Unlocking Peer and Self-Assessment: A Guided Feedback Activity

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Abstract

Recent EFL research has indicated the advantages of providing students with opportunities for self-assessment or peer feedback in addition to teacher feedback (Choi, 2013; Rodriguez-Gonzalez & Castaneda, 2018; Al Jahromi, 2020). This practical teaching report will cover use of a classroom activity designed to encourage interactive peer feedback and productive self-assessments via Google Forms. This activity was developed in line with relevant literature on peer feedback and self-assessment, which suggests several benefits of offering students the opportunity for these alternative forms of feedback. In line with recommendations from previous research, the activity utilizes both closed and open questions geared towards setting specific goals and developing reflective and evaluative skills; this combination can guide students towards producing more meaningful and constructive feedback, hence boosting their future performance. This tool allows either real-time or asynchronous feedback to be provided in online or face-to-face lessons, which might be particularly useful for teachers working in various environments. Although the example questions provided were designed for use within a first-year university English Presentation course, the basic structure of the activity could be readily adapted to suit a range of speaking or writing courses.

Keywords: peer feedback, L2 feedback, self-assessment, self-assessment online

Introduction

Formative feedback

Feedback is essential within the classroom: it provides information to students on aspects of performance that can be improved upon in the future, and reciprocal feedback between teachers and students can significantly improve both learner and teacher performance (Klimova, 2015). Feedback can be summative or formative; summative feedback evaluates learning and tends to occur at the end of a course or class, whereas formative feedback occurs during the course and aims to set learning targets to improve performance efficiently and expediently(Taras, 2005; Conzemius & O'Neill, 2009). In their seminal meta-analysis on feedback and goal setting, Black and Wiliam (1998) state that formative feedback has three essential elements: "recognition of the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two" (p. 6). Formative feedback is therefore constructive and future-focused, as to make improvements in the future, students need to know both how they are progressing (Sadler, 1989) and gain specific advice on ways to 'close the gap' by improving particular aspects of their work (Black & Wiliam, 2010). This process can be motivating, as well as sustain or develop performance (Klimova, 2015). In contrast to summative feedback, formative feedback provides more frequent opportunities to comment on progress by sampling a wider variety of student work, and may reduce learner anxiety (Sadler, 1989, p. 141). Formative feedback can be delivered via teachers or peers, or come from students themselves via self-assessment (Al Jahromi, 2020). This paper will further explore each type of formative feedback before detailing an activity designed in accordance with these principles.

Teacher feedback

Traditionally, feedback on how to close the gap has passed from teachers to students in what could be termed a teacher-centred approach. Several studies indicate that students in L2 learning environments show a preference for feedback from teachers over that of peers (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006; Choi, 2013), and that teacher-centred feedback is more often incorporated into student work (Yang et al., 2006)I In line with these findings, feedback from teachers arguably has an important role to play in the classroom as they possess greater tacit evaluative knowledge (Sadler, 1989), for instance for assigning grades.

However, it can be hard for teachers to assess examples of work in isolation, and hence, there is a "tendency to use a normative rather than a criterion approach, which emphasizes competition between pupils rather than the personal improvement of each" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 18). This is because teachers might struggle to provide personalized feedback to each student, particularly in larger classes. Further problems with teacher feedback could include students failing to grasp how to close the gap because of difficulties with L2 comprehension, and it presents fewer opportunities for student autonomy in goal setting (Yang et al., 2006). However, teachers can open two alternative avenues for feedback, which offer benefits to learners by developing students' evaluative capacities via self- assessment and by encouraging classmates to collaborate via peer feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Peer feedback

Regardless of the type of feedback received, Sadler (1989) writes that before students can improve upon their previous performance, the first step they must make is to

> "develop the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production. This in turn requires that students possess an appreciation of what high quality work is... and that they develop a store of tactics or moves which can be drawn upon to modify their own work... these skills can be developed by providing direct authentic evaluative experience for students" (p. 119).

