by enabling them to share the responsibility for their students' assessment and overall learning.

In the current study, instructors were eager to implement PA in their classes since learners had more than one opportunity to receive marks and feedback. Most instructors did not think that PA was a waste of time and effort and believed that PA was suitable for every learner. They observed that the use of PA in writing reduced students' intellectual, physical and evasion stress and increased their self-confidence as EFL writers. Whereas instructor assessment may be more precise and accurate, learner assessment is instant and can relieve teachers' workload (also in Wu et al. 2012). Time and engagement are the most significant challenges among EFL writing instructors and initiatives, e.g., PA, could assist in alleviating the challenges and improving the quality of students' essays.

Instructors also thought that PA had a direct influence on the way EFL learners write their essays by helping them learn about correcting mistakes and remember them more easily. They thought that peer-assessors assist in heightening learners' awareness of the audience, warn them against potential problems in their writing, require them to instil more time and energy on their written work and help them assume responsibility for their own learning (also in Esfandiari and Myford 2013).

Moreover, teachers confessed that implementing PA in their classes increased their confidence in using formative assessment methods with their students to enhance their academic performance. They became aware of the fact that PA was time-consuming, but they managed to include it into their syllabus and confessed that they believed that learners should have multiple chances to receive feedback. Teachers were positive towards PA as they were desperately seeking a way to help their learners enhance their writing skills. However, they were also rather intimidated as they did not know how to implement PA effectively in their classes and whether it would yield any positive outcomes. After the implementation, they came to the conclusion that learners could reap significant benefits from this formative assessment method which may have a significant impact on their writing performance and motivation.

4.4. PA Impact on Learning: High-Achieving vs. Low-Achieving Students

After PA implementation, instructors confessed that they observed that PA yields more benefits for low-performing rather than more proficient students. High-achieving learners may have participated in the PA implementation more actively, but they could not improve considerably their writing performance. This contradicts previous research which has also shown that instructors think that average and high-achieving learners gained more benefits from peer review in primary education (Nicolaidou 2013). Taking into consideration the instructors' response in the interviews (Table 2), they believed that low-achieving learners could not assess their peers fairly and responsibly, but they improved their performance, taking into consideration their peers' feedback. This conforms with the education for social justice and sustainable development principles as PA supports low-performing students who often come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Smith 2018). Furthermore, instructors claimed that PA is suitable for all learners. They believed that all students could gain something depending on the length of their involvement in PA,

their training and the kind of support they had during its implementation. This confirmed that PA is a genuinely inclusive formative assessment method that promotes learning and enhances student motivation simultaneously.

Moreover, most teachers in our study indicated that they thought that PA could be used with low-achieving students, although some researchers claim the opposite (Panadero et al. 2016). Previous research states that when learners show their peers their essays, they tend to improve them as it is easier for them to understand their focus and purpose for writing (Tai et al. 2018). The current study has also indicated that teachers believe that PA was more beneficial for low-achieving rather than high-achieving learners. Most of these learners could not understand the marking criteria or their instructors' feedback. Consequently, they felt disadvantaged as they were unable to improve their texts. PA helped them develop their self-confidence as learners, ask for clarifications with regards to the marking criteria, become more aware of their teachers' expectations, and revise their texts accordingly. Moreover, they requested additional support during the writing process and more opportunities to improve their writing performance.

Instructors also claimed that PA had a positive impact on teaching and learning particularly as regards EFL writing as it helped students identify their strengths and weaknesses. Instructors indicated that by assuming an active role as assessors, learners were able to better understand and internalise the marking criteria on their own and were then able to assess their peers' work with confidence. PA demystifies the evaluation process, allowing learners to better understand it and gently guides students as they try to reach a specific standard (Hovardas et al. 2014). Despite the barriers and challenges that EFL writing instructors face, there comes a time when teachers should explore alternative ways to help their learners improve their writing performance and motivation. Teachers can thus maximize overall achievement gains for their students.

Moreover, instructors claimed that PA should be included in the regular curriculum so that learners could gain more benefits from the PA implementation. They thought that systematic involvement in PA, rather than its infrequent use, can improve students' academic performance and attitudes towards learning. While involving students in PA, instructors became aware of the fact that they were not offered any opportunities to enter conversations about PA with their colleagues and discuss their experiences and challenges with the aim of improving their PA practices and resolving any issues they had during its implementation. More seminars/short courses, meetings with colleagues and other chances for instructors to join groups and critically reflect on their problems might help them implement PA with their students more effectively (Vogt and Tsagari 2014). Instructors need to be able to interact, share their challenges and resolve them together as 'two heads are better than one'.

