Increasing Student Participation in Post-Discussion Feedback Using Partner-Check Sheets and Peer Feedback

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a classroom-based activity that is designed to increase student participation in the feedback process of an English language-learning course. The language course features two small group discussions in which the students discuss contemporary topics. During the discussions, students use paper check-sheets to record their partner's use of the target language phrases. After the discussions, the students use the check-sheets to provide peer feedback. The activity aims to increase students' awareness of their use (or lack of use) of the target language phrases during the discussion (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and develop student ownership of the learning process by providing feedback to other students (Knowles, 1975; Benson, 2011; King, 2011).

INTRODUCTION

English Discussion Class (EDC) is currently one of four required English courses at Rikkyo University. It is taken during the students' first year at the university. The aim of EDC is to enable students to use English to communicate effectively in an academic setting. Two core principles of the EDC are to provide student-centered lessons that focus on the communication and exchange of ideas and to maximize collaborative learning opportunities.

Each EDC lesson follows a set structure. In the first half of the lesson, the instructor introduces the target language phrases for that particular lesson. The two categories of target language phrases for this course are *discussion skills* and *communication skills*. Discussion skills are phrases that are commonly used in discussions and other daily situations. Communication skills are phrases that are useful for repairing communication problems. After the new phrases are introduced in a lesson, students are given time to practice using the new discussion or communication skill phrases through pair work and pre-discussion warm-up activities. Following the practice time, students participate in two, small group (three to five students) discussions lasting 10 and 16 minutes respectively. In each discussion, students have autonomous use of their English language skills to enable them to express their ideas. The target language phrases provide the students a means of enhancing their ability to discuss topics independent of instructor involvement. Formative feedback sessions after each discussion provide the students opportunities to become aware of the correct (or incorrect) use of the target language phrases in the discussion.

Traditionally, the language instructor presents formative feedback to the class. However, without student participation in this process, it is easy for the feedback sessions to be teacher-centered. This means the students are passively receiving the information without a role in its generation or transmission. This is in opposition to the EDC principle of collaborative student learning. With this in mind, I chose to increase student participation in the feedback process using partner-check sheets followed by peer feedback sessions.

DISCUSSION

Educational feedback plays a crucial role in improving knowledge and skill acquisition. Formative feedback, which is based on formative assessment, provides students with information that will help them improve their acquisition of the target language (Shute, 2008). EDC instructors assess students based on their use of the target language phrases during the two small group discussions. The information gathered by the instructor's formative assessment is used to provide feedback to the whole class in order to increase the students' awareness of their own use of discussion and

communication skills during the discussions. The external feedback presented to the students helps them to understand how they are currently using the target language in relation to the expectations of the instructor (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

The need for feedback is clear. How to incorporate formative assessment and feedback in a student-centered curriculum requires language instructors to take more innovative approaches. Students who are active participants in the learning process are better able to improve their own learning (Black & William, 1998). Many teachers in the EDC use self-check sheets as a means of directly involving students in the feedback process. Self-check sheets require students to evaluate themselves on their use of the target language phrases during the discussion. However, the accuracy of self-assessment may limit the effectiveness of self-check sheets. An alternative to self-assessment is peer assessment. Birjandi & Siyyari (2006) reported that research data has shown more agreement between teacher and peer assessment than between teacher and self-assessment. Therefore, feedback based on peer assessment will more closely reflect the teacher's assessment of the same activity.

Partner-check sheets are a peer assessment tool in which one student uses a teacher-prepared handout to record their partner's use of the target language. Peer assessment requires students to evaluate each other's performance much in the same way that teachers assess student performance. In the case of EDC discussions, students can use partner-check sheets to assess their peers' use of the discussion and communication skills while the discussion is in progress (see Appendix A). The benefits of peer assessment are that it increases student participation in the learning process and peer assessment is likely to be more accurate than self-assessment.

Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) wrote that an important part of assessment is to clarify task requirements. They specifically recommended providing written documents that describe standards of achievement. The partner-check sheets clearly show which target language phrases the students need to use to achieve the best possible score. Shute (2008) said that formative feedback must inform the student if their answer is correct or not and provide information about what is correct. At their most basic function, the partner-check sheets allow the learners to understand if they are using the target language phrases during the discussion. Through the use of formative assessment and feedback, students have the opportunity to become aware of their correct, incorrect, or non-use of the discussion and communication skills during classroom discussions.

Research into the use of peer assessment has demonstrated that students positively view it as a valuable learning tool (De Grez, Valck, and Roozen, (2012). The information students gather through the use of partner-check sheets is then shared in a post-discussion, peer feedback session. De Grez, Valck, and Roozen (2012) stated that, because students view peer assessment and peer feedback positively, they would be more likely to use the information presented in the feedback to improve their performance. While the language skills gap between instructors and students can create issues of comprehension, students are often able to better communicate in a manner that is mutually comprehensible. In addition, language students may be able to explain new concepts to their classmates in a way that is mutually more accessible than their language instructors (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Another benefit of peer feedback is that it is often easier to hear criticism from someone in the same situation than from someone seen to be in a position of authority. Language students share the same experience in each classroom discussion. That being the case, students may be more receptive to feedback, especially critical feedback, from their fellow students than from the instructor (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Peer feedback is not only beneficial for the recipient of the feedback, it is also advantageous to the provider of the feedback. When language students are required to advise other students about how they are using the target language and how they can improve their use of it, they are

better able to take that same information and apply it to themselves (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). By becoming the advisor, students can further their own learning and output of the target language.

