

## SECTION FOUR: Action Research Part 3- Feedback

## Research into the Effectiveness of Peer Feedback in a Discussion-based Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper was to observe the effects of peer feedback on university students in a discussion class. Research has shown that the precise form and nature of peer evaluation varies according to the context and whilst there is copious research extolling the advantages of peer feedback in writing courses – little seems to be written about the value of peer feedback in discussion/oral communication classes. The challenge here was to see how effectively the peer feedback system could be incorporated into a regular English Discussion Class (EDC).

Moreover, previous research has also shown students from Asian cultures (particularly Japan) are uncomfortable expressing criticism of another's written output. (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Soares, 1998). As the students in this paper's research were Japanese, it was also interesting to observe whether the same reticence, regarding peer feedback, would also apply to discussion.

### INTRODUCTION

Peer evaluations are assessments, ratings or evaluations of a person's product or performance that are carried out by peers as opposed to by a teacher, supervisor, parent or expert. Although a great deal of research has been devoted to the content and structure of peer feedback in writing courses – (Mendoca & Johnson 1994 ; Rollinson 2005) little seems to be written about the value of peer feedback in discussion classes.

One of the key benefits shown from peer evaluation research in ESL writing is that it is shown to be a key method of providing more self-control to language learners. Research has shown that as a democratic pedagogy becomes established students not only become more autonomous – but more responsible for their own/ each other's learning (Papinczak, Young and Groves 2007).

Further studies also reported that feedback from peers assisted students in identifying deficiencies in their understanding and skills that were not readily apparent to them, thereby enabling them to take steps to further improve (Falchikov 2005; Nicol & Miligan, 2006).

Although studies have shown that students from Asian countries initially feel uncomfortable giving criticism about output (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Soares,1998), it is also possible that the more familiar students become with peer feedback, the more relaxed they become at giving and receiving critical feedback from each other.

It would seem that an obvious advantage to using peer feedback for a discussion class (rather than a written class) is that all members of a group /pair are equally responsible for the output, and much of the intense personal attachment students may have towards, for example, a piece of written work, is removed or shared equally amongst the group.

This research paper tested several types of peer feedback, with graded levels of guidance and observation were made on how this affected students' performance and awareness.

**METHOD**

Several classes of varied levels (A B C) were used as the sample for this research. In total over 48 students were introduced to peer feedback in their discussion class, over a semester of EDC at a Japanese University in Tokyo. Each EDC class had an average of 8 students per class, each discussion group would contain on average 4 students. Each 90 minute class included 2 full length L2 discussions (between 10 and 16 minutes long). The types of peer assessment fell into 2 main groups:

- 1) Groups /pairs assessing their performances within the same discussion group and
- 2) Mixed students from different groups, (4)/ pairs comparing and sharing their reflections on their separate discussions and giving feedback /advice in response to these reflections.

The groupings and the prompts/criteria used to aid peer feedback were adjusted regularly to help students develop more learner autonomy.

Initially students were encouraged to reflect on their own personal discussion performances and share their reflections with their peers. This reflection took place after the second discussion and the criteria was fairly free with the prompt written on the board for guidance (see Appendix 1). Depending on time and how different groups performed, this exercise was sometimes expanded, whereby members from different groups compared (sometimes as whole groups/sometimes as pairs) their ideas and problems and gave each other advice, and encouragement (this therefore formed the initial phase of peer feedback).

As students became familiar with reflecting and sharing advice, feedback became more peer focused. Members of the same discussion group were asked to give other members feedback on their performance. Aware of problems that other researchers had seen (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Soares,1998), it was important that the focus of the prompting questions (see appendix 2) were about praising their peer rather than criticising them. These were written on the board after the second discussion and used as the framework for peer feedback.

Later in the semester after a number of functions had been accumulated, feedback after the first discussion was added. By then students had built up a set number of skills and that also could be used as a a rubric to help them assess performances (see Appendix 3).

The students were free to use the rubric in a number of ways, 1) to grade each others' performance, 2)to use it to self-assess and then discuss how their partner would have marked them differently, and 3) to assess how they felt their group performed as a whole and focusing on successes or areas for improvement.

Having a rubric made it easier for students to give structured feedback but from time to time, the original freer questions (see Appendix 1) were used for peer feedback so that students did not feel restricted in the feedback they could give.

