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SOME ASPECTS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN FORMATIVE IN-CLASS PEER REVIEW

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Abstract

The paper deals with some aspects of postgraduate students' perceptions of formative in-class oral peer review of presentations or participation in other speaking activities in language modules. The research specifically addresses the development of language, presentation, professional/academic communication, and research skills during peer review exercises in small groups and analyses the feedback of students over the period of two academic years showing the development of their perceptions during their postgraduate studies. The findings confirm the results of previous research in peer review and expand our knowledge with regards to the use of in-class oral peer feedback in language training with the aim of developing academic speaking skills, critical thinking and argumentation, teamwork and some elements of the community of practice. The paper also considers challenges which students experienced in relation to in-class peer review especially at the beginning of the academic year and explores whether students perceive this approach useful for the development of their language and research skills while comparing those attitudes at the beginning and at the end of modules. The paper argues that this approach contributes to more effective engagement of students in teaching and learning and can be easily transferred to online training which is crucial in the current circumstances of coronavirus pandemic.

1. Introduction

Peer review and feedback are not new terms which are often used interchangeably. Many scholars, researchers and specialists in Higher Education are familiar with the terms since peer review has been used extensively to validate a completed research work. Thus, it contributes to quality assurance and enhancement of published research. However, it will be interesting to investigate whether similar principles can be applied in teaching and learning, and more specifically in language training at postgraduate level when students acquire necessary skills for business and professional communication.

In our research, formative in-class peer review is considered as the oral assessment of work of other students for the benefit of their further development and progression towards their study objectives. Our definition is based on the approach suggested by Topping (1998) where he defined peer assessment as "an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status" (p. 250). Topping (2010) later established some uncertainties, especially whether peer-peer relationships may have an impact on the process of peer review of assessment. However, our main concern is the usefulness of the feedback the students receive for further development of their skills and knowledge on a specific subject.

There are a few compelling reasons why postgraduate students acquire excellent oral communication and presentation skills: to fully prepare the student for employment, and to develop effective communication and analytical skills in a foreign language which will allow the students to participate in the discussion on the topic of their research or other professional subjects and engage in the discussion of research findings with their peers. In view of this, students regularly engage in delivering research-related presentations and participating in mock negotiations, talks, press-conferences and discussions. Presentations usually start from four to five minutes in the autumn semester and increase to eight or ten minutes (depending on the level of students) towards the end of the module in the spring semester. The content of presentations is also changing from more generic at the beginning of the module to more subject-specific especially in spring semester, when topics of presentations are normally based on their research in one of the domains depending on their major subject.

After their presentations or participation in mock talks, press-conferences, negotiations or discussions, students are given time to ask speaker(s) questions on the topic and receive more information. Only when the discussion is completed, the speaker(s) is asked about her/his performance and then all students provide constructive formative feedback to presenter(s) or speaker(s) during the class which should address the following:

- improving their presentation skills,
- expanding the knowledge of the subject or any related issues which should be considered in the research,
- exploring other routes in research process or methodology,
- enhancing their language skills,
- developing communication skills in case of a mock event;
- improving other skills, e.g. analytical and critical thinking, originality of research and approaches, focus on the main research questions.

This list is not exhaustive. Engagement in formative in-class peer review offers many more benefits to students which will be assessed and analysed in this paper. It is important to note that students were not asked to generate a mark since this is a formative peer assessment, but rather students in the audience were encouraged to provide an expanded feedback on the performance of their peer(s). Students were not allowed just to say that the presentation was good but explain what was good in the presentation from various points of view, i.e. language, subject/topic, interesting and useful facts and how they were presented. Teacher's role was to guide students and explain what feedback would be useful for their further development during the module and beyond.

2. Problem Statement

The present study considers in-class formative peer review or peer feedback in language training as an intrinsic part of student engagement which has become one of the key issues in the Quality Assurance assessment process in the UK. The entire Chapter B5 of the *Quality Code of the Higher Education*[1] is dedicated to student engagement in teaching and learning, and quality assurance and enhancement processes. It is acknowledged that student engagement can facilitate changes that enable us to develop a dynamic and inclusive learning community at universities. As part of student engagement in teaching and learning, academics develop various approaches which would enhance student experience and contribute to the development of the required knowledge and skills. The current research deals with one of the innovative modes of formative in-class peer feedback from students to their peers. Students particularly value feedback during their university courses, which allows them to address issues or gaps in their knowledge. Every survey of students conducted by institutions in the UK Higher Education points to the fact that students always ask for more feedback.