Giving opportunities for students to engage in peer feedback provides the "direct and authentic" experience needed for students to develop their evaluative knowledge, and therefore, through the process of peer feedback, students can both gain and apply strategies or tactics to improve their own work in future by helping other students to improve theirs (Sadler, 1989, p. 140). In the same article, Sadler provides further advantages, such that students can see more examples of work on the same task they had undertaken, can observe multiple designs or solutions to problems, and can be somewhat more objective when evaluating others' work than they would be of their own.

In their in-depth study on peer feedback in L2 writing classes, Tsui and Ng (2002) noted numerous benefits for students, including greater collaborative learning, an increased sense of audience and authenticity regarding their own work, better understanding of what contributes to "success" on a task, and higher awareness of problems that reviewers could not previously spot in their own work. The authors concluded that this awareness was gained "not only through getting feedback but by giving feedback to peers as well" (p. 166), underlining the importance of peer feedback for future success. Black and Wiliams (2010) found that peer feedback best improved learning when specific strengths and weaknesses were listed and when this advice was offered without marks or scores from peers. Yang et al. (2006) concluded that in most cases where peer

feedback was offered, students could receive more feedback than they would have if only teacher feedback had been provided, and that the process of peer reviewing appeared to boost both critical thinking skills and student autonomy. Finally, peer feedback has been shown to reduce L2 anxiety (Choi, 2013; Rodriguez-Gonzalez & Castaneda, 2018) and encourage or motivate learners (Rollinson, 2005).

However, peer feedback could be vulnerable to issues with L2 language competence that may result in vague comments (Rodriguez-Gonzalez & Castaneda, 2018). Students may also lack task-based knowledge needed for effective peer response (Zhu, 1995) and might require guidance on what constitutes appropriate peer feedback. Zhu (1995) described successful peer response groups as being "task-focused" and providing specific and accurate feedback; however, when training was provided for students in feedback skills, it significantly enhanced the quality of peer response. One method of training students recommended by Rollinson (2005) is to pre-teach the purpose and methods of effective peer feedback and to emphasize that peers should focus on being collaborators rather than correctors.

Other guidelines for generating effective peer feedback include creating a comfortable learning environment, preparing appropriate peer response tasks that guide students towards providing better responses, modeling the process and instructions, and allowing students to discuss the activity afterwards (Hansen & Liu, 2005). Cho and Cho (2011) suggest that providing a combination of strengths and weaknesses (i.e., praise and constructive feedback) has been found to help both the reviewer and reviewee to improve their work in future and that reviewers offering positive comments alone did not improve the quality of work (p. 639). Students in some cultures which particularly emphasize the value of harmony in relationships might feel anxious about criticizing others' performance; however, within a Japanese EFL context, Kamimura (2006) found harmony promoted rather than hindered peer feedback.

Self-assessment

Sadler (1989) argues that formative assessment on how learners can "close the gap" can include both feedback provided externally to the learner (such as that from teachers or peers) and self-monitoring, by which the learner generates the relevant information themselves (p. 122). Self-assessment refers to learners making judgements about their own abilities (Brantmeier, 2006), such as independently evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their own work. Self-assessment was found by Black and Wiliams (1998) to significantly increase students' commitment to their own work, and this statement was taken further in a later paper that claimed "self-assessment by pupils, far from being a luxury, is in fact an essential component of formative assessment" (Black & Wiliams, 2010, p.6).

However, students cannot assess their own work without evaluative knowledge or guidelines on how to do so effectively. For self-monitoring to be successful, students need criteria, standards, or goals (Taras, 2005) which allow them to adequately judge the quality of their own work, and they should be able to choose various strategies on how to improve their performance in future (Sadler, 1989). By allowing students the opportunity to self-monitor, setting criteria to judge themselves by, and offering various strategies for improvement, teachers are effectively downloading their evaluative knowledge so that students can "eventually become independent of the teacher and intelligently engage in and monitor their own development" (Sadler, 1989, p. 141), which enables students to continue learning and utilizing the taught skills beyond and after the course. A further benefit of self-

assessment is that it can develop critical thinking skills as students evaluate their own learning and experiences (Klimova, 2015).

