The Value of Peer Feedback in English Discussion Classes

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Peer feedback is a student-centered activity in which learners apply set criteria to assess peers' performance and provide feedback. As a way of enhancing learner autonomy, its benefits have been recognized from theoretical and pedagogical perspectives. Unlike studies on peer assessment in writing classes (Braine, 2003; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), it was in recent decades that peer feedback in speaking classes started drawing attention. This study looks at peer feedback in discussion classes, investigating its reliability, quality, and students' perceptions of peer feedback. The data were collected from self-reported questionnaires, check sheets, and recordings of student interactions in the classroom. The findings of this study reveal that overall attitudes to peer feedback were positive and became even more so in the post-questionnaire and that although its quality varied individually, the peer feedback was fairly reliable, showing a certain degree of accuracy when compared to teacher feedback.

　ピアフィードバックとは、一定の基準に基づき、相手を評価し助言を与えるという学生主体の活動である。自立的学習を促す手段として、その効果は理論的、教育学的観点からも認識されている。ライティング授業でのピアフィードバック活動の研究（Braine, 2003; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009）に対し、スピーキングに特化した報告はまだ少数ない。英語ディスカッション授業でのピア活動に着目した本研究は、アンケート、授業内で使用したチェックシート、フィードバックのやり取りの録音を集め、フィードバックの信頼性と質を検証し、学生の意識調査も行った。その結果、ピア活動実施当初より好意的であった学生の反応は、活動を繰り返すことでより一層強まり、またピアフィードバックの質において個人差はあるものの、その信頼性と正確性は比較的高いことが明らかになった。

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT, which is also known as assessment for learning, is an ongoing and interactive process that demands an active role for teachers and students (Brown, 2004). One way of involving students in this kind of assessment is through peer feedback in which students apply set criteria to the work of their peers in order to assess and provide feedback. The use of peer assessment in speaking classes has been underresearched, compared to its use in writing classes (Braine, 2003; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). This study investigates peer feedback in discussion classes, focusing on students' perceptions and its reliability and quality.

Values of Peer Feedback

One theoretical framework commonly used for collaborative work in classroom contexts is a social constructivist approach. This approach is based on Vygotsky's (1978/1930s, cited in She-

hadeh, 2011) claims that human mental activities are mediated and that children develop cognitively and linguistically in collaboration with more capable members of society. It is viewed that learning occurs through face-to-face interaction and shared processes. In foreign language settings, peer feedback has also been understood to provide learners with opportunities to use language in a meaningful way (Shehadeh, 2011).

Other theoretical grounds come from the theory of metacognition. Metacognitive awareness is defined as "learners' awareness of their knowledge, of the task, and their thinking/learning strategies" (Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011, p. 97) and is considered to play an essential role in learning. By analyzing their peers' work, students are expected to develop a better understanding of the criteria and consequently to reflect on their own performance (De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2012; Patri, 2002). For example, Lundstrom and Baker (2009) conducted a study to determine which was more beneficial in improving student writing, giving or receiving feedback. They concluded that students who learned how to review others' writing made more significant gains in their own writing than the receivers. The findings of the study support the idea that the abilities students learn when reviewing peer texts are transferable and enable them to critically self-evaluate their own performance.

Additionally, from a pedagogical perspective, multiple benefits of peer feedback have been reported in the literature. Peer assessment can increase student-student interaction time (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), promote learner autonomy (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2012), and even motivate students to perform better (Kurt & Atay, 2007). Some learners may feel less anxious and more confident when receiving feedback from peers more than from the teacher (McDonough, 2004). Moreover, sharing responsibilities for assessment with learners can reduce teacher workload (Topping, 2009), which—in addition to the educational benefits above—is worth considering since teachers are often overloaded.

Two Challenges That Peer Feedback Faces

Considering these significant benefits, peer feedback can be regarded as a complement to teacher feedback. This does not mean peer feedback is free from challenges. As Nilson (2003) noted, there are mainly two concerns with peer feedback, alleviating students' anxiety and ensuring reliability.