Numerous studies conducted by academics around the world targeted the use of peer review approach in a number of subjects in the past two decades. Scholars oftentimes analysed peer reviewing of written assignments, especially in English language training, with the aim of developing writing skills (Huisman et al., 2019; Liu & Carless, 2006; Malyuga, 2009; Min, 2006; Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol, 2014). Nevertheless, peer review remains largely unexplored, especially in establishing links with collaborative learning (Kollar & Fischer, 2010). In contrast, this research specifically addresses formative in-class oral peer review by students when they assess other students' presentations or participation in mock business meeting simulations. This type of peer review has not received much attention in previous studies for various reasons, since perhaps it is a less common type of activities used in class.

3. Research Questions

Recent research studies support active learning in those courses, where students become engaging participants in the learning process (Springer et al., 1999). So, what can we do to increase the amount and quality of feedback and at the same time make it more effective? In this research paper we will aim to answer this question, as well as to explore the usefulness of feedback students receive, how students respond

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[1] For more information see *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* at https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/student-engagement

to the feedback from their peers, and what other challenges they encounter when they engage in in-class peer review activities.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the formative in-class peer feedback in language training and more specifically students' attitudes towards this type of peer review. The study was undertaken because there is a certain stigma in teaching and learning about arranging peer review or peer feedback. And this does not only concern teachers but applies to students in Higher Education as well.

In order to achieve the best results in the study of the usefulness or effectiveness of peer review and in line with previous studies (Van den Berg et al., 2006), small groups of postgraduate students (9 – 16 students in each group) were selected for this study. All students were doing Russian either at Advanced or Intermediate levels as part of their degrees, however their major subjects were either Politics, International Relations, Diplomacy, Economy, or Literature. The Russian language modules were aimed at developing necessary language skills for business and professional communication and in accordance with the UCL's connected curriculum framework for research-based education[2] aimed at ensuring that the curriculum of all modules support students' research projects in their major subjects and developing their research and related skills.

5.   Research Methods

Participants in the study, which took place during 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years, were postgraduate students on Russian Intermediate and Russian Advanced modules majoring in various other subjects, e.g. International Relations, Politics, Policy and Security, Economy, and Literature. The overall number of students who participated in the research was 26 in 2018/19 and 17 in 2019/20. The majority of students had studied previously in the UK and overseas being exposed to a wide range of approaches in various systems of Higher Education. At the same time, around 30% of all participants did not have any experience of studying in the UK. Approximately 85% of students were in the same age group of 20 – 30 years old. There were also 8% of 30 – 40 years old students and 7% of students in the 40 – 50 years age group participating in the research. The groups were balanced along the line of 39% male and 61% female participants in this study. On the whole, the above statistical data reflects demographic composition of modules across the university.

For the present study, an anonymous short questionnaire was designed and first piloted on a group of four students at the end of 2017/18 academic year. It enabled us to establish issues and enhance clarity of some questions used in the questionnaire. The questionnaire included open questions asking participants to comment on various aspects of giving and receiving feedback from their peers, e.g. usefulness of receiving and giving feedback on the performance of their peers in delivering a presentation or participating in a mock press-conference, arising challenges, as well as any other comments or observations which would contribute to the development peer review.

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[2] For more information see *Connected Curriculum: Enhancing programme of study* at
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/connected_curriculum_brochure_oct_2017.pdf

When compiling a questionnaire, the main objective was to create some space for postgraduate students so that they could express themselves freely on any aspects of peer review, identify issues relevant to them, their group of peers or specific tasks, since quality criteria in peer review or feedback are often determined by the goal of the task, e.g. presenting research findings, assessing a certain event or providing a view on a policy change (Gielen et al., 2011). This approach was based on practical considerations bearing in mind that there were certain variables in our research:

- age of students;
- their previous experience at school and during undergraduate studies;
- differences in the level of the Russian language competencies since we had Intermediate and Advanced students;
- a wide variety of contexts where in-class formative peer review was used;
- participants were interested in developing research skills in their particular subjects and specific topics;
- university encourages connected curriculum framework for research-based education which supports student research and makes strong connections across disciplines;
- researcher's previous experience in using formative peer feedback in teaching interpreting and negotiating skills;
- ensuring student-centred approach and enabling the development of a community of practice where all participants are working together on expanding their knowledge and practising various skills;
- encouraging engagement of students and developing initiative, analytical and critical thinking, originality, and the ability to liaise effectively with the audience and present their arguments.

In view of the above variables, there were only broad open questions in the questionnaire, which allowed postgraduate students to present their observations, experience, and concerns.

Students in Intermediate and Advanced groups were asked to fill in the same questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of their modules in 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years. The following numbers of participants in the research are presented in Table 01 below.

