Exploring Peer Feedback in High-Level Discussion Classes
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ABSTRACT
This paper outlines three different approaches to peer feedback in EDC classes focused on so-called high-level learners. In this paper, high-level learners refer to near-native speakers of English who are enrolled in discussion class. By utilizing the learners sophisticated language skills, three peer feedback activities were designed. Each activity allows learners to examine not only the discussion skills introduced in the EDC course, but also their own perceived weaknesses. The paper concludes with a discussion of the effectiveness of each activity and reflections on teaching high-level students.

INTRODUCTION
Peer feedback is promoted as a useful tool in the language learning classroom. It has been shown to have positive social, cognitive, affective and methodological effects (Mendonca and Johnson, 1994). While there is much research into peer feedback for L2 writing, it remains scarce regarding speaking skills. Peer feedback can be comparable to the feedback given by teachers in oral-skills classes (Patri, 2002). However, peer feedback must be implemented carefully as it can cause stress to students (Pope, 2005). Furthermore, it can take a long time for benefits to become noticeable and its implementation should be carefully considered before being undertaken (Saito, 2008).

My experience within the EDC has given me the opportunity to teach discussion classes to a variety of English learners. This year I was given the responsibility to teach what in this context I will call “high-level” learners. These learners are near-native speakers of English. All of them have experienced extensive English education or have lived in an English-speaking environment, thus some may call them near-native/native speakers of English. Initial observations of the learners would suggest that they have so few issues with their spoken English that they would probably need very little instructions to make adjustment. Because of this, feedback can be limited in the context of the course assessments. The learners find it easy to meet the requirements of the class. As a response to this, I considered the potential of peer feedback as a tool to increase the benefits of the discussion class.

Using peer feedback for these students came about from comparing these students to the majority of other students taking discussion classes. Many of the linguistic issues that other students have in discussion classes fall within the assessment framework of the course, i.e. function and communication use, while the high-level students performed the skills well from their first lesson. As an awareness-raising exercise, I asked the students to discuss what they thought their weaknesses were in discussions and their answers were diverse. It is important to note that their answers did not fall within the assessment criteria of the course. Not to say that they were perfect users of the target language of the course, but they saw their own issues as being different.

The high-level students make up a small minority of the students taking the EDC classes and while the EDC journal provides literature about peer-feedback (c.f Saito, 2013; Hurrell, 2014), none focus on the specific needs of high-level students. In a previous paper (Buck, 2016) I discuss the potential of critical thinking skills through peer feedback. Non-EDC formative assessment peer feedback activities showed tentative potential for students to both perform peer-feedback activities and effectively identify and modify their own speaking skills, even if such skills had not be introduced to them previously.
As a result of these issues, in this paper I would like to examine peer feedback activities for high-level students. By developing activities where students can highlight their own perceived weaknesses and review their own development, they can focus more on their own individual needs. Subsequently, I will outline three activities which I designed and implemented in my high-level classes and discuss their effectiveness based on my own observations.

**DISCUSSION**

**Peer Tutoring**

The first approach implemented in the high-level discussion classes is peer-tutoring. Damon & Phelps (1989) summarize the approach as one peer taking on the role of tutor to another. As such, initially it is important to identify the students’ strengths and weaknesses. Then students with strengths of certain skills give feedback to students who have weaknesses in the same skills. In the second lesson of the semester, I instructed the students to make a list of four strengths and weaknesses (two each) related to English discussion. This time I asked students to only use skills outlined as part of the EDC target languages i.e. **functions** and **communication skills**. At this point in the course, the students had studied *Opinions, Reactions, Follow-up Questions* and *Checking Understanding*. In the preamble to making their lists, I encouraged the students to talk candidly about the strengths and weaknesses within a group and asked them to be as specific as possible. Rather than listing the name of the skills, the students were asked to talk about them in depth, such as their tone, appropriate usage, confidence in using the language, types, etc. Though this would be extremely challenging for most English learners, this class consisted of eight near-native/native speakers of English. The first activity and list-generating session was productive. Students gave many comments regarding their own strengths and weaknesses. It should be said that while students often cited their own weaknesses, they often relied on their peers to identify their strengths, which may be a socio-cultural issue. The strengths and weaknesses identified were often the same as the ones in my teachers’ notes. The high-level students exhibited a strong ability to analyze language performance in English.