Mitigating Students' Anxiety

Previous studies conducted in different contexts indicate that in general, students respond positively to peer feedback while some remain skeptical (Braine, 2003; Cheng & Warren, 1997; De Grez et al., 2012). Cheng and Warren's (1997) study, conducted in a university in Hong Kong, is worth reviewing here because their primary focus was to investigate students' attitudes toward peer assessment by administering a pre- and post-questionnaire. Fifty-two 1st-year Chinese students, enrolled in a course of English for Academic Purposes, conducted peer assessment on various English skills such as group presentations.

The results of the questionnaires revealed that the most common trend was a positive shift in students' attitudes, which suggests that "implementation of peer feedback alone goes some way toward dispelling students' initial reservations" (p. 237). On the pre-questionnaire, only 21.2% of the participants answered that they would feel comfortable in making peer assessments, but that number increased to 48.1 % in the post-questionnaire. However, the post-test did show that some students switched from being positive, or unsure, to negative for various reasons. Limited English proficiency made some students feel unqualified to assess their peers' work while others felt compelled to award a higher score to those with whom they were friendlier. Lack of adequate training prior to the peer feedback activities made some students doubt the objectivity of their peers' assessment.

Ensuring Reliability

Some researchers (De Grez et al., 2012; Patri, 2002; H. Saito, 2008) believe that training is vital to guarantee the benefits that peer assessment may bring to the classroom and so focus their research targets on exploring training effects on rating or commenting. One way of analyzing the reliability of peer feedback is calculating an agreement rate between peer and teacher assessment as seen in Patri (2002), H. Saito (2008), and De Grez et al. (2012), even though the findings of the three studies, which investigated peer assessment for oral presentation skills, were different. In Patri's (2002) study, students received a 2-hour training session and were able to make peer evaluations that were comparable to those of the teacher. De Grez et al. (2012) gave students formal instructions on presentation skills and the use of an evaluation rubric. Despite a positive relationship between teacher and student assessment, they concluded that peers and teachers interpreted the criteria differently. H. Saito (2008) compared a control group to a treatment group with an additional 40-minute training session. He found that although there were not statistically significant differences between the two groups, students in the treatment group referred to more skills of peer performance in their feedback.

The Focus of the Present Study

As the findings of Cheng and Warren's (1997) study show, the two challenges are closely linked; students' negative attitudes toward peer assessment can be improved if they see it as a reliable tool. However, the criteria used in all four studies (Cheng & Warren, 1997; De Grez et al., 2012; Patri, 2002; H. Saito, 2008) were complicated. For example, the assessment rubric for oral presentations in Patri's study included six categories, each of which was further divided into subcategories. It could be argued that using less complicated criteria in peer feedback would result in different student reactions and agreement rates. Hence, the present study looks at peer feedback that was conducted with easy-to-use criteria in discussion classes and reports students' attitudes toward it while examining the peer feedback's reliability.

Moreover, this study is distinguished from the earlier four studies in that it investigated student feedback qualitatively because not only the statistical reliability of peer feedback, but also its contents are worth researching. Black and William (1998, cited in Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002) emphasized the importance of feedback being specific. Specific feedback—as opposed to abstract feedback such as "You did a good job!"—should pinpoint learners' strengths and weaknesses. For example, in discussion classes, specific feedback says, "You discussed both advantages and disadvantages of living in the countryside. For example, you talked about your hometown in Akita, explaining how friendly people are there. Good job using today's function, sharing experiences. But don't forget to agree and disagree more!" Contextualizing feedback with examples is of great importance because "feedback has no effect in a vacuum: to be powerful in its effect, there must be a learning context" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82).

The aim of this study was to investigate as follows:

1. What are university students' perceptions about peer feedback in discussion classes?

2. How statistically different is student rating from teaching rating?

3. Can student feedback be specific?

To answer these research questions, data were collected in three ways: pre- and post-questionnaires, peer review check sheets, and recordings of student-student interactions in the classroom.

Method

Participants

Participants were 46 first-year university students enrolled in an English discussion course during the spring semester of 2011. The class was conducted on a small scale with a maximum of nine students and met once a week for 90 minutes over the course of 14 weeks. Students first learned useful functions for conducting discussions, such as giving opinions, reasons, and examples, and then participated in discussions on various topics using the phrases they learned. Since the participants were predominantly accustomed to teacher-centered instruction in their previous learning experiences, the first 5 weeks of the course were conducted with more guidance from the teacher. During this time, students learned the basic skills of English discussion and how to work in a student-centered classroom. Peer feedback was introduced in week 6.