Table 01. Student numbers participating in the study

Academic year	Number of participants at the beginning of the module	Number of participants at the end of the module
2018/19	26: 18 Advanced students and 8 Intermediate students	25: 17 Advanced students and 8 Intermediate students
2019/20	15: 11 Advanced students and 4 Intermediate students	17: 10 Advanced students and 7 Intermediate students

Numerous comments of participants in 83 questionnaires were considered in this study, and the qualitative analysis of their feedback is presented in the next chapter. The findings were split between the beginning and the end of the modules for comparative analysis and discussion.

6. Findings

This study examined free-text comments made by students in two groups of Intermediate and Advanced Russian language modules. In order to analyse the comments and present the findings, themes and subthemes were identified and coded accordingly for our analysis. In the following parts of this paper, the feedback from students at the beginning and at the end of modules will be analysed separately. Some differences between the two cohorts of participants in 2018/19 and 2019/20 will be discussed in our research. Comments will have the following reference system where the year of study will be identified as A for 2018/19 academic year and B for 2019/20, while the Intermediate language students will be marked as 1 and Advanced students as 2. The feedback received at the beginning of the module will be coded as a, while the comments received at the end of the module will have b, followed by the participant number in this research. For example, A-1-b-14 means that the comment was received at the end of the Intermediate language module from student No.14 during 2018/19 academic year.

6.1. Students' perceptions of peer review at the beginning of the module

One of the most salient findings was that 14% of postgraduate students were not familiar with the terms and concepts of "peer review" or "peer feedback" and were not able to provide any comments at the beginning of the module. They belonged to two age groups: 20-30 and 30-40 and were previously educated in the UK and overseas. All other participants confirmed that they received and provided peer feedback before in other courses at school or during their undergraduate studies, however, only 28% of participants specified that they had been engaged in the provision of peer review orally in class before. The majority of students mostly engaged either in the provision of written peer feedback or orally in one-to-one situations. The obtained results are similar in both academic years with a slight decrease by 3% of the total number of students involved in the provision of formative in-class oral peer review in 2019/20 academic year, however in view of smaller number of participants this figure is negligible. What is important for our study is the fact that only approximately one third of students were familiar with formative in-class peer review, which may represent a certain challenge to the lecturer teaching these modules who is interested in introducing formative in-class peer review.

Another prominent theme revolved around challenges students may have when giving and receiving feedback from their peers. Participants identified several key challenges which may have an impact on the creation of appropriate atmosphere in a group, culture specific issues, further research, and even relations between students. Issues linked to group atmosphere and relations between students were mentioned in almost 70% of questionnaires. Culture specific issues were identified as key in engaging students representing various cultures of the world. Their previous experiences at school or when doing undergraduate courses could be significantly different to the environment they may encounter in the UK at postgraduate level course. The issue came up in questionnaires as to whether all students would be able to understand the full significance of in-class formative peer review and learn how to provide useful, relevant, and inoffensive feedback or recommendations. In the process of developing peer feedback skills and the actual provision of peer feedback, the role of a lecturer is becoming crucial in creating a friendly and collaborative atmosphere where all students feel as part of the team or community of practice aiming to achieve common goals. In view of the last statement, several students pointed to the fact that it was

important to understand and predict how another student may respond to peer feedback from other students. Some participants also mentioned different perceptions of research work, topics, and presentations which were linked to previous experiences in their home or study country.

Our study also considered students' perceptions of the usefulness of the oral peer review. On one hand, a couple of students (12% of participants) who were previously involved in oral in-class peer review in other institutions thought that it was not always useful, as sometimes students who provided feedback to their peers did not know the subject well and "just wanted to show off" (A-2-a-9). On the whole, they thought that sometimes this experience might be discouraging to some students (both receiving and providing feedback) and could even have a negative impact on friendly relations, especially in instances when students are "criticising someone" (B-1-a-5). Our analysis of student comments at the beginning of the module shows that some students felt strongly about challenges peer review may pose and doubted the usefulness of the exercise for developing necessary skills and their research projects,

> e.g. If students do not know the aim of the task well, the feedback may not be relevant, and in some cases, may be offensive to some students. (B-2-a-8)

On the other hand, a considerably higher proportion of students (almost 34%) felt that peer feedback was useful because it could provide practical and valuable suggestions for improvement and also indicate whether the presentation and messages were clear and transparent to the audience. A small group of students in both years of study (11% in 2018/19 and 9% in 2019/20), while agreeing that peer review could be a useful tool for the development of research and associated skills, also pointed out that it would largely depend on the guidance and clearness of instructions provided by lecturers. These comments also addressed the usefulness of peer review, that they would benefit from, for example, "concrete and constructive feedback" (A-2-a-16). Some students reported on their positive experience in other institutions or courses they attended before. They specifically suggested that peer review could work extremely well in very small groups, e.g. tutorials with only two or three students:

> The peer feedback I received was useful as it was in 2:1 tutorials where both the professor and fellow student gave feedback on my work (B-2-a-4). They thought, that in groups of this size it would be possible to have a proper discussion and receive feedback from their tutor and peers.

