

# Increasing the Effectiveness of Post-Discussion Peer Feedback through Updated Partner-Check Sheets

*Jason Donald Arndt*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents an updated classroom-based activity in which students provide feedback to a partner about that partner's use of the target language after both students have participated in a small group discussion. The partner-check sheets in the original classroom activity led to an increase in student participation in the post-discussion feedback process. However, there was room to add personalized details to the student generated feedback. Personalized details refers to how the partner used the target language when speaking or asking a question. It may also include how other students in the group responded to specific language use. The action research process was utilized to guide the creation of an updated version of the partner-check sheets with the goal of increasing the number of personalized details and specific examples of partner language use in the post-discussion feedback sessions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a required course for all first year students at Rikkyo University. Students learn communication and discussion skill phrases, which they use to effectively communicate in English during two academic discussions in each class period (Hurling, 2012). Each discussion is followed by a formative feedback session which provides students opportunities to become aware of their correct/incorrect use the target language from that discussion. Formative feedback is important for providing students with information that will help them improve their target language acquisition (Shute, 2008).

These feedback sessions are primarily led by the class instructor. However, this creates a very teacher-centered environment in which the students are only passively receiving information about a communication process that should be interactive. By following the EDC principles of student-centered lessons and creating collaborative learning opportunities (Hurling, 2012), I believed it necessary to incorporate the students directly into the formative feedback process. In order to do this, an activity was created where the students were directly involved in the feedback process. Students who are active participants in the learning process are better equipped to improve their own learning (Black & William, 1998).

One way students can take ownership of the learning process is by monitoring a partner's target language use during the classroom discussions and providing feedback to that partner in a post-discussion feedback session. Research has demonstrated that students positively view peer assessment as a valuable learning tool (De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2012). Peer feedback is advantageous for both the provider of the feedback and the recipient. Peer assessment and peer feedback provide valuable opportunities for students to see the gap between their current output and the learning goals (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). In addition, students who provide advice to their classmates about how to improve their target language use are better able to apply that same information to themselves (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

To better equip students for providing peer-feedback, I designed and implemented partner-check sheets as my professional development project (PD project) for the 2019-2020 academic year. Those partner-check sheets proved to be a good starting point for getting students directly involved in the feedback process. In the resulting paper (Arndt, 2019), I suggested possible variations for the partner-check sheets to be considered based on the class needs and the students'

ability levels. However, there were issues raised in Arndt (2019) with the student-generated feedback.

I felt the students could do more to personalize their feedback by providing details and examples of their partners' utterances. There was a perceived gap between the desired amount of detailed personalization of the feedback and the amount of detailed personalization the students were actually producing in the post-discussion feedback sessions. An action research plan was suggested to work through these issues and then document the effects those changes had on the amount of detail in the student feedback. By employing the action research process, the next step, "intervention through action," was required to address this feedback issue (Burns, 2005). The action research process led me to make alterations to the original versions of the partner-check sheets, introduce the updated partner-check sheets to a new group of students, and document the impact those changes had on the amount of details and examples of the student generated peer feedback in accordance to the activity's directions. Before describing the results of the updated partner-check sheets, the original project and the efficacy of the updates on the detail of student feedback will be reviewed.

## PROCEDURE

The first versions of the partner-check sheets that I created and provided to the students were used during the discussions and in the two post-discussion feedback sessions (Appendix A). The partner-check sheets were divided into two parts. The top half of the paper contained a small table in which the target language types were listed (discussion skill phrases and communication skill phrases). To the right of these phrases were separate boxes for the first discussion (D1) and the second discussion (D2). In these empty boxes each student would place a mark corresponding to the target language phrase their partner uttered during the discussion. This marking process was to be done during the discussion. The bottom half of the paper contained prompts which were intended to help students write two sentences containing feedback about their partner's performance during the discussion: *You did a great job \_\_\_\_\_* and *You can try using \_\_\_\_\_ next time*. The intention of this marking process was to provide a starting point for students to give feedback to their partners. The teacher verbally instructed the students to use these writing prompts as a starting point for giving feedback to their partners. After the discussion finished, each student was to use the markings, the prompts, and any examples from their partner's utterances to give oral feedback in a post-discussion feedback session. The students were instructed to not simply read the prompts, but to talk to their partners about what happened in the discussion by giving an example of an utterance or a question asked, thus personalizing the partner feedback.