In sum, while teacher feedback is valued by students and is arguably the most suitable for assigning grades or offering summative assessments (Sadler, 1989), alternative forms of formative feedback can offer numerous advantages to learners. These include gaining awareness of what is required for successful achievement of a task and assembling a range of strategies to close the gap, as well as increased autonomy and reduced L2 anxiety. However, students require some guidance or training for either peer feedback or self-assessment to be successful. With these principals and arguments in mind, an activity was designed to guide students toward producing effective peer feedback and self-assessment.

Method

The activity has been trialed in several English Presentation classes in two semesters at Rikkyo University, Tokyo, and has been undertaken in online and face-to-face L2 learning environments. Students were provided with a Google Form, on which a series of questions invited them to consider both their own and other team members' presentations.

First, students were shown a preview of the Google Form. This ensured they knew where to find it (for instance, on the class Google Drive folder) and allowed them to see what topics they would need to write about after delivering and watching presentations. Short instructions or prompts such as *"What did you / your team do well? What can you / your team improve? Take notes"* were written on the whiteboard while the students watched presentations.." These acted as reminders for students to focus on their own and others' work, to include both positive and negative aspects, and to take notes to enable students to recall these in detail later. Students performed the activity as soon as they finished giving presentations and aimed to complete it during class time in order to better remember the presentations they had seen; however, this could easily be adapted as a homework task depending on teacher preference and time limitations.

As written peer feedback is more effective when supplemented by discussions between reviewers (Tsui & Ng, 2000), students were often given time afterward to read classmates' responses and discuss their ideas. These discussions could take place in the same class; a possible alternative for students is to read the comments as a homework task, then discuss them during the following lesson. Discussion of peer comments allowed students to collaboratively ascertain meaning if language use was unclear or to gather more details. For lower-proficiency groups, allowing this discussion to take place in their L1 might also benefit them.

Alternatively, or in addition to peer review discussions, instructors could show the results to the class as a whole and highlight interesting examples or recurring patterns, for instance 'many people mentioned they had found making eye contact difficult in their own presentations'. This could provide a good opportunity to teach extra skills or to review previously learned information in order to benefit students that had found these aspects difficult.

Discussion

Open and closed questions

The activity used a series of questions that invited students to evaluate both their own and other

team members' presentations. Various question types were utilized, including short answer, multiple choice, and scales. Closed questions guided students towards providing feedback on specific points, and open questions allowed for greater self-expression or explanation of their choices. A few examples of these designed for use in an English Presentation course will be provided as follows, although it may be worth noting that these can be adapted for use in other courses, including L1 writing courses, and could be offered in either students' L1 or L2.

Table 1

Some commonly used questions and instructions

Open questions	Think about a team member's presentation. What was the most interesting part? Which person in your team gave the best presentation today? Why did you think it was good ? .. *Your answer will be more helpful if you give detailed information (not "it was great!"... explain why)* Give one piece of advice to someone in your team - what can they improve? (For example: "Yuka - I liked your topic, but it was sometimes difficult to understand because you spoke too quickly. Try to speak slower next time") What do you think was good about your presentation?
Closed questions	Did your team members... Use phrases from p. 19? Use gestures? Look at the audience? Speak loud and clear? Show research? Give interesting information? What do you think is difficult about giving a presentation? *Choose 1–3 of the following:* Making eye contact, remembering my speech, making slides on PowerPoint, choosing a topic, planning and research, speaking clearly, using gestures