Classroom Procedure

Peer feedback was conducted in weeks 6, 8, 11, and 12. All the participants worked in pairs or groups of three if the class had an odd number of students. They were asked to monitor their peers while participating in a 10-minute group discussion by putting ticks on a check sheet (see Appendix A) if they heard their partners using target phrases. They were also instructed to give feedback on their partner's ideas and use of functions. After the first round, students switched roles and repeated the same procedure. The whole activity took from 25 to 30 minutes of class time.

Results

Research Question One

Questionnaires were administered in weeks 6 and 12 to examine how students' views on peer feedback changed before and after

the peer feedback activities. Two students who were absent in week 12 answered the post-questionnaire in the following week and 46 pre- and post-questionnaires were collected. The only difference between the pre- and post-questionnaire was that statement 5 (S5) appeared only in the post-questionnaire. Each statement was provided with a 4-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. (See Appendix B for an English translation of the questionnaire administered in week 12).

Table 1 shows the mean scores, as well as the points given by individual participants, for six statements in the questionnaires, which are listed below the table. As can be seen in S1 and S2, before the peer feedback activities, students generally responded favorably toward peer feedback and their attitudes became even more positive in week 12. S3 and S6 were designed to explore their attitudes regarding the anxiety of giving and receiving feedback. Students initially felt less comfortable in giving feedback ($m = 2.96$) than receiving feedback ($m = 3.28$). The mean scores for giving and receiving feedback both gained a statistically significant increase ($m = 3.37$, $m = 3.52$) according to the results of paired t-tests: $t(45) = -4.29$, $p < .05$. d = .63 and $t(45) = -2.54$, $p < .05$. d = .37, respectively.

S1: I think peer feedback is a useful way of learning.

S2: I think I can learn a lot from my peers.

S3: I feel comfortable in giving peer feedback.

S4: I can give helpful advice to my peers.

S5: I think my skill of giving feedback has improved since the first time I did it.

S6: I feel comfortable receiving peer feedback.

In response to S5, 42 students (91.3%) marked either *agree* or *strongly agree*. This item allowed students to give reasons for

Table 1. Mean Scores and Individual Scores for Statements 1-6 (*N* = 46)

	S1		S2		S3		S4		S5		S6	
Week	W6	W12	W6	W12	W6	W12	W6	W12	W6	W12	W6	W12
Mean scores	3.20	3.37	3.26	3.35	2.96	3.37	3.11	3.20	n/a	3.04	3.28	3.52
Strongly Agree	9	17	12	16	8	19	7	13	n/a	6	16	24
Agree	37	29	34	30	29	25	37	30	n/a	36	28	22
Disagree	0	0	0	0	8	2	2	2	n/a	4	1	0
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	n/a	0	1	0

Note. A 4-point scale was used (4 = Strongly agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly disagree).

their answers in Japanese and their comments were translated by the researcher.

One of the reasons given for self-reported improvement in feedback, which was referred to in eight comments, was familiarity. By repeating peer feedback four times and working with different students, they became familiar with not only the task but also their peers. For instance, one student wrote in the questionnaire, "I have become used to giving feedback by practicing again and again and now I feel it is relatively easy to give feedback. This is maybe because I get along with everyone in this class."

Awareness of the criteria, which was hypothesized from the metacognitive perspective, also emerged as another category to explain improved skill in giving feedback. One student said, "I remember the phrases so it gets easier to check them. Also I know which point to give feedback on." An example of the transfer of skills that learners had acquired from peer feedback to improvement of their own performance was observed during the feedback session. A male student, who paired up with a female student, said, "I said to you, 'Ask follow-up questions!' so I felt I had to ask follow-up questions and I did." Thirdly, their feedback per se became more contextualized with examples and more practical with concrete advice. This point will be examined in more detail in answering research question three.

