

# Teaching Graduated Feedback for Peer-to-Peer Assistance in the Zone of Proximal Development

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## ABSTRACT

Sociocultural theory in English language teaching supports graduated feedback in conversational interaction, a mediational strategy involving implicit-to-explicit feedback movement for the facilitation of higher autonomous resolution. Accordingly, this project looked at how an activity introduced peer-to-peer graduated feedback to Japanese first-year university students, and interactions were observed for subsequent appropriation. Results show that when peers provided implicit feedback, learners consistently resolved breakdowns in communication with a higher degree of autonomy.

## INTRODUCTION

Graduated feedback (GF) operates within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a model of learner development derived from Vygotskyian sociocultural theory (SCT). In short, the ZPD represents the distance between what the learner can do with assistance and without assistance from a more capable other (Lantolf, 2011). The aim of the expert is to help the novice perform a task with progressively less need for assistance until the novice achieves autonomous resolution. In second language learning, facilitation of autonomous resolution is demonstrated by how an expert moves from explicit feedback to more implicit feedback as the novice learner develops less need for assistance in given tasks (Lantolf, 2011). In conversational interaction, the challenge for the instructor is knowing what the learner is capable and incapable of as the context changes, and accordingly when to start with implicit or explicit feedback during breakdowns in communication. The potential drawback to providing explicit feedback, especially as a first option, is that this resolves an issue *for* the learner rather than *with* the learner, and without knowing if the learner can resolve with less assistance (Aljafreeh & Lantolf, 1994). In order to gauge developmental level effectively, Aljafreeh & Lantolf (1994) proposed that it is best to begin with implicit feedback types, a strategy which affords opportunity for autonomous resolution. Given that the learner does not repair following implicit feedback, the instructor moves to more explicit feedback types. This adjusted movement from implicit to explicit per learner performance is the primary function of GF strategy (Aljafreeh & Lantolf, 1994).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although SCT-guided practice focuses mostly on teacher-learner interaction, movement toward autonomous task resolution in the ZPD is likewise found in peer-to-peer interaction, where expert-novice roles change with the context (Guk & Kellogg, 2007). For language learners, this means that capability will depend on what linguistic tools need to be appropriated in a given context. Thus, there is a great need for learners to understand what types of feedback they have at their disposal, how and when to appropriate these feedback types, and why GF can be effective during breakdowns in communication. The three most commonly observed implicit feedback types in peer-to-peer interaction are the Three Cs of conversational interaction: comprehension checks, clarification requests, and confirmation checks (Gass, 2005). The Three Cs work to indicate misunderstanding, but do not highlight problematic areas, nor do they provide preferred forms (Gass, 2005). A less implicit type of feedback is a reformulated recast, which offers an utterance back to the learner in an adjusted form. As for explicit types, metalinguistic feedback and projecting are common strategies (Gass, 2005). Concerning the role of the learner in graduated

feedback, the act of speaking to oneself has been shown to afford a higher understanding of concepts, a self-scaffolding strategy coined languaging (Knouzi, Swain, Lapkin, & Brooks, 2010). In short, when a learner expounds on a concept through speaking, or thinking out-loud, the learner develops a deeper understanding of that concept. When a learner is asked to clarify or elaborate on a concept following a clarification request, the learner’s response performs the function of languaging as the learner clarifies a concept not only for others but for the learner’s own benefit as well. In this way, implicit feedback affords the use of languaging for achieving intelligible production in the L2 autonomously.

The matter of shared L1 use in English language teaching (ELT) relates to this project due to the use of a request for translation in the designed activity. While many researchers have highlighted the benefits of learners using a shared L1 in the ELT classroom, one of the more important long-term goals is that L1 assistance should gradually diminish over time (Izumi, 1995). That is, an instructor should provide learners with alternative means of L2-focused assistance as a course progresses, using the L1 as a catalyst. The proposed activity uses requests for translation (How do you say {L1 item} in English?) as a catalyst for feedback opportunities. While early in the course learners were granted permission to provide L1-L2 translation when needed, the activity demonstrates how to assist the requester in generating an approximate lexical item or explanation autonomously (implicit feedback), and why this type of assistance can be more beneficial than direct translation (explicit feedback). Additionally, learners discover when explicit feedback may be more appropriate than implicit feedback.

## TASKS AND MATERIALS

The presentation method chosen for this project was a dialogue comparison accompanied by two high-control, gap-fill practice dialogues (Appendix A and B). This was easily designed with digital software and distributed via paper handouts.