Analysis of the qualitative findings of this study showed that teachers were mostly favourable towards PA, very positive in terms of the outcomes it produced and strongly positive towards its compliance, but also stressed PA's perplexity. Greek Cypriot EFL educators expressed their wish to use PA when teaching EFL writing, but unless PA was included in the syllabi and curricula and educational institutions provided training to both EFL instructors and learners, it would be impossible for PA to be unanimously applied.

4.5. The Use of Anonymous PA

However, some teachers were not overly optimistic about their learners' ability to provide marks to their peers. Learners could be either over-judgmental, vague or unwilling to assess their peers' work. Consequently, instructors had to prepare learners for PA and skillfully manage peer interaction to successfully apply PA in their classes (Iwashita 2022). Finally, previous research indicates that students were more favourable towards PA and felt less stressed about being criticized when they were involved in anonymous PA (Meletiadou 2012). As one of the instructors stressed in the interviews, since the goal was for students to become expert peer assessors, they had to consider 'blind' peer review to avoid enmity among learners (Table 2).

Most instructors believed that learners were fair as they offered more or less similar grades to their own because the PA rubric they used was detailed and user-friendly and the PA procedure was double blind (see [Meletiadou 2021a](#)). Moreover, when learners receive training from their instructor, they may give constructive feedback to their classmates. Previous research indicates that the fairness of PA is often challenged by instructors and the accumulation of grades and feedback linked to PA tasks is relatively difficult, tiring and troublesome leading to instructors' reluctance to use this innovative approach ([Hyland 2019](#)). Instructors in the current study had mixed feelings but believed that learners could offer reliable grades if their instructors gave them a detailed reader-friendly formative assessment tool (PA rubric). Finally, these students needed training and ongoing support especially before using PA in their classes for the first time.

4.6. Fostering Students' Attention to Detail While Writing

Teacher-participants in the current study believed that when they used PA, learners could improve their higher-order writing skills, critically think about their own work, and learn from their peers. Most instructors thought that PA was a worthwhile experience and that most learners loved it. Teachers stated that their learners had improved their essays considerably in terms of structure, paragraph development, vocabulary and new ideas which was also confirmed by comparing students' marks ([Meletiadou 2021a](#)) and their texts taking into consideration various indicators of writing quality ([Meletiadou 2021b](#)). However, this does not imply that instructors should opt for students' short-term preparation because EFL learners' PA skills require time and effort to mature (also in [Min 2006](#)). Although learners would rather have their instructors correct their mistakes, the feedback students give may be more effective than instructor feedback. [Sadler and Good \(2006\)](#) also indicated that most learners used peer feedback that they had themselves given to other students slightly more than received comments. One of the instructors, who was interviewed in terms of the current study, indicated that, during the PA implementation, learners became more cautious when writing their texts (Table 2).

4.7. PA of Writing: Its Impact on Both Teachers and Students

Instructors also indicated that learners increased their autonomy and reaped various benefits from PA as they became aware of a variety of ways in which they could support their peers in their effort to develop their writing skills. Engaging learners in the PA process allowed them to communicate with one another as writers and readers and helped them when writing their essays as they felt less stressed and more optimistic about the final outcome. Instructors noticed that students welcomed both instructor and peer feedback and that improved their attitudes towards writing as well. Moreover, they confessed that they would advise their colleagues to use PA, warning them that they had to work hard especially at the beginning but it would be worthwhile both for them and their students. Studies indicated that the PA method saves time and effort for EFL teachers, especially for those who have limited time and a lot of students in their classes ([Ng 2016](#)). To sum up, as one of the instructors mentioned, PA had a significant influence on both instructors and students (Table 2).

4.8. Necessity of Changes in the Teaching and Learning Context to Promote PA

Teachers confessed that they were willing to use PA in the future, not only in writing but in terms of other skills as well. Instructors' need for reform originated from their reflections on their exposure to alternative assessment methods as teachers (also intensified at the preparation stage), which guided them into questioning their past traditional teaching and assessment methods (also in [Warford 2011](#)). Although teachers were attentive to their students' needs and wanted to respond to every mistake in their students' essays, they realised that students kept on making identical mistakes. They also believed that underlining their mistakes and correcting them caused disappointment in students. Instructors believed that this did not help them learn anything; EFL learners did not understand how

to improve their writing skills by looking at their mistakes because they thought teacher comments were vague and therefore needed additional support. Students also complained about the lack of connection between evaluation, learning and instruction and thought that direct corrective feedback was useless.