Research Question Two

This section looks at how statistically different peer rating is from teacher rating. Simple yes/no check sheets, where students ticked boxes for their peers, were used during the four peer feedback sessions. The basic format of the sheets was the same each time, but target functions were accumulated as the semester proceeded. Appendix A shows a check sheet used in week 12, which included six functions and three communication skills. At the bottom of the chart, some phrases were provided to help students construct their feedback based on ideas, things to keep doing, and things to do more. At the end of each session, the sheets were collected but only 44 week 12 sheets were analyzed for this study—two of the participants were absent that week. The teacher kept a check sheet of her own for each student during the discussions and this was regarded as teacher rating.

The average agreement rate for each student ($n = 44$) between peer and teacher rating, calculated by dividing the number of peer ticks by those of the teacher, was 0.83. A statistical analysis was also conducted to see the internal consistency estimates of reliability. The mean of student rating was 5.11, which was slightly lower than the mean teacher rating ($m = 5.75$). However, the value for coefficient alpha was .86, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Research Question Three

Now that the question of the reliability of peer feedback has been answered, the focus shifts to the quality of peer feedback. For this analysis, student-student interactions during the peer feedback sessions were audio-taped by putting two IC recorders on the tables. Although there were constraints on capturing all the simultaneous interactions clearly, it was expected that several examples from the recorded data could provide insights into actual peer feedback.

The extracts below illustrate different degrees of specificity. Phrases in bold were already written on the sheet and examples of ideas and function phrases are underlined for this analysis.

A. **I enjoyed your discussion because** I can hear about some part-time job story. For example, your tutor work's income is so good. **You did a good job because** you used follow-up questions and said "Can I say something?" so it's good thing.

B. **I enjoyed your discussion because** your ideas were clear so I hear, I understand. **You did a good job because** you asked a follow-up question. For example, you asked Kaori, "Why did you choose this?"

C. **I enjoyed your discussion because** good discussion. For example, you used "for example" "Can I start?" and so on. **You did a good job** of these three functions.

Extract A is the most specific; a student gave feedback on the content by giving an example of her peer's part-time job and on the use of functions by specifying the phrase her partner used. Although some students, as represented in Extract A, were able to give feedback whose quality was almost equivalent to that of teacher feedback, there were a few students who found it challenging to give examples, as indicated in Extract C. This student struggled to complete the first sentence probably because he did not remember ideas discussed or could not articulate them sufficiently. Extract B lies somewhere between A and C. In this case, the student was able to pinpoint his partner's strengths by referring to a follow-up question she asked, but failed to fully develop his reason why he enjoyed the discussion due to a lack of concrete feedback on the ideas.

Although the three excerpts above are only a part of the data from the recordings (see Y. Saito, 2013 for more examples), the degree of specificity in peer feedback seems to vary, depending not so much on English proficiency, but on individual differences: even within the same class, to which students were allocated based on their English scores on a placement test, the quality of student feedback varied from one student to another.

Discussion

Overall, the students' initial take on peer feedback seemed to already be positive and these favorable perceptions were reinforced after the repeated peer feedback activities. Unlike what Cheng and Warren (1997) found, a noticeable shift in their attitudes from positive to negative was not observed in the present study. One of the significant benefits of peer feedback, metacognitive awareness, seems to have been raised as can be seen by some participants' comments in the questionnaires. Furthermore, the recordings of student-student interactions captured one example of skills acquired through peer feedback being transferred to reflect their own performance. This is in

parallel with the finding of Lundstrom and Bakers' (2009) study in which students who learned how to review peers' work benefited more than those who received peer feedback.

One of the challenges peer feedback faces is students' anxiety, especially related to giving and receiving feedback. As shown in earlier studies, some students might be concerned about their inexperience in evaluating, feel uncomfortable criticizing others' performance, or be afraid of losing face (Braine, 2003; Cheng & Warren, 1997). However, in this study, 42 out of the 46 participants indicated on the pre-test that they felt comfortable in giving peer feedback and all 46 participants responded positively in week 12. These numbers were much higher than those found in Cheng and Warren (1997). Regarding the anxiety of receiving peer feedback, a similar pattern emerged. Initially, 44 students answered they would feel comfortable in receiving feedback and this number also improved to 100% in week 12.