## PROCEDURE

As for target language, as seen in Table 1, clarification requests are presented as implicit assistance, and reformulated recasts along with metalinguistic explanation presented as explicit assistance. Target language is also provided for the speaker role to facilitate languaging. All target items were previously used under different functions in the previous semester. In Table 1, simplified categories are given to the learners and formal labels are provided in parentheses. Target language as presented to the learners can be found in Appendix B.

Table 1. Target Language for Peer-to-Peer Graduated Feedback

<i>Target Language</i>	<i>Phrases</i>
<b>Indirect Help</b> (Implicit Assistance)	What do you mean? (clarification request) Can you tell me more? (clarification request) Can you give me an example? (clarification request)
<b>Direct Help</b> (Explicit Assistance)	Do you mean _____? (reformulated recast) You can say _____. (metalinguistic explanation)
<b>Finding the Answer</b> (Speaker Languaging)	I mean... For example, ... If...

Target items are integrated into a dialogue comparison with guiding questions following each

dialogue (Appendix A). As for the process of the activity, learners first read Dialogue 1 in pairs or groups, then answer post-reading questions. Dialogue 1 demonstrates a negotiation sequence in which listeners provide explicit feedback following request for translation, yet the feedback does not sufficiently assist the speaker. Learners discuss post-reading questions, report findings to the class, and the instructor can reaffirm or add to the findings. Learners repeat activity with Dialogue 2, in which they find listeners providing implicit feedback and the speaker successfully expressing the L1 concept. Listeners discuss post-reading questions, and again the instructor reaffirms or adds to the findings while referring back to Dialogue 1. For instance, the instructor can elicit the possibility that although the listeners may know an approximate L1 item in L2, they chose to let the speaker find the answer for the benefit of the speaker. This is an important teaching point on GF strategy as it promotes the importance of *assisting* the speaker over completing the task *for* the speaker. Learners are next moved to controlled practice of target items with a gap-fill dialogue wherein learners place the appropriate target language (Appendix B). The instructor can choose to further discuss with the class the benefits of GF following the completion of the practice activities. For instance, Practice 1 demonstrates a speaker's successful languaging and resolution following implicit feedback from listeners. The instructor can demonstrate further how implicit assistance helped the speaker "find the answer." Practice 2 in particular reveals the need for explicit assistance (*direct help*) when the learner is unable to self-resolve following implicit assistance, which reveals the usefulness of GF in determining the feedback type which the peer actually needs. The important difference between Practice 1 and Practice 2 is the varying capabilities of the speakers. The instructor can elucidate the difficulty in knowing whether or not the speaker may already know the answer, and highlight the value in first giving the speaker a chance to self-resolve before resolving for the speaker.

To follow-up on this activity, it is important for the instructor to draw attention to successful appropriations of GF as well as any missed opportunities in the subsequent free-practice and free-discussion activities both in that lesson and thereafter throughout the course. The continued implementation of GF ensures that learners are not providing more assistance than is actually needed, and likewise relying on L2 linguistic tools rather than L1 tools to resolve breakdowns in communication.

## VARIATIONS

While this activity may be adjusted in a number of ways, the most pertinent variables for adjustment are learner profile and classroom appropriateness. The present activity utilizes request for translation as a catalyst for feedback, but learners of a higher proficiency may benefit from seeing GF in L2-only situations, such as how to provide assistance when a speaker abandons or struggles to convey an idea. The activity can also address projections, a common explicit feedback move which tends to provide far more assistance than is needed. The degree of control in the practice stage can also be decreased for more proficient performers, such as replacing gap-fill dialogues with discussion questions and a check-sheet for learners to self-monitor GF use. For low proficiency learners, additional controlled activities in tandem with more explicit teacher feedback may be more beneficial. A dialogue comparison is not recommended for lower proficiencies due to the high demand of metalinguistic analysis. As for classroom appropriateness, learners unfamiliar with a dialogue comparison may experience cognitive overload. These learners may benefit from a more familiar presentation method.