Using the students’ notes of their own strengths and weaknesses, I developed a post-discussion peer-tutoring exercise. I edited the strengths and weaknesses lists to use more consistent terminology. After a discussion, I gave the students their own strengths and weaknesses lists and asked them to talk about how their weaknesses had changed within their discussion groups. I encouraged students who had strengths to give feedback to students who had weaknesses. I found that this was somewhat successful initially. Students talked openly about their own performances and the students with strengths offered various advice to the students with weaknesses. However, there were too many different types of strengths and weaknesses to match. For example, asking interesting questions was often listed as a weakness but only one student in the class was identified as having that strength, thus they did not have the opportunity or time to give feedback. Despite this, the activity worked as a good autonomy-developing exercise, with students reflecting on their own linguistic skills. The high-level students who performed as a tutor sometimes struggled to give implementable advice for the more sophisticated weaknesses (such as asking interesting questions) though the students seemed particularly engaged in the role.

Overall, the students enjoyed the activity, though it was somewhat difficult for students in the tutor role to give useful advice. However, the students’ high-level English meant that they often attempted to reformulate their language, which is considered by some to be an important part of language learning (Watanabe & Swain, 2007).
Cooperative Learning

This approach to peer feedback is a term for team-based learning. It can refer to many different approaches such as each member of a group becoming an expert of one part of a topic (Aronson et al., 1978). Learners are given a skill, which they have to become “experts” at using and instructing. The learners convene in groups and share their knowledge to develop their skills. Despite its benefits, this approach is probably not implementable in the EDC context. It would be difficult for learners to research the skills taught in the EDC. Another approach would encourage learners to be fully autonomous, assigning their own topic to investigate after which the learners would meet and exchange knowledge. Even in the high-learners classes, the students struggle to identify their own strengths and explaining such strengths to their peers is quite difficult. Finally, like the peer tutoring, asking students to ‘investigate’ their topic is incompatible with the class design.

The activity was redesigned by stripping back the basic design of this approach: students gathered together to plan what they were to focus on, then split up, then reconvened to share knowledge. Before the first discussion (after the preparation activity), I had the learners note in their books what they wanted to focus on. I asked them to choose one function skill, one communication skill and one other skill (e.g. pronunciation, quality of questions asked, etc.). After this activity, the students were shuffled for the first discussion and then shuffled for the second discussion. Finally, at the end of class the learners met and discussed their performance.

Firstly, this activity is not different from most common EDC peer feedback activities. Students are often asked to focus on a particular skill or skills and report their performance to their partner. Regardless of their English ability, most students can do this activity effectively. However, in the case of the high-level students, the addition of the other skills as a focus point is something more featured in the high-level activities. Again, based on the initial strengths and weaknesses activity which occurred in the first lessons, learners already had an awareness of other skills they wanted to improve. Thus, the list-generating activity before discussion 1 was very easy for them to perform. In addition, I asked the learners to briefly share their focus language before being shuffled into a new group for two minutes. This time also allowed for students to give some short ideas to use the language effectively. The learners were then split up for the rest of class before being reunited at the end.

