Peer Feedback: Do Our Students React to It as Positively as Teachers Wish?

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ABSTRACT

Peer feedback is an engaging classroom activity where students have opportunities to listen to their partners discussing and exchange feedback. The primary objective of this activity is to create an autonomous learning classroom environment by preparing students for responsibilities of monitoring and assessing their performance. This paper reports on the effects of peer feedback conducted in three review lessons. There are some challenges peer feedback faces, the main two of which are minimizing students' anxiety about giving and receiving feedback and ensuring its validity. With peer feedback carefully implemented to overcome these challenges, the majority of 42 participants from six different classes responded positively to the experience. The students' comments and some changes in their perceptions of peer feedback before and after this activity will be discussed in this article.

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of peer feedback reported in literature (Bradford-Watts, 2011; Ertmer, Richardson, Belland, Camin, Connolly, Coulthard, Lei, and Mong, 2007; Kurt and Atay, 2007; and Tuttle and Tuttle, 2011), are that students can become more autonomous, more aware of the assessment criteria, and more motivated to perform better. Additionally, the post-observation interaction when learners give and receive feedback has also provided meaningful learning opportunities from the socio-cognitive point of view that knowledge is best acquired through negotiation with others (Bradford-Watts, 2011). It does not mean, however, that peer feedback is free from problems. Among them, two main challenges are alleviating students' anxiety about giving and receiving feedback and ensuring its validity and reliability (Nilson, 2003). To reduce the anxiety level, Cheng and Warren (n.d.), who investigated college students' views on peers assessing written reports before and after the assessment exercise in Hong Kong, emphasize the importance of sharing objective assessment criteria with students so that they can feel more comfortable in this learning process.

Although a considerable amount of research has explored the role of peer feedback in writing, its benefits in speaking has been yet to be fully studied and it is with this idea in mind that the present study was conducted. Three research questions are:

1. What are the benefits of peer feedback in EDC?
2. Does students' anxiety about giving and receiving feedback change before and after the experience?
3. How valid and effective is peer feedback? Do the students' perceptions of peer feedback change?

METHOD

Based on the students' positive attitude to peer feedback piloted in the first semester 2011, I decided to further investigate its benefits in the longer term. It was first introduced in 10 out of 13 classes, but the number was reduced down to 6 for such reasons as not having enough students or because of extra practice replacing this activity. The English proficiency of 42 participants in this study ranges from A to C level. In three review classes (week 4, 8, and 12),

students were asked to monitor their partners participating in a group discussion for 10 minutes, put checks in the sheet every time they heard their partner using target phrases, and give feedback on their ideas and use of functions. Then the students switched their roles and repeated the same procedure. As a data-collecting tool, a questionnaire was issued after the feedback session (see the appendix). It included four questions about the students' attitudes toward peer feedback, which are designed with reference to those used in Cheng and Warren's study (n.d.).

RESULTS

Regarding research question 1, positive reactions to peer feedback were observed overall, which is consistent with the findings of Cheng and Warren's study. The questionnaire conducted in week 4 and 12 includes an open-ended form where the students wrote any comments on peer feedback. Although some students felt pressure ("*It was like a discussion test!*"), all but two students made positive comments on this experience. Their comments are analyzed, grouped into some categories in Table 1. The total numbers of references in week 4 outnumbered those in week 12 probably due to the fact that students' reactions were more conspicuous when they first experienced peer feedback in EDC. As mentioned in literature, they appeared to become more motivated, aware of their own performance as well as the assessment criteria. Having had few chances to listen to other group's discussion, some reported that "it was an enjoyable experience." Their negative comments related to anxiety will be closely examined in the next section.

	Main categories reported	Numbers of references	
		Week 4	Week 12
Positive	Increase in performance level (e.g. "*I tried harder to use functions.*")	4	3
	Learning from peers (e.g. *"By monitoring my peer, I got to understand how to use functions better."*)	6	5
	Awareness raising (e.g. "*The feedback I got from my peer made me aware of what I could and couldn't do.*")	13	9
	Positive emotions (e.g. *"It was fun to listen to my classmates' ideas."*)	15	11
Negative	Feeling nervous (e.g. *"I felt very nervous and pressured."*)	12	8
	Difficulty in giving feedback (e.g. *"It was difficult to give feedback to my peer in English."*)	5	1

Table 1 Categorization of students' comments on peer feedback

Secondly, one of the difficulties peer feedback faces is students' anxiety about giving and receiving feedback. To overcome this challenge, it was emphasized that the purpose of peer feedback was to help each other improve at discussion. The objective criterion was adopted: students were asked to count number of target functions used. As a general trend, the more time students spent in class, the more comfortable they seem in giving and receiving peer feedback as seen in Table 2.

Thirdly, the other challenge of peer feedback is its validity. Table 3 shows the discrepancies between the numbers of target phrases reported by peers and the teacher. In week 4 and 12 the peers under-reported function use by approximately 0.45 and 0.42 phrases per students while they over-reported it by 0.21 in week 8. Most under-reported functions are "if" and "changing a topic." To the teacher's relief, these numbers are low, lower than 1.2 which Brett Davies found in his similar study on the accuracy of self-evaluation. However, since different functions were targeted in each week, the results do not show, if any, the students' improvement of accurately quantifying function phrases.