Research has indicated that feedback which provides specific details about how to improve is more effective than feedback which only indicates if something is correct or incorrect (Shute, 2008). At its best, peer feedback should provide clear indications for how students can improve their language skills (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002). For these reasons, the students were instructed to tell their partners how they used the target language phrases based upon the marking done on the partner-check sheets during the discussions. In addition to target language phrase use, the students were encouraged to give feedback on any other aspect of their partner's contribution to the discussion. For example, did the partner ask helpful questions to other students? Once each student had the opportunity to orally provide feedback to their partner, the partner-check sheets were returned to the owner to be used again for the same process after D2. The partner-check sheets were used in this manner for several class sessions.

My conclusions about the use of the partner-check sheets (Arndt, 2019) were they successfully enabled students to see which type of target language phrases they were using well and which ones they could use better. This was evident from the markings made during the

discussions by the partner and from information gathered in a student questionnaire regarding this project (Arndt, 2019). Despite the significant increase in student participation in the feedback process, I felt there was room for improvement in feedback being generated.

## **DISCUSSION**

It has been reported that a major weakness of student generated feedback is it can be vague and superficial (Nilson, 2003). I found this to be true based on my observations of the post-discussion feedback sessions. Despite my oral instructions, the students routinely read the feedback prompts directly to their partners without giving further details, descriptions, or examples. The information the students were often sharing was available in the marked boxes on the top half of the partner-check sheets. The students did not give supplemental details to personalize the feedback (Arndt, 2019).

Language learners have a tendency to feel that their ability to use the target language is insufficient to provide useful feedback to their partners (Cheng & Warren, 2005). I envisioned the original partner-check sheets as something that would provide scaffolding to help students give examples and personalize the peer feedback. This was not accomplished as hoped. I felt increasing the amount of scaffolding on the partner-check sheets would help students provide more detailed feedback. To improve the partner-check sheets, I incorporated three suggestions from Arndt (2019) to make an updated partner-check sheet (Appendix B). One of these improvements was to increase the number of feedback prompts from two prompts to five. This was done to provide prompts that could fit a variety of possible partner utterances. Another change was to provide blank space for students to take notes of their partners' utterances. Examples of partner speech would prove very useful to personalize the oral feedback. A third change to the original partner-check sheet was the addition of a prompt for students to set a D2 goal for themselves. Goal setting is an active way of striving to bridge those performance gaps and improve as language learners.

### **Implementation of action research**

Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) as cited in Burns (2005) organized the concept of action research into a process with four distinct elements: plan, action, observation, & reflection. These four elements guided this PD project as follows:

**Plan:** The original version of the partner-check sheets created greater student involvement in the feedback process, but the level of detail of the feedback was lower than desired. The three variations recommended in Arndt (2019) were incorporated into an updated version of the partner-check sheet to provide more scaffolding for the students to use when giving feedback to their partners and preparing for D2. The additional scaffolding was to increase the personalization of the peer feedback.

**Action:** The updated version of the partner-check sheets were introduced in the 2019 Fall semester from Lesson 6 onwards. Prior to Lesson 6, students used self-check sheets to become comfortable with the concepts of self-monitoring their output and checking the boxes for each utterance during the discussions.

**Observation:** The students' use of the updated partner-check sheets was observed and critically compared with student use of the original versions of the partner-check sheets. Each class seemed to have their own level of success using the updated check sheets. This judgement was based on the average ability level of the students in each class and the classes' willingness to actively participate in the post-discussion feedback sessions. This second factor will be discussed later in this paper.