This activity was performed three times during the semester. Firstly, I noted that the learners did a good job of practicing their focus language in discussion 1, particularly in using the functions and communication skills. There was a noticeable increase in appropriate usage of the focus language. However, some of the nebulous other focus language often created struggles. It was easy for the high-level students to modify and improve the EDC target language. It was more difficult for them to make changes to their non-EDC focus language. It was common for learners to discuss their failure to master such language. What was the reason for this? As mentioned before, the high-level learners are confident, strong speakers of English. It was possible that they lacked an approach to improve their weaknesses. For example, a learner mentioned once that they wanted to improve their pronunciation of /r/ and /l/, which can be issue for Japanese speakers of English. However, their peers could not offer much useful feedback on how to improve. It took intervention from myself to provide implementable techniques. This also led to a loss of confidence by some students who could identify weaknesses themselves but their peers could not think of how to improve them. This is an issue of the approach to dealing with some of the other language issues the students have. It is usually better to have an instructor offer feedback than the students’ peers for more complex and nebulous language issues. As a result of this, I decide to extend the issue-generating activity and the end-of-class activity length to include instructor-led feedback to give
more expertise advice on some issues. Moreover, the high-level students could participate in a class mini-debate on effective ways to improve such issues.

Overall, this approach would benefit all EDC students. However, for issues outside the functional target language and communication skills, even high-level students lack the autonomy to improve certain issues.

**Peer Collaboration**

This approach uses two learners who are both novices working together to become experts at a topic. Often this would take the form of doing investigation outside the classroom. Learners would use their own research skills to investigate an idea and then return to class to share their ideas. Students can measure their own improvement with interactions with their peers or teachers. The eventual goal is that the learners become experts, developing alongside each other (Ames & Murray 1982). In the case of EDC classes, outside research is not implementable. As such, are there any benefits of peer collaboration?

In the case of the high-level students, they shared some weaknesses. Again using a strengths and weaknesses list generating activity, I compiled a list of learners who shared the same weaknesses. At the start of the subsequent lesson, I paired the learners together and asked them to discuss their shared weaknesses and how they could use the lesson activity to improve them. The weaknesses consisted of various issues – asking interesting questions, avoiding katakana English, clarifying, and avoiding Japanese reactions. Only one of these weaknesses is part of the EDC target language (clarifying). The learners whose weakness was clarifying could refer to the textbook for guidance and had heard my previous feedback on the topic. As such, they had more knowledge to draw on to make adjustments to their discussion language. However, the other learners all listed non-EDC target language and had less knowledge to draw on. The learners whose weaknesses were avoiding katakana English and avoiding Japanese reactions needed only to focus more during discussions to show improved performance. This was something they raised in their first peer-collaboration discussion. The learners whose weakness was asking interesting questions had the least productive initial activity. They could not think of ways to improve their speaking, instead citing their own limitations such as shyness or a lack of creativity. I asked them to think about how to overcome such problems and they were at a loss.

After the learners completed their two discussions, the pairs were brought together to reflect on whether their efforts were successful. The learners focused on clarifying were the most positive about their performance and gave different approaches to help improve their performance. The learners who focused on katakana English and reactions, while their performances improved, offered only brief reflections on how they showed improvements. For the high-level speakers, they reiterated that it only takes focus for them to produce their desired performance. The asking interesting questions learners showed the most output regarding their performance, talking at length about the questions they asked, whether the questions were “interesting” and potential future approaches.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I briefly outlined three possible approaches to peer feedback in the cases of high-level learners in the EDC. Firstly, peer tutoring was an effective activity for high-level students. However, it is probably less effective for the majority of EDC learners as it requires students to not only be strong speakers of English, but also confident and analytical. Secondly, the instructor needs to manage the activity as well by possibly stepping in and offering feedback. For some, this goes against the autonomy-fostering purpose of peer feedback, though in this case I observed a positive effect on subsequent performance through reformulation of language. Cooperative
learning also showed improved performances. It allowed learners to solve some of the more complex problems over three weeks while reporting their learning experience to their peers. However, again the students often struggle to find solutions to more complex problems. Peer collaboration allowed students to work alongside students who shared their problems.

Peer feedback has demonstrated itself to be a useful activity for EDC classes and it is beneficial for high-level students. Nevertheless, giving high-level students the opportunity to give peer feedback on non-EDC linguistic issues is somewhat less effective due to the complex and diverse nature of the issues. As such, I would advise teachers to keep such activities controlled. Not to say that an instructor should avoid non-EDC linguistic issues, but possibly consider whether the students can actually solve the problems by themselves.

REFERENCES