There are some reasons why the students' reactions were much more positive than those reported by Cheng and Warren (1997). The assessment criteria used in the current study was straightforward and easy-to adopt; the students were simply asked to do yes/no checking, not to give scores to their peers, which could explain an increase in students' comfort level. Additionally, the nature of this class—a small class size with many opportunities to exchange opinions on various topics in pairs and groups—contributed to a learning environment that could help students feel comfortable in giving and receiving peer feedback.

Although specific training was not provided in this study, a relatively high agreement rate between student and teacher rating was found and this is consistent with the findings of H. Saito's (2008) study that instructions on presentation skills were sufficient enough to achieve a certain level of correlation between the instructors and students.

The qualitative analysis of student feedback showed a different picture. All the students were instructed to give feedback on three points—the ideas discussed, things peers did well, and things peers should do more—and to provide concrete examples. This instruction, however, did not guarantee equally valuable feedback from every participant. Some students were able to provide feedback that was as specific as teacher feedback while others struggled to remember or verbalize examples of ideas or function phrases used in the discussions.

Although the degree of specificity varied individually, the differences in the quality of student feedback were not considerable enough to offset the value of peer feedback as seen in the high correlation between peer rating and teacher rating.

Conclusion

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution due to some methodological limitations. One limitation is the social desirability bias of questionnaires (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). The participants of this study were reminded that their answers on the questionnaire were solely for a research purpose, yet some of them might have tried to posit themselves in a good light and chose answers which were favorable to peer feedback. Another limitation is that this study did not demonstrate the changes in their feedback. The number of functions listed in the check sheets increased as students learned more function phrases, which made it difficult to compare the reliability of peer feedback during the 4 weeks. Similarly, with no pre-test to check the quality of feedback at the beginning, this study did not fully address the issue regarding what kinds of changes occurred in the student feedback. Additional research, comparing student feedback in weeks 6 and 12 using discourse analysis, for example, might clarify this point.

In spite of these limitations, this study reveals important results about the under-explored role of peer feedback in speaking

classes. One finding is that students favorably perceived peer feedback and their perceptions were reinforced as they repeatedly experienced this activity. The other important finding is that regardless of the differences in the degree of specificity, peer feedback was fairly reliable, showing a certain degree of accuracy measured against teacher feedback. Therefore, as a complement to conventional teacher-centered feedback, peer feedback can provide students with meaningful learning opportunities.

This is an extended version of a paper that appeared in *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion* in 2013.

Bio Data

Yukie Saito has been with Rikkyo University since 2010, teaching 1st-year English discussion and presentation classes. She is currently working on her PhD at Temple University. Her research interests include autonomous learning, language policy, teacher beliefs, and identity issues in multicultural contexts. <yukiesaito@rikkyo.ac.jp>

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Appendix A
Peer Feedback Sheet Used in Week 12

Functions	Used?	Discussion 1	Discussion 2
Giving opinions	In my opinion, … / What do you think?		
Giving reasons	One reason is … / Can you tell me why?		
Giving examples	One example is … / For example?		
Joining a discussion	Can I start? / Can I add something?		
Connecting ideas	As [you/name] said, …		
Sharing experiences	When I was in high school, …		
Checking understand-ing	Do you follow me?		
Agreeing/ Disagreeing	I agree with you. / I'm not sure I agree.		
Asking follow-up questions	Where…? / What …? / Do you …?		

Please give your peer feedback on ideas and the use of functions!

- I enjoyed your discussion because ….. For example, …
- You did a good job because…
- In the next discussion, try to ... more!

Appendix B
Questionnaire Conducted in Week 12 (translated)

Read the questionnaire items below and choose one answer for each statement. Put check marks in the boxes below.

(4 = Strongly agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly disagree)

	4	3	2	1
I think peer feedback is a useful way of learning.				
I think I can learn a lot from my peers.				
I feel comfortable in giving peer feedback.				
I can give helpful advice to my peers.				
I think my skill of giving feedback has improved since the first time I did it.				
Why do you think so?				
I feel comfortable receiving peer feedback.				