Process writing, which enables learners to improve their content and structure, was rarely used in traditional EFL classes as learners only wrote one draft. Students had the intention but were unable to respond to instructor comments as they did not understand them. Instructors were inspired to engage in this study as they believed in the benefits of the PA implementation which included process writing. To sum up, instructors thought that their previous evaluation methods were outdated and decided to improve their assessment practices by using PA. By stressing the aspects of the target genre, assisting students in setting their own aims and making the evaluation criteria transparent, teachers raised their learners' awareness of direction and allowed them to clearly see how to move towards the anticipated standards (i.e., 'feed up'). The new feature (i.e., PA) which was incorporated in the evaluation process contrasted traditional practice. The organisational culture had a more powerful impact on instructors' beliefs and actions than their previous preparation and ventures, forcing them to adapt the aspects of the innovation to match the local culture of the educational institution (also in [Moore 2012](#)). This is the reason why teachers claimed that they wanted to use PA, but teaching should remain teacher-centred.

All in all, instructors reported that there were advantages as well as shortcomings involved in using PA of writing with their EFL students. The favourable findings regarding EFL teachers' attitudes towards PA of writing unveiled that: (a) instructors shared a positive disposition towards the influence of PA on their instructional practices and students' learning; (b) they viewed PA positively and thought it was a worthwhile learning tool; (c) instructors believed that people who want to participate in PA should be trained and continuously supported during the PA implementation and; (d) PA must be used more widely, regularly and from a younger age in educational institutions. The somewhat negative outcomes of the study revealed that: (a) instructors believed that writing classes should be teacher-centred; (b) they thought that PA was time-consuming, unreliable, and invalid; (c) they believed that PA caused anxiety to learners and considerably increased their teaching 'burden' and; (d) they confessed that instructors often lack the necessary skills and support to use PA effectively.

In conclusion, the current study has provided valuable insights into teachers' perceptions of the use of PA in their classes and of the way PA can influence students' performance and motivation. It has also offered valuable suggestions for the successful implementation of PA in EFL writing classes to allow fellow EFL practitioners to use this inclusive formative assessment method effectively in their classes. The next section will conclude this article by providing more recommendations, discussing the limitations of the current study, and offering suggestions for future research.

5. Conclusions

The current study has several pedagogical implications for teachers, parents and students. Firstly, teachers who invite their learners to provide feedback to their peers' writing should remember how challenging it is to complete the activities involved in reviewing written scripts effectively. It may also be challenging, even for proficient students, to take their peers' feedback into consideration. PA training for inexperienced learners should therefore be carefully designed and adapted by their instructors according to their needs and the specific educational context in which these learners develop their writing skills. Moreover, teachers need to detect and implement certain techniques that facilitate the use of PA, i.e., reading techniques (locating a writer's primary aim etc.), writing techniques (providing constructive feedback) and cooperative abilities (writing comments in a helpful manner). Next, they need to prepare a well-structured plan regarding how they are going to incorporate PA into their modules/courses. They must provide transparent and concrete guidance that learners need to take into consideration as they use a carefully designed tool,

i.e., a PA rubric, to review their peers' essays. Finally, they should show learners how they can reflect on and apply the helpful feedback they receive during the PA implementation.

Another point drawn from teachers' interviews is that intellectual ability, leadership skills and learning responsibility seem to be three skills students must develop even more. These skills characterize independent learners and more research regarding ways in which to help students enhance these skills may be useful for all stakeholders, e.g., students, teachers and parents.