## DISCUSSION

Data was collected for one class of eight Level III first-year university students who shared Japanese as an L1. Level III is derived from a TOEIC band of 480 to 679. Video and audio recorded

the implementation of the activity. Subsequent lessons were recorded via audio alone. The purpose of data collection was to observe activity implementation, and to capture feedback episodes by learners to determine how GF was appropriated after the introduction activity for a period of four lessons. Interactions were recorded in all practice, preparation, and free discussion stages, totaling 136 minutes of interaction. Three types of request for feedback episodes (RFE) were observed: explicit-only assistance, implicit-only assistance, and graduated movement. For all episodes, the data correlates those which were successfully repaired and those which were not. Successful repair was defined in three ways: when the speaker performed successful languaging of a concept in a way comprehensible to the listeners, recalled a relevant L2 lexical item, or the speaker confirmed an L2 item provided by a peer's explicit feedback. An unsuccessful repair was defined as when the speaker abandoned languaging (or the listeners failed to comprehend the languaging), and the listener provided no further assistance. In total, there were 38 RFE episodes, sixty percent explicit, thirty-six percent implicit, and one instance of graduated movement. Explicit episodes all resulted in successful repairs. Lexical recall and successful languaging did not occur in explicit-only episodes since the L2 item was already provided by the assistor. Implicit episodes yielded one unsuccessful repair, and ninety-two percent successful repairs. Of these successful repairs, none were lexical recall as all thirteen were resolved with successful languaging. The single graduated movement episode yielded one successful repair, and did not coincide with lexical recall nor successful languaging, since the L2 item was already provided by the assistor. These results are represented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Types of Speaker Repair per Request for Feedback Episodes

<i>Feedback Types</i>	<i>Totals</i>	<i>Unsuccessful Repair</i>	<i>Successful Repair</i>	<i>L2 Lexical Recall</i>	<i>Successful Languaging</i>
<i>Explicit</i>	.60 (23)	0	.100 (23)	--	--
<i>Implicit</i>	.36 (14)	1	.92 (13)	0	.92 (13)
<i>Graduated Movement</i>	.02 (1)	0	.02 (1)	0	0

The data reveals that learners most often used explicit assistance when the speaker requested translation, as in Extract 1:

Extract 1. *Explicit Feedback with Successful Adjustment*

L1: Speaker: How do you say <i>ubou</i> ?	<i>Request for Translation</i>
L2: Listener: Rob.	<i>Explicit Feedback</i>
L3: Speaker: Ah. Many people can rob me in Tokyo.	<i>Confirmation, Successful Adjustment</i>

Implicit assistance proved to be effective in encouraging the speaker to perform languaging and successfully explain the concept intelligibly as shown in Extract 2. In this way, the speaker was able to appropriate L2 tools for the task of explaining a concept rather than relying on translation, signifying a higher degree of autonomy. In other words, learners were often capable of conveying the concepts they appeared to have difficulty with, but needed minor help from the listeners (implicit assistance) to complete such a task:

Extract 2. *Implicit Feedback with Successful Languaging*

L1: Speaker: How do you say <i>sin-seki</i> in English?	<i>Request for Translation</i>
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L2: Listener: For example?	<i>Clarification Request</i>
L3: Speaker: For example, my uncle, and my aunt, and my cousin.	<i>Successful Languageing</i>
L4: Listener: Ah. Ok. Yes.	<i>Confirmation</i>

Implicit assistance and languageing did not seem to afford the speaker's lexical recall. Graduated movement occurred only once, shown in Extract 3, likely due to the relatively high success of implicit feedback. The learner who performed graduated movement was also observed to have provided the most implicit feedback, indicating that this student had a relatively high awareness of GF function. This particular episode also revealed how learners in a peer-to-peer ZPD will assume an expert or novice role, depending on who needs the assistance. Additionally, it revealed the importance of knowing when to provide explicit feedback. The listener realized that implicit feedback did not successfully afford adjustment (L3), so the listener moved to more explicit assistance in offering a lexical item (L4). A technique germane to the skilled instructor was here observed in use by a learner's peer:

Extract 3. Graduated Movement with Successful Adjustment

L1: Speaker: How do you say <i>han-nin</i> ?	<i>Request for Translation</i>
L2: Listener: Can you tell me more?	<i>Implicit Feedback</i>
L3: Speaker: For example, the people who fight on the street...uh... I don't know.	<i>Unsuccessful Languageing</i>
L4: Listener: Um... criminal? The criminals.	<i>Explicit Feedback</i>
L5: Speaker: Ah. Yea. Criminals should pay a fine and go to jail.	<i>Confirmation, Successful Adjustment</i>

There were two main limitations to this study: a lack of student perception in the results and participation size. Future inquiry on GF strategy in peer-to-peer ZPD should address how the learners perceive using explicit, implicit, and graduated movement feedback types, providing more insight into why learners may prefer explicit assistance. This may also provide insight into how learners perceive expert roles and the effort and time required for autonomous repair. As for participation size, more participants are needed for more reliable results. While eight students were registered to this class, only one class involved all eight students, and other lessons varied between five and eight due to absences. A higher participation pool accompanied with a longer trial time will help to average out the effect of absences and late arrivals.