	Agree/Disagree	Numbers of students	
		Week 4	Week 12
I feel comfortable in giving peer feedback.	Strongly Agree	1	11
	Agree	35	26
	Disagree	5	5
	Strongly disagree	1	0
I feel comfortable in receiving peer feedback.	Strongly Agree	6	12
	Agree	31	28
	Disagree	5	2
	Strongly disagree	0	0

Table 2   Anxiety about giving and receiving peer feedback

		Numbers of use (Week 4)		Numbers of use (Week 8)		Numbers of use (Week 12)	
Target functions /Communication skills		If Changing a topic Agreeing & Disagreeing		Paraphrasing Reporting Information Follow-up questions		All 6 functions	
Level : Class	n	Peer (s)	Teacher	Peer(s)	Teacher	Peer(s)	Teacher
B: Monday 2nd	6	23	26	13	13	15	20
B: Monday 3rd	7	40	42	30	24	35	37
A: Wednesday 1st	8	43	42	15	14	21	25
C: Wednesday 2nd	7	25	27	19	20	26	28
A: Thursday 1st	8	32	40	22	21	17	20
B: Thursday 3rd	6	57	62	22	20	24	26
Total	**42**	**220**	**239**	**121**	**112**	**138**	**156**

Table 3   Numbers of function use reported by peers and teacher

Comparing before and after the peer feedback experience, there seemed to be some changes in the students' perceptions of its effectiveness (Table 4). At the same time, the number

of students who regard teacher feedback more effective than peer feedback doubled up from 7 to 14 and this shift was observed with motivated participants. This may be because when these students paired up with the less motivated, they might be unsatisfied with the peers' misreport or perfunctory feedback and prefer more "accurate" teacher feedback.

	Agree/Disagree	Numbers of students	
		(week 4)	(week 12)
I think peer feedback is a useful way of learning.	Strongly Agree	4	7
	Agree	32	31
	Neither agree or disagree	0	1
	Disagree	5	1
	Strongly disagree	0	0
	Others	1	1

Table 4   Students perceptions of how useful peer feedback is

Discussion
For feedback to be practical, it should be concrete and contextualized. As Tuttle and Tuttle point out (2011, 14), an example of constructive feedback includes "factual statements on specific language items which help to overcome the problems." In this regard, some students provide their partners with remarkably valuable feedback. For instance, one of A level students said, *"Oh, your classmate paraphrased your idea but you said 'No' and explained it again. You didn't use 'I mean…' so next time, you should try this!"* She not only verbalized the problem well, but also suggested how to solve it. Moreover, there are some students who commented on older functions from the first semester as well as the target ones. One C level male student was praising his peer, saying, *"You were very active in the discussion because you said 'Can I start?' and started the discussion. Speak[ing] first is very difficult for me so you did a good job!"* Although all the participants were instructed to give feedback on the ideas discussed (e.g. *Your ideas were easy to understand because…*), the use of functions (e.g. *You used .....*), and to give advice for the future (e.g. *In the next discussion, you should…*), this does not always guarantee equally valued feedback from everyone. Its quality seems to be subject to such individual differences as motivation and learning preference. In this vein, it is understandable that some motivated participants who prefer to have direct, to-the-point feedback from teachers might have doubted the objectiveness and seriousness of their peers (Cheng and Warren, n.d.), but this point should be further examined. In addition, qualitative analysis of whether or how each student develops their skills of giving and taking in feedback could have added another facet of the present study.

Conclusion
The questionnaire issued before and after this peer feedback activity revealed its various benefits. A moderate amount of peer pressure motivated students to join discussions more actively, giving and receiving feedback orally raised students' awareness of function use, and what is more significant, they enjoyed the experience of listening to ideas discussed by their classmates. Considering the most noticeable trend, the shift of their attitudes in favor of peer feedback, it could be argued that the students' initial concerns were relieved to some extent. There is still room for further research to study how to guarantee the quality of peer feedback, which, in this

study, turned out excellent, fair, or poor depending on each student. Nevertheless, peer feedback in English Discussion Class can serve learners as a meaningful way of reflecting their performance and help them to grow as more autonomous learners.

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APPENDIX
A questionnaire on students' perceptions of peer feedback

In this semester, we conducted peer feedback three times in this class. Based your experiences, please answer the questions below.

後期のディスカッションの授業では３回、ピアフィードバックを行いました。その経験に基づいて、以下の質問に答えて下さい。

<Question 1>
I think peer-feedback is a useful way of learning.
ピアフィードバックは学習において役立つと思う。

４．強く同意する　　３．同意する　　２．反対する　　１．強く反対する

<Question 2>
I feel comfortable in giving peer-feedback.
自分のピアに、フィードバックを与えるのは抵抗がない。

４．強く同意する　　３．同意する　　２．反対する　　１．強く反対する

<Question 3>
I feel comfortable in receiving peer-feedback.
自分のピアから、フィードバックを受けるのは抵抗がない。

４．強く同意する　　３．同意する　　　２．反対する　　１．強く反対する

<Question 4>
Which of the three ideas do you agree most? Choose one and put a tick in a box.
次の考えを読み、最も同意するものを1つ選び、✔を入れて下さい。

A: I think peer-feedback is more effective than teacher-feedback.
ピアフィードバックは、教員からのフィードバックより効果的だ。
B: I think peer-feedback is as effective as teacher-feedback.
ピアフィードバックは、教員からのフィードバックと同じくらい効果的だ。
C: I think teacher-feedback is more effective than peer-feedback.
教員からのフィードバックの方が、ピアフィードバックより効果的である。

<Question 5>
If you have a chance in other English classes, would you like to try this peer feedback again?
もし、他の英語のクラス等で機会があれば、またこのピアフィードバックをやってみたいですか。

□Yes: □No:

Write any comments on peer feedback. ピアフィードバックを経験した感想を自由に書いて下さい。