Figure 1

Example of a 'checkbox grid' (closed) question using a difficulty scale

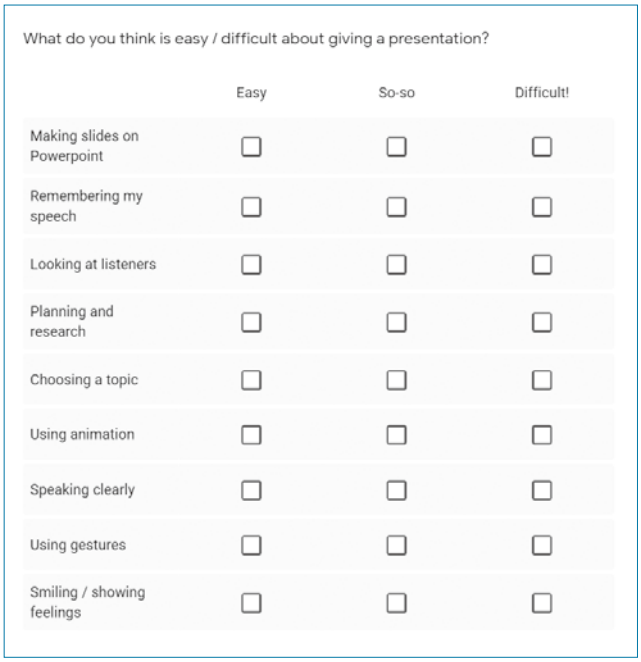
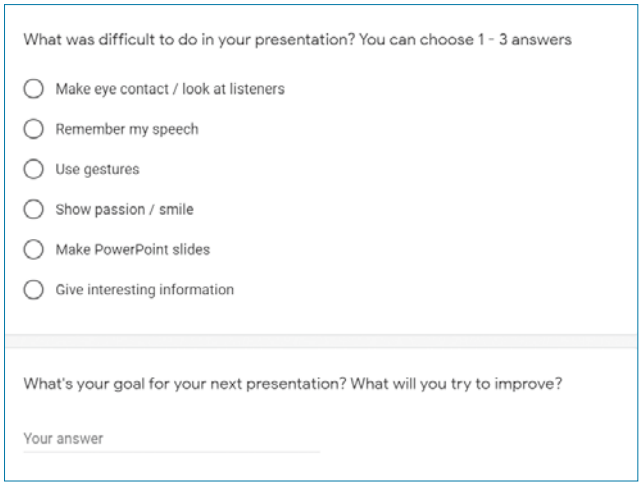


Figure 2
Examples of a multiple choice (closed) and short answer (open) question types



As students might benefit from training to gain the evaluative skills necessary for successful peer- or self-assessment (Hansen & Liu, 2005), closed questions aimed to draw students' attention to cogent, specific features of the presentations, which were listed as various options in multiple choice, ranking, or checkbox questions. Fixed criteria were used here to "narrow the choices of specific items which are considered important and relevant for any specific judgement" (Taras, 2005, p. 467), and they were often used before open questions that offered opportunities to expand upon these selections or decide on the specific items to be used in goal setting.

Praise and points to work on

As providing praise alone does not lead to effective improvements in student work (Cho & Cho, 2011), it was expected that a balance of positive and constructive comments would be more effective. Therefore, questions were structured to encourage both complimentary and critical feedback, such as "what did your team member/s do well?" and "what can they improve?".

It is conceivable that some students may feel nervous about criticizing another's work, so an example of a politely phrased comment that started on a positive note but then gave a specific recommendation for improvement (for instance, *"Yuka- I liked your topic, but it was sometimes difficult to understand because you spoke too quickly. Try to speak slower next time"*) was provided to model how to phrase feedback without being cruel or overly negative. Based on recommendations by Rollinson (2005) on peers being collaborators rather than correctors, this question aimed to elicit advice rather than baldly stating what was "bad". This should be emphasized in oral or written instructions to the class, such as by suggesting *"write a comment to help others improve in the future, and remember to be kind but clear"*.

Self-reflection and goal setting

After choosing from a set of options such as those in the first question of Figure 2, all feedback forms contained some variation on self-reflective questions encouraging students to consider their strengths and weaknesses in their own words, such as "what do you want to improve next time?". As

above, the focus was to consider how to improve in future rather than to be excessively negative regarding their own performance. Having previously decided some weaknesses in the closed question provided before this one, this open question type had the advantages of allowing students to express themselves more freely or justify why they had found certain aspects of the task challenging, as well as to autonomously select a goal on how to improve.