Using feedback to improve their use of English may be the next step for students to take ownership of their learning process. Once students are aware of how they are using the target language phrases, they have opportunities to take ownership of their English language learning. Ownership over the learning process will produce more autonomous language learners, which, research has shown, is more likely to produce accomplished language learners. Knowles (1975) stated that students who are proactive learners would learn more and remember it better than those who are reactive learners. Based on Knowles' observations, the autonomous learner is more likely to be invested in their learning and more likely to be successful in their language learning experience. Benson (2011) argues that it is the natural progression for language learners to take control of their learning. He reasons that if learners lack autonomy, they are capable of developing it. Furthermore, Benson (2011) emphasizes that autonomous language learning is more effective for the learner than dependent language learning. King (2011) recognizes the importance learner autonomy has in relation to language learning precisely because it allows the student to gain control of their language acquisition. It is reasoned that the more control a learner has over their learning, the more invested they will become in their growth as a language learner. For these reasons, peer assessment and feedback have the potential to greatly increase student learning through ownership of the learning process.

PROCEDURE

In all EDC lessons, students participate in a discussion prep activity before each discussion. Prep activities are typically done with a partner or in groups of three if the class has an odd number of students. The discussion prep activities allow students to practice using the target language phrases while also generating content they can use in the small group discussions. After the students have completed the discussion prep activities, they are placed in groups and given a partner-check sheet. The students write their name at the top of the check sheet and exchange it with a partner.

The partner-check sheets (see Appendix A for example) are divided into three categories: *Discussion Skills*, *Communication Skills*, and *After Discussion*. Under the discussion skills heading, the names of that lessons' discussion skill phrases are listed. For example, *asking for different viewpoints* and *giving different viewpoints*. The specific target language is not listed on the partner-check sheet. To the right of these are empty boxes where students are able to place a mark indicating that their partner uttered the corresponding phrase during the discussion. There are separate boxes for discussion one (D1) and discussion two (D2). Below the discussion skills section, the communication skills are listed: *active listening, checking understanding, paraphrasing,* and *clarification*. As described above, the students will put a mark in the corresponding boxes for D1 and D2. The students must place their marks on the partner-check sheets while the discussion is in progress. This is done for accuracy purposes.

Once the discussion has finished, the students will write two sentences in the *After Discussion 1* section of the check sheet. Research about feedback has demonstrated that feedback which provides specific details about how to improve is more effective than feedback which only indicates if something is correct or not (Shute, 2008). Two prompts are used to help students write the two sentences containing feedback to their partners: *You did a great job _____* and *You can try using _____ next time.* Once the sentences are completed, the students give their partners oral feedback about their partner's use of the target language phrases during the discussion. Finally, the partner-check sheets are returned to the owner to be used again for the same process in D2.

VARIATIONS

It is possible to create many variations of the partner-check sheets. The partner-check sheet can be altered to fit the students' ability levels in each class. For example, the number of discussion skills listed can be increased to make it more challenging for the speaker to use multiple discussion skills. Another variation is to use tally marks to indicate repeated use of that target language phrase.

To maximize improvement opportunities, peer feedback should describe ways for students to develop their language skills in a clear, constructive fashion (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). Despite encouraging my students to expand upon the written feedback they give to their partners, I felt that many students simply read their feedback sentences to their partner without providing further explanation or examples. Language learners may feel that their own language capabilities are insufficient to provide good feedback for their partners (Cheng & Warren, 2005). Adding other sentence starters to the cheek sheets will provide students more opportunities to give more varied or specific feedback. Some example sentence starters and helpful language may include:

- You used _____ very well. For example, you said _____.
- Other students responded well when you said _____.
- Asking _____really helped other students to share their ideas.
- You can try using _____ in the next discussion. It would help you to _____.
- If you _____ in the next discussion, other students will _____ your ideas better.

To be most effective, feedback must be simple and specific (Fluckiger et. al, 2010). The current version of the partner-check sheet does not allow any space for students to take notes. Creating a space to take notes may help students to provide better feedback. To be able to write down even one or two words may enable students to provide specific examples of their partner's utterances, which could improve the quality of their feedback.

Goal setting is yet another variation that can be incorporated into the partner-check sheets. Setting goals and taking steps to reach those goals are an important part of taking ownership of the learning process. Students who are able to use the information from assessments and feedback can see where their current output is in relation to the learning goals (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). To encourage goal setting, a space can be provided on the partner-check sheets for students to write goals to strive towards in the next discussion.