Student feedback was recorded throughout and student examples were logged to assess how the feedback was working. By shifting peer feedback to after the first discussion it was also possible to note if students incorporated any of the feedback they had received into the second discussion.

**RESULTS**

Using reflection exercises at the start, worked well and students happily discussed positive and negative parts of their own performances and often freely offered their own experiences to support their peers.

When asked to directly give feedback on their peer's performances, many students initially said their partner had no problems! However when pushed to help their partner become

‘perfect’, students would always have a suggestion. Sometimes these were small suggestions such as more eye-contact, but often they were accurate and in all, but a few cases, matched the feedback the teacher had written in note-form. Overall students were happy to give both group and pair feedback although – group feedback would often focus more on content and pair feedback would focus more on skills.

The success of using the rubric was varied. When using the rubric to grade each other, students would often feel the need to check it during discussions (for fear of missing a key point) and this distracted from the students achieving their ultimate aim of a good discussion.

Using rubrics to self assess and then have peers comment, worked well as students were happy to do this reflectively. This also removed the ‘critical’ element of feedback and allowed students to help peers with issues that troubled them, leaving students free to praise or advise, as they felt necessary.

Using the rubric to assess the group performance was also a popular choice for feedback format, and allowed students to focus both on individual performances and the group as a whole.

## NOTED EXAMPLES OF PEER FEEDBACK IN DISCUSSIONS

### Example 1 (A level students)

Background - Although levels were similar, this class was mixed, with some students having lived abroad and others who had only studied in Japan. Some of the students were intimidated by the fact that their peers had strong American pronunciation and were, they assumed, better. I had repeatedly tried to reassure these students that they were equally good at function use and discussion, but they remained reticent in discussion groups that included returnees. In a group feedback 2 returnees focussed on a non-returnee’s ability to remember and use a large number of function phrases:

*S1 (Returnee). Your functions are awesome!!!*

*S2 (returnee) – Yeah how do you remember to use them ALL!!*

*S3 (non-returnee) – Eh, eh, I don’t know.*

*S1 I really wish I could do that.*

*S2/S1 – It’s soooo hard!!*

*S4 (non-returnee) – I said before! You are really good!*

*S3 Really ?? Thank you!*

Once the peers S3 had admired, praised him the student became much more confident and his discussion participation improved dramatically. In addition S4 who had repeatedly given S3 the same feedback in prior peer feedbacks, became more confident in her ability to assess performance and was more ambitious when giving feedback to the returnee students. This also benefitted the returnees in the class who had often wanted stronger peer feedback.

### Example 2 (C level students)

In a pair feedback exercise, a fairly dominant student told a quieter student she should speak more. The student responded that she couldn’t because her peer had asked no questions and left no pauses for her to volunteer.

*S1 – You should talk more. You are too quiet. It is not equal. Maybe you only speak 10 (percent).*

*S2 – I can’t! You talk too much. You must ask questions and give time.*

Both students accepted each other's assessment positively. S1 decided to ask more questions and S2 decided to react and volunteer more. In the second discussion they openly gestured to each other and made efforts to help each other achieve their aims by asking questions and volunteering answers. Although somewhat contrived and artificial, the students had accepted and incorporated the peer feedback into their second discussion (and in fact in several discussions to follow).

## DISCUSSION

Overall, I felt that many of the benefits determined in using peer feedback in writing classes (Mendoca & Johnson 1994 ; Rollinson 2005) were successfully transferable to the discussion classroom. The research showed that through peer feedback, students were able to identify problems, analyse them and discover effective solutions without any teacher intervention. It was therefore clear for the teacher to see that students had understood what was needed to make a good L2 discussion and could advise their peers what to do when these strategies were failing, supporting the idea that theories by Falchikov (2005) and Nicol & Miligan (2006), could work in a discussion class.

As hoped, a definite growth in learner autonomy was observed and by the end of the semester teacher feedback was often just a reinforcement of the peer feedback they had already received. Students often discovered that their ideas and opinions about what was important matched those of their classmates and they developed a sense of confidence in their ability to give advice. In addition, the increased opportunities for peer interaction also encouraged students to build bonds that would help them in future discussions. As by Papinczak, Young and Groves (2007) had previously found in their research, peer feedback helped students start to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses and in doing so they were more able to help each other work around them.