Moreover, to apply PA in EFL writing, a helpful professional community of fellow practitioners with common aims and principles is vital (also in [Planas Lladó et al. 2014](#)). For example, experienced EFL instructors using PA may give ideas to instructors new to the initiative, arrange workshops to share best practice and their ventures in implementing PA with their colleagues and inform them of the strategies they used and the challenges they faced. Instructors may also create future action plans in cooperation with their colleagues and work together through peer mentoring to improve their implementations of PA in their classes step by step. Considerable assistance from the administrators is also necessary to enhance the possibility of widespread adoption of this innovative inclusive formative assessment approach (also in [Adachi et al. 2018](#)). Instructors should be allowed more independence and flexibility in structuring and applying PA within their syllabus to ensure a smooth integration. Moreover, headteachers should allow time to probe new techniques, critically think and learn from the new venture. It should be taken into consideration that the improvement of students' academic (EFL writing) performance requires certain sacrifices, e.g., in time, and, most of all, perseverance, since instructors may encounter certain obstacles at first. Consequently, when instructors undertake innovation, challenges or even 'defeat' at the beginning, it is often considered to be 'part of the game' as everybody learns by trial and error. Therefore, endurance and help from institutional leaders is a prerequisite for the successful and sustainable use of PA in language education.

The current study comes with significant limitations as it cannot be generalized to other countries, subjects or domains. Future researchers may wish to explore the use of PA to develop other skills, i.e., oral fluency. More research is also needed to explore primary teachers and higher education lecturers' attitudes towards the use of PA as an inclusive alternative assessment method that can enhance learning and cater for students' needs as teachers currently have to teach increasingly diverse cohorts due to the phenomenon of globalisation.

To sum up, the current study has notable practical implications for the future application of PA. [Mitchell and Sackney \(2011\)](#) claim that educational change not only presupposes that instructors need to alter their beliefs and practices but also depends on the common philosophy among the entire community as assistance for the suggested reform. It would therefore be essential, as the outcomes of the current study show, to promote professional development in inclusive formative assessment methods, such as PA, for both pre- and in-service teachers in Cyprus and other countries. These should be more specifically relevant to the development of, for example, effective PA activities, which may enable students to efficiently assess their peers' performance by sharing constructive peer feedback. The aim should be to promote inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices that support all learners, irrespective of their background, in their efforts to succeed in school and life.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

1. Have you ever had any experience with peer assessment (PA) as a student? If yes, could you please describe your experience?
2. Have you ever used PA in your classes? If yes, please describe.
3. What kind of assessment methods did you usually employ to evaluate students before the study?
4. Whose job is it to undertake assessment?
5. Would you agree to use multiple assessment methods in your classes, for example, TA and PA? Why or why not?
6. What are your perceptions of students' use of PA?
7. In your opinion, what are the overall limitations/disadvantages and advantages of using PA?
8. How comfortable were you with implementing PA?
9. Have you seen any changes in students' writing skills? If so, what were they, and were changes more prevalent in specific domains? If no, why do you think no changes occurred? Explain.
10. Do teachers shy away from PA? If so, why?
11. Some people claim that PA may empower students and involve them in the assessment process? Do you agree? Why? Do you think it is effective?
12. What do you think about giving students some power of negotiating the assessment criteria?
13. What were the problems you faced during the implementation of PA?
14. Do you think your students evaluated their peers in a fair and responsible manner? Please explain why.
15. Did your students become autonomous and independent learners after experiencing the PA exercise? Please justify your answer.
16. Do you think that the outcomes of the PA implementation accurately reflect your students' ability or performance? If not, why?
17. Were you satisfied with the outcomes of incorporating PA in terms of teaching and assessing this module?
18. In what ways, if any, did PA help you as a teacher?
19. Do you think PA is a useful assessment method? For whom?
20. In your opinion, how can you improve the PA exercise?
21. Did students generally have positive attitudes towards PA? If not, why?
22. Did the motivation of students increase because of the implementation of PA in their module?
23. From your observations, were there any differences between high achieving and low-achieving students? For example, did high-achieving students assess their peers more accurately and fairly?
24. Would you recommend PA to your colleagues?
25. Do you think PA should be incorporated in an EFL curriculum? Why?
26. Students claim that PA is just a way of saving teachers' time. Is that true?
27. Isn't it the case that students lack the knowledge or experience to carry out the task?
28. Do students find assessing themselves or their peers stressful?
29. It takes teachers long enough to get through their marking. Won't students doing it just take too long?

30. Students may not want to be involved in assessments. How can you persuade them to give it a try?
31. How should teachers prepare their students for PA?
32. Describe the students' experience: the positives, the challenges, and any suggestion for future implementation?
33. Would you consider using PA next school term? Why or why not? If yes, would you change anything in terms of the procedure? Explain.
34. Would you consider using PA as a supplementary assessment method in the future?
35. Any final comments?

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