Some research has reported that peer feedback is unreliable. The accuracy of peer feedback activities can be vastly improved by minimizing the variables that interfere with clear results (Birjandi & Siyyari, 2006). When introducing partner-check sheets, it is absolutely critical to take the time to explain to the students how they are to use the check sheets and provide examples of what constitutes clear and constructive feedback. The variations mentioned above provide additional ways of realizing the full benefits and reliability of using partner-check sheets to provide peer feedback.

CONCLUSION

Based upon my in-class observations about student responses to this activity, I believe it successfully increased student awareness of their discussion and communication skill use during the two classroom discussions. Using the partner-check sheets enabled students to see specifically which target language phrases they were using well and which ones they could use better. This information was the most common type of peer feedback produced after the discussion. Students were then able to understand where they needed to put more effort in the next discussion.

It is difficult for me as the instructor to know if students took that information and used it

to increase their ownership of the learning process. By generally scanning the marks on the partner-check sheets after D2, I estimate approximately half of the students in my classes maintained or increased their use of the target language phrases from D1 to D2. This indicates that these students were increasing their use of the target language phrases as a response to the feedback after D1.

Some of the limitations of this activity are that it is a bit time consuming, it requires a higher cognitive load for the students during the discussion, it requires higher levels of student motivation to be effective, and the peer feedback can be too general to prove useful. Nilson (2003) reported that "superficial and unengaged" feedback is often sighted as a major weakness of student-generated feedback. The variations mentioned in the previous section are designed to increase the usefulness of student-generated feedback. However, student willingness to participate in the activity is a variable that is often beyond the instructor's control.

In order to gauge student opinions of the partner-check sheets, a questionnaire was distributed in the final lesson of the semester (Appendix B). It consisted of four questions using a four-point Likert scale with possible responses of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. A total of 60 students were surveyed. The questionnaire was written in English and translated into Japanese. Table 1 lists the questions and students responses.

Table 1. Student questionnaire results about partner-check sheets and peer feedback

Question	Agree/Disagree	Number of students
1. The partner-check sheets helped me to become aware of if I used or did not use the discussion and communication skills.	Strongly agree	38
	Agree	22
	Disagree	0
	Strongly disagree	0
2. Using the partner-check sheet helped me to become aware of if my partner used or did not use the discussion and communication skills.	Strongly agree	33
	Agree	25
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	0
3. Getting feedback from my partner after the discussion is more helpful than not getting feedback from my partner after the discussion.	Strongly agree	35
	Agree	23
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	0
4. Getting feedback from my teacher after the discussion is more helpful than getting feedback from my partner.	Strongly agree	28
	Agree	28
	Disagree	4
	Strongly disagree	0

Student responses to question one and question two confirm that this activity successfully raised student awareness of their use of the target language phrases. This suggests that partner-check sheets can be a very useful classroom activity to promote learning the target language phrases. However, it is not a replacement for teacher feedback. As indicated by the responses to question four, over 90% of the students felt that teacher feedback is more helpful than student feedback. Peer assessment and peer feedback are most effective when they are accompanied by teacher feedback (Patri, 2002). Therefore, peer feedback should be used to complement teacher

feedback rather than replace it.

The partner-check sheets are a useful and worthwhile classroom activity that will increase student participation in the feedback process. Through increased use of peer assessment and peer feedback, students will take greater ownership of their language learning opportunities. Based on the questionnaire results it is likely that students see the value in such an activity. Partner-check sheets are a versatile learning tool that can be adapted to every class level to increase language learning opportunities.

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APPENDIX A – Partner Check Sheet (Lesson 6)

Partner-Check Sheet (Lesson 6)   Your name: _____

Discussion Skills	D1	D2
Ask about Different Viewpoints		
Talk about Different Viewpoints		
Communication Skills		
Active Listening		
Checking Understanding		

After Discussion 1

You did a great job_____.
You can try using _____**next time.**

After Discussion 2

You did a great job _____.
You can try using _____**next time.**

APPENDIX B – Student Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions about using partner-check sheets in English Discussion Class.
パートナーチェックシートについての以下の質問に答えてください。

1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Agree	4 = Strongly Agree
全くそう思わない	そう思わない	そう思う	非常にそう思う

1. The partner-check sheets helped me to become aware of if I used or did not use the discussion and communication skills. 1. パートナーチェックシートのおかげで、自分がディスカッションスキルやコミュニケーションスキルを使ったかどうか気づいた	1	2	3	4
2. Using the partner-check sheet helped me to become aware of if my partner used or did not use the discussion and communication skills. 2. パートナーチェックシートのおかげで、パートナーがディスカッションスキルやコミュニケーションスキルを使ったかどうか気づいた	1	2	3	4
3. Getting feedback from my partner after the discussion is more helpful than not getting feedback from my partner after the discussion. 3. ディスカッションの後で、パートナーにフィードバックをもらう方が、もらわないより役に立つ	1	2	3	4
4. Getting feedback from my teacher after the discussion is more helpful than getting feedback from my partner after the discussion. 4.ディスカッションの後で、先生にフィードバックをもらう方が、パートナーにフィードバックをもらうより役に立つ	1	2	3	4