## CONCLUSION

Graduated feedback strategy in a peer-to-peer zone of proximal development affords learners opportunity for more autonomous adjustments using L2 linguistic tools, following graduated feedback moves by their peers. Although explicit feedback was most common, learners were observed to have chosen implicit feedback as a response to requests for translation, almost always resulting in the speaker's successful languageing of an L1 concept in the L2. This suggests that learners are more capable of using L2 tools to convey a concept than they realize for themselves. One instance of graduated movement from implicit to explicit, following a speaker's failure to perform languageing, revealed that peers were likewise capable of assuming expert roles, providing calculated feedback as a skilled instructor does. Future studies may benefit from more insight into learner perception of graduated feedback strategy, and affirm its effectiveness with increased participants and trial period.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX A

### Dialogue Comparison

*Read the dialogue with a partner. Next, answer the questions below.*

#### Dialogue 1

- Eri: In my opinion, if I donate my clothes to natural disaster victims, umm... how do you say *mottainai* in English?
- Jun: You can say... umm... I don't know.
- Aki: Maybe... umm... sad?
- Ryo: Sad? Umm. Yea sad. Maybe.
- Eri: So, I will feel sad about my clothes? Right?
- Jun: Maybe. I understand *mottainai*.
- Eri: Ok. So, I will feel, umm... *mottainai* if I donate my clothes.

#### Questions

1. Did Jun and Ryo give a good English answer for *mottainai*? Yes/No
2. Did Eri find a good English answer for *mottainai*? Yes/No
3. How can Jun and Ryo help Eri find a better answer?

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Read the dialogue with a partner. Next, answer the questions below.

#### Dialogue 2

- Eri: In my opinion, if I sell my car, umm...how do you say *mottainai* in English?
- Jun: Can you give me an example?
- Eri: Well, for example, if I sell my car, I will be sad. Is that clear?
- Aki: A little. Can you tell me more?
- Eri: I mean, I want to keep my car, but if I sell my car, I will feel sad, and I'll feel regret.
- Ryo: I understand better now.

**Questions**

1. Did Jun and Ryo give an English answer for *mottainai*? Yes/No
2. Did Eri find a good English answer for *mottainai*? Yes/No
3. How did Jun and Ryo help Eri find an English answer?  
*a. They gave the answer. b. They helped the speaker find the answer.*
4. Which is better: giving an answer (**direct help**), or helping the speaker find an answer (**indirect help**)?

**APPENDIX B**

**Helping the Speaker**

<p><u><b>Direct Help (Giving the Answer)</b></u>                  Do you mean [<i>answer</i>]?                  You can say [<i>answer</i>].</p>	<p><u><b>Finding the Answer</b></u>                  I mean...                  For instance/example...                  If...</p>
<p><u><b>Indirect Help (Helping the Speaker Find the Answer)</b></u>                  Can you give me an example?                  Can you tell me more?                  What do you mean?</p>	
<p><u><b>Direct Help (Giving the Answer)</b></u>                  Do you mean [<i>answer</i>]?                  You can say [<i>answer</i>].</p>	

Use the **Helping the Speaker** phrases to complete the dialogues below.

**Practice 1**

- Eri: I would say we can't help some people in natural disaster, so... umm...how do you say *syoganai* in English?
- Aki: \_\_\_\_\_?
- Eri: \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes we can't help them. Is that clear?
- Jun: \_\_\_\_\_?
- Eri: \_\_\_\_\_ if they are in a dangerous place, for example Mt. Everest, there is nothing we can do.

**Practice 2**

- Eri: From my perspective, a good way to help people in natural disasters is... umm... how do you say *kifu-wo-suru* in English?
- Aki: \_\_\_\_\_?
- Eri: It is difficult to give an example. Umm... I don't know an example.
- Jun: \_\_\_\_\_ *donate money*?
- Eri: Yes! I mean *donate money*. From my perspective, money is dangerous.