One principal that can guide students in generating productive goals for future improvement is the *SMART* method, which recommends that goals be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely: students who used these perimeters to set goals were found to better achieve learning outcomes, such as delivering more professional presentations (Lawlor, 2012). Asking students to consider one to three weaknesses narrows their focus to become more specific, and all of the options provided are realistic and attainable with some practice or focus. Furthermore, the options also allow timely goals to be chosen as they set the duration of the goal as "your next presentation".

Insights for teachers

Klimova (2015) suggests that this form of goal setting question could not only assist students with selecting goals autonomously, but might also benefit teachers reviewing these answers, as through self-reflection:

> "Students can critically think about what they have learned during the course and also convey some of their personal experience, experiences and feelings... teachers can then draw conclusions about their teaching practices and reconsider some of their teaching approaches and strategies" (p. 174)

By reviewing student responses, either with the class to highlight interesting or important examples, or outside of class contact hours, teachers can gain real-time insights into anxieties or difficulties students are facing. In the English Presentation classes discussed so far, difficulties faced by students may include looking at the audience, remembering their speech, or making gestures while speaking. The act of reviewing and reflecting on student goals or problems can enable teachers to offer strategies targeting these. One such example could be that if students commonly reported difficulties with remembering their speech, teachers could recommend that they practice three times before class: once with a full set of notes or complete speech, a second time with shorter notes, and a third time with brief bullet points. While the problems reported by students will vary on different courses, a review of responses to these types of questions might provide useful insights for educators seeking to combat common issues and improve their own teaching practice.

Effects of group cohesion

The most effective peer feedback offers both strengths and weaknesses (Cho & Cho, 2011), which might be challenging for some students. Although Kamimura (2006) found that harmony promoted rather than hindered peer feedback in a Japanese EFL context, students may feel anxious about criticizing others' performance. Previous research indicates that establishing a comfortable learning environment improves the quality of peer feedback (Hansen & Liu, 2005), and therefore, more cohesive groups might be better able to provide constructive feedback.

Students in the Presentation classes that undertook this activity had previously been divided into teams that had already worked closely together for several lessons, and icebreaker activities were run at the start of both semesters, which explicitly aimed to build cohesive teams by selecting shared

goals (Maxfield, 2021, *in press*). Students were asked to review only their team members' performances, rather than those of other classmates whom they might not have interacted with prior to the feedback activity. Peer review was not initiated until Lesson 5, by which time students had made a team presentation together, given two mini-presentations to their team, and participated in several discussions together. It was hoped that doing these tasks together before the feedback activity helped improve group cohesion and thereby reduced anxiety on giving constructive feedback as well as praise.

Classroom usage and potential adaptations

This activity has been tested in both online and face-to-face teaching formats. When instructions were clear and students could see a brief model or explanation of the task before attempting it, they were able to complete this activity in both environments with seemingly minimal difficulty, and later iterations in the same course required less explanation as the activity became more familiar. As this activity has been successfully used both online and face-to-face, it seems likely that it could also be used in hybrid learning environments. However, this should perhaps be further researched or trialed before being implemented on a major scale because the combination of written and oral feedback might be more difficult to achieve in hybrid environments.

The examples and questions listed above were used in the context of teaching a first-year university English Presentation class but could be altered to suit a range of other courses, including L2 writing classes or even those taught in the students' L1. While questions can be adapted to suit a variety of courses and tasks, previous research has indicated that it is best to offer a combination of closed questions to guide students towards providing specific feedback and open questions to encourage reflection. A good starting point could be to consider what would be needed for successful task performance, perhaps with reference to a rubric, and then to design questions leading students toward those goals.

Conclusion

Both peer feedback and self-assessment can lead students toward closing the gap between their current level and an ideal future performance. When applied with proper guidance, peer feedback and self-assessment can increase the evaluative knowledge essential for successful task performance, assist with judicious and autonomous goal selection, and indicate various strategies on how to get there. The benefits might extend after this activity has been completed as teacher review of self-assessments can improve their own teaching practices. Moreover, learning how to independently set and achieve course-relevant goals enables students to continue building on the taught skills beyond the end of the course.

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