Contrary to early expectations and previous studies linked to peer feedback in Japanese writing class (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Soares,1998), Japanese students did not seem to hesitate in giving critical peer feedback in discussions. Perhaps the ephemeral nature of oral communication makes any perceived criticism less permanent and therefore easier for students to handle. Certainly I have often listened to discussions and wanted to criticize students, but feared that I could be seen as too picky. Too often teacher comments about small details can seriously undermine a student's confidence and motivation. However I was pleasantly surprised by the way the students themselves had none of these fears and supportively explained each other's faults and gave ideas on how to fix them.

The deliberate phrasing of the freer questions (Appendix 2) may also have helped as it takes into account Japanese cultural influences and reflects the idea of Kobudo (old samurai spirit). (A theory that perfection can hardly ever be truly achieved and that it takes years of hard work and effort to master certain skills.) Thus rather than seeing peer feedback negatively, students accepted that perfection takes time and were more willing to highlight areas that will help their peers improve, without the worry of causing offence.

I feel a key element in the success of peer feedback not causing too many problems, was that it was given in L2, and student vocabulary was limited. Suggestions were often very direct *'This is not good!' 'You must do XXX more!' 'Don't xxx'*. However, using L2 also meant students were not offended by the use of these imperatives and the customary obtuse politeness, prevalent when using L1, was successfully avoided. Drawbacks were that students could not always give as much detail as they may have wanted.

Another advantage observed from peer feedback was the ‘feelings of obligation’ common in teacher – student feedback were removed. Students often feel they have no choice and are obliged to follow teacher feedback exactly, whereas peer correction seems to provide more flexible and non-coercive decisions about whether the student should adopt their peers’ suggestions. Students also showed a willingness to support their behaviour if they felt the criticism was unjustified (for results, see Example 2).

Although a drawback to this may be that students were able to help each other avoid their weaknesses by helping to build on each others’ strengths – this also sometimes led to slightly artificial discussions - but equally, knowing these strengths, having confidence in them and using them to help others also showed a deeper understanding of skills needed for good L2 communication.

The use of the rubric highlighted 2 problematic areas. Students were often worried that they would miss critical feedback points and would repeatedly refer to their assessment criteria during discussions. In further studies it would be advisable to remove any feedback aids until after the discussions were complete. Another issue that the rubric highlighted was the student tendency to lean towards helping others solve problems their peers had already recognised, rather than helping to highlight new areas for focus. This may be connected to Japanese cultural influences.

Finally the use of peer feedback in the research also presented some unexpected advantages that would have been impossible otherwise. As Example 1 showed students with low confidence often do not believe positive feedback from teachers. Even when fellow students support it. However when S3 heard the same feedback from students he had admired and wanted to emulate his confidence returned. This type of impact could only have been achieved by peer feedback. However dedicated the teacher.

Compared to classes that did not undertake the peer feedback exercises, students in the research group were more able to articulate ways to solve problems in discussion, however when comparing the final discussion test data across all the students in EDC, there was no obvious improvement in marks compared to those students who were not in the research group.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on initial findings it would certainly appear that peer feedback works well a discussion class environment and further research would be beneficial. Learner autonomy seems to have increased and previous problems that had occurred in connection to peer feedback and Asian/Japanese students in writing classes did not seem occur.

Without a wider study base and a more qualitative student analysis, it is hard to say how many of the improvements observed in the study students came directly from peer feedback and how many developed naturally over the semester as students bonded and became more familiar with the discussion classroom environment. It would also be interesting to discover if L1 feedback would be given and received the same way as L2 was - and whether the cultural protocol in L1 has a negative or positive impact on the peer feedback in Japanese discussion classrooms.

Finally a different but equally interesting alternative area of research would be to look into the way peer feedback seemed to change depending on the target audience (i.e. pairs or groups).

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**APPENDIX 1**

- What did you do well/enjoy?
- 'What was difficult for you/ can you do better?'

**APPENDIX 2**

- Tell your partner 2 things you really enjoyed about the discussion/ or things you thought they did well'.
- Even if your partner did a great job – give them advice on 1 thing they can do that will help them become perfect'

**APPENDIX 3**

FUNCTIONS	1	2	3	4	5
REACTIONS	1	2	3	4	5
OPINION	1	2	3	4	5
EXAMPLE? EXPERIENCES	1	2	3	4	5
FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4	5
CHECKING UNDERSTANDING	1	2	3	4	5
EQUAL	1	2	3	4	5