Students also commented on their attitude and quality of feedback. These are two important themes identified by almost a third of all participants. Some of them reported that they valued the feedback of their peers, e.g. "I take feedback from my peers really seriously" (B-2-a-12). Some other thought that anonymous feedback allowed more open and frank feedback, while in-class oral peer feedback would be limited, since peer reviewers "need to be polite" (B-1-a-3) and avoid any comments which might be viewed as offensive by some students. There were two students in 2018/19 cohort who misread the question about the usefulness of peer feedback and thought the question was about feedback to teachers.

The feedback provided by two cohorts of students analysed in this study allowed us to conclude that at the beginning of the module, students were concerned about the usefulness of in-class oral formative peer review and the ability of their peers to provide clear, constructive, and inoffensive feedback which would allow them to understand better what particular skills they need to develop and how to proceed further with their research. The main reason was perhaps insufficient exposure to in-class formative peer review approaches in their previous studies. At the same time, about a quarter of participants showed some

uncertainty and expressed their doubts whether they would receive clear guidelines for in-class oral peer review and how effectively it would be organised during their classes.

6.2. Students' perceptions of peer review at the end of the module

During the modules over two semesters, students were asked to prepare and make presentations related to the topic of their research and participate in several mock press-conferences, negotiations and meetings where they had to present their points of view and approaches related to the topic of discussion. The time allocated for individual presentations increased from four to five minutes (depending on the module) at the beginning of the module to eight to ten minutes in the second semester. The lecturer provided guidance as to how the sessions will be organised, and what feedback is expected from peers to presenters or participants in mock events. Students also received some vocabulary lists and selected phrases which they could practise in the provision of feedback in Russian. All presentations were followed by students' questions and comments on the content of the presentation, after which students in the audience were encouraged to provide oral formative feedback to presenters on various aspects of their performance, e.g. presentation and language skills, logical structure of the presentation, originality, message coherence, familiarity with subject matter, good preparation, methodology of research, literature or references used in the presentation, competence in conveying verbal and non-verbal content, idiomatic use of the language and many other relevant issues. While receiving feedback presenters were asked to respond to feedback and agree or disagree with comments of their peers. There were numerous instances when presenters agreed or did not agree which led to a mutually beneficial discussion, especially at Advanced level.

The comments received from participants at the end of their modules showed that 85% of respondents in 2018/19 and 93% of respondents in 2019/20 found the in-class peer feedback useful for developing their presentation and language skills and further progress with the research. It is important to note that approximately 35% of respondents in both academic years thought that this activity was "extremely", "definitely" or "very" useful. Almost 78% of students in 2018/19 and 83% in 2019/20 reported that the received feedback allowed them to improve their presentation and language skills, while 72% in 2018/19 and 79% in 2019/20 confirmed that peer feedback allowed them to rethink their research methodology and approaches and develop new ideas and analytical thinking in their research projects, e.g.

- I found the in-class peer feedback very useful. Not only is it a great way of developing your (Russian) language skills, but it also teaches you to give critique and think analytically as well as developing new ideas. It is a good way of including the students. (2-2-b-6)
- My classmates made good constructive comments which I found helpful, and giving feedback was a good linguistic exercise for me. (2-1-b-4)

Almost 60% of students in 2018/19 and 64% in 2019/20 mentioned that peer feedback enabled them to come up with new innovative ideas in their research, as in the example 2-2-b-6 above. However, almost all students who found the peer review useful particularly valued the opportunity to learn from each other and several students in both academic years pointed out "self-reflection" as an important skill they learned during peer review, e.g.:

- I think peer feedback is definitely useful, as it gives the student more opportunity for feedback, but not only as it allows different perspectives on the same work, as well as insight on the other students' ideas, thoughts, processes and opinions (2-2-b-8).

The remaining 15% in 2018/19 and 7% in 2019/20 were generally satisfied with the peer review approach as part of the formative assessment of presentations and participation in mock events, however they either thought that their own skills of providing feedback should be improved, or in a couple of instances, they thought that the feedback they received was neither sufficiently useful not entirely clear. They also mentioned that they could not understand how they might apply peer suggestions in their research.

Many respondents also mentioned that their language skills either improved (45% in 2018/19 and 53% in 2019/20) or significantly improved (approximately 41% in both academic years). Some participants revealed that they learned specific phrases for offering constructive feedback and effectively engaging in the discussion when agreeing or disagreeing with their peers. Apart from learning some new academic vocabulary, students particularly appreciated the opportunity of