**Reflection:** This final step in the action research process provided the opportunity to consider what was going according to plan and what was not. The detail of the feedback generated

in the post-discussion feedback sessions continued to be lower than desired. The increased scaffolding on the updated partner-check sheets was not producing the level of detailed feedback that was desired. Even with minor alterations to the check sheets after two class periods, the students continued to produce feedback that was at a lower level of detail than desired. Reflection about the student feedback being generated using the updated partner-check sheets, led to new conclusions about the continued absence of detail.

### Results of alterations

The writing prompts were to help students organize their thoughts before orally providing feedback to their partners. The five prompts for post-discussion feedback were intended to give the students options that would best fit their partner's utterances. For example, one prompt referenced a question that was asked, while another prompt referenced student responses to a comment that was made. The students were told they were not required to use all five prompts, but to only select one or two that were appropriate based on their partner's utterances from that discussion. These instructions were often not heeded. The result was many of the students feverishly wrote to fill in all five of the sentence prompts. This was time consuming and not always appropriate for what each student said.

#### Five Sentence Prompts

- You used \_\_\_\_ very well. For example, you said \_\_\_\_\_.
- Other students responded well when you said \_\_\_\_\_.
- You asked \_\_\_\_\_. It really helped other students to share their ideas.
- Try using \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. It would help to \_\_\_\_\_.
- Use \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. Other students will \_\_\_\_\_ your ideas better.

After observing this behavior repeated over multiple class periods, I decided it was necessary to scale back the prompts from five to the original two prompts. One prompt was for something the student had done well and one prompt was for an area needing improvement. This proved more successful in terms of the time required to complete the prompt on paper and the specificity of the information presented to the partner during the feedback session. However, another unexpected problem occurred when students spent an unnecessarily long amount of time writing feedback on the prompts before speaking to their partners. This was especially true in higher level classes. While it was a wonderful example of their language skills, it was problematic because the time students spent writing reduced possible talking time, which was the whole point of the activity. When this behavior was observed, I would often remind the students they only needed to write enough to help remind themselves what they should tell their partner in the peer feedback session.

#### Two Sentence Prompts

- You used/asked \_\_\_\_\_ well. This helped \_\_\_\_\_.
- You can try \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. It would help \_\_\_\_\_.

The note-taking space provided opportunities to record examples of partner utterances. Students were advised to write down, in English or Japanese, any word or phrase that would help them personalize their feedback. It was my hope that the note-taking space would provide opportunities to record examples of their partner's utterances to personalize the feedback. Some students did use the note-taking space, but this was the exception, not the norm. In the majority

of classes, a general glance at the partner-check sheets during the two discussions revealed that the vast majority of students did not use the open space to take notes as recommended. Unfortunately, many students simply read what was written on the page without further elaboration and returned it to their partner. This minimal participation in the feedback sessions is what I have identified as a major weakness of peer feedback process.

The goal-setting prompt was also minimally used. Students would often choose the one phrase they had not used in D1 and write it down as their goal to use that phrase in D2. It was not common for students to make the goal more personal, such as asking more questions. The time constraints at the end of the class period often meant we did not have sufficient time to verify whether or not students had met their goal.

In my previous paper (Arndt, 2019), I concluded that the lack of scaffolding on the partner-check sheets prevented the majority of the students from providing more detailed feedback to their partners. This led me to make the additions to the partner-check sheets that I have described above in the hopes that the feedback would be more personalized with examples and detailed information. Overall, the updates made to the partner-check sheets did not accomplish this. After several weeks of using the updated version of the partner-check sheets in class, I now believe that two previously unaddressed factors contributed to the lack of detailed feedback provided during the post-discussion feedback sessions: 1) class willingness to communicate 2) specialized training on how to provide effective peer feedback.

## **VARIATIONS**

The strength of the discussions in EDC classes is largely a product of the students' willingness to communicate with each other. MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod (2001) defined willingness to communicate "as the intention to initiate communication, given a choice." Some classes have a better class chemistry and willingness among the students to participate in activities. This willingness to communicate is more important than individual ability level as a means of using the target language to engage in any given classroom activity. For example, an EDC level 3 class (Combined listening and reading TOEIC score 280-479) with a high willingness to communicate will likely have a more effective peer feedback session than an EDC level 1 class (TOEIC score 680 or above) with a low willingness to communicate.

It is commonly held that people prefer communicating with friends more than acquaintances. Anxiety levels will be lower and self-confidence will be higher when friends speak to each other compared to acquaintances (MacIntyre et al., 2001). Considering this, in a cohesive group of students, the members of the group want to contribute to that groups' success in the classroom activities (Dörnyei, 1994). It would follow then that classes in which the students are friends or highly friendly are going to achieve higher gains when using the target language than classes which do not have such a willingness to share and communicate.

As a classroom activity which requires a high amount of interpersonal communication, peer feedback is best suited to classes which demonstrate a high willingness to communicate and good rapport among the class members. Peer feedback is not a one-size-fits-all activity. This form of feedback is not well suited for classes with low willingness to communicate and may further undermine student enthusiasm for subsequent classroom activities. Teachers must judge each class individually and decide if the classes' overall willingness to communicate is high enough to implement peer feedback as a suitable activity.

Once the instructor has established that a class has good chemistry with a high willingness to communicate, that class would be well suited to use peer feedback during the post-discussion feedback sessions. Through two semesters of using the partner-check sheets as an in-class activity, it has become evident that the students require specific training in order to effectively provide peer

feedback. The differences between generalized classroom feedback and detailed partner feedback must be demonstrated to the students. Specific examples of what constitutes detailed feedback and how to create such feedback must be demonstrated, taught, and practiced before effective, detailed partner feedback can be produced by the students. Such training would take valuable classroom time, which is another factor to consider when deciding to use peer feedback as a classroom learning activity.

In an effort to train students about what constitutes detailed and example filled peer feedback, instructors must consider the most direct and time efficient ways to do this. As of the writing of this paper, these suggestions are only speculative and have not been tried or tested in a classroom setting. One recommendation would be showing videos in the classroom, in which the target language is used to demonstrate one person giving specific, detailed peer feedback to another person in a post-discussion feedback session (Freeman, 1995). Another recommendation is allowing students to practice using the partner-check sheets and giving feedback to a partner. After this, the instructor would give feedback about the student generated peer feedback. In Patri (2002) students spent several hours of class time over a few weeks' worth of class periods in peer assessment training. Such training was done to establish assessment criteria, how to apply such criteria to student performances, and to give students time to practice assessing each other.

While such extensive training would be ideal, it would not be possible in the time constraints of the current EDC lesson format. Each teacher must consider the time and resources at their disposal when choosing how to train their students. In cases of limited time or resources, one solution would be to distribute written examples of detailed vs. non-specific feedback as a guideline for students to follow. Another possibility would be for the instructor to self-record short videos and show them to the class in order to demonstrate the desired types of feedback the teacher would like the students to produce.

## CONCLUSION

Despite all of these challenges, there are still several benefits of employing peer feedback. One such benefit is students will be able to experience different approaches to giving feedback other than instructor led feedback. Such focus on the target language skills may have the added benefit of creating deeper internalization of those same language skills by the assessor (Topping, 1998). Furthermore, teacher workloads may be reduced by passing some of the assessment responsibilities to the students, thus allowing the teacher to focus on other aspects of the class (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

Peer feedback increases student participation in the overall feedback process and encourages student ownership in the language learning process. Therefore, the partner-check sheets are a worthwhile classroom activity under the right circumstances. First and foremost, the class must naturally have a high willingness to communicate. Second, the time and resources must be available to train the students to provide example filled, detail rich, personalized feedback. Such extra training will ensure the students have the ability to provide feedback that will enhance the learning experience for all involved. Furthermore, the constraints of class time and curriculum must be considered to ensure such an activity is feasible. If these conditions are met, partner-check sheets and peer feedback are versatile learning tools that can increase language learning opportunities for students of all ability levels.

## REFERENCES

- Arndt, J (2019). Increasing student participation in post-discussion feedback using partner-check sheets and peer feedback. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 7, 95-102.

- Black, P., & William, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(2), 139-148.
- Burns, A. (2005). Action research: an evolving paradigm? *Language Teaching* 38, 57-74. doi:10.1017/S0261444805002661
- Chang, W. & Warren, M. (2005). Peer assessment of language proficiency. *Language Testing*, 22(1) 93-121.
- Chappuis, S. & Stiggins, R. (2002). Classroom assessment for learning. *Educational Leadership*, 60(1), 40-43.
- De Grez, L., Valcke, M., & Roozen, I. (2012). How effective are self- and peer assessment of oral presentation skills compared with teachers' assessment? *Active Learning in High Education*, 13(2), 129-142.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and Motivating in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(3), 273-284.
- Freeman, M. (1995). Peer assessment by groups of group work. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 20, 289-299.
- Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004). Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 1, 3-31.
- Hurling, S. (2012). Introduction to EDC. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 1, 1.2-1.10.
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (Eds.) (1988). *The action research planner* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- MacIntyre, P., Baker, S., Clément, R., & Conrad, S. (2001). Willingness to communicate, social support, and language-learning orientations of immersion students. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 23(3), 369-388. doi.org/10.1017/S0272263101003035.
- Nicol, D.J., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2) 199-218.
- Nilson, L.B. (2003). Improving student peer feedback. *College Teaching*, 51(1), 34-38.
- Patri, M. (2002). The influence of peer feedback on self- and peer-assessment of oral skills. *Language Testing*, 19(2), 109-131.
- Shute, V. (2008). Focus on Formative Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(1), 153-189. doi: 10.3102/0034654307313795.
- Topping, K. (1998). Peer assessment between students in colleges and universities. *Review of Educational Research*, 68(3), 249-276.

## APPENDIX A - The Original Partner-Check Sheet

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 (Updated Partner-Check Sheet)

Partner-Check Sheet (Lesson 7)

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Part 1: In Discussion 1

Discussion Skills	D1	D2
Asking about Information		
Giving Information		
Communication Skills		
Reactions		
Checking Understanding		
Paraphrasing		

Use the space below to take notes during the discussion. Use your notes to give feedback to your partner after the discussion.

D1	D2
----	----

### Part 2: After Discussion 1

Partner feedback: Use the phrases below to give your partner feedback about their use of the discussion skills and communication skills during the discussion.

- You used \_\_\_\_\_ very well. For example, you said \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Other students responded well when you said \_\_\_\_\_.
  - You asked \_\_\_\_\_. It really helped other students to share their ideas.
  - Try using \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. It would help you to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Use \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. Other students will \_\_\_\_\_ your ideas better.
- \*\*\*Return the partner-check sheet after giving feedback \*\*\*

### Part 3: Set a goal

My Discussion 2 goal is: \_\_\_\_\_.

### Part 4: After Discussion 2

Partner feedback: Use the phrases below to give your partner feedback about their use of the discussion skills and communication skills during the discussion.

- You used \_\_\_\_\_ very well. For example, you said \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Other students responded well when you said \_\_\_\_\_.
  - You asked \_\_\_\_\_. It really helped other students to share their ideas.
  - Try using \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. It would help you to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Use \_\_\_\_\_ in the next discussion. Other students will \_\_\_\_\_ your ideas better.
- \*\*\*Return the partner-check sheet after giving feedback \*\*

### Part 5: After Discussion 2

I met my discussion 2 goal.

I did not meet my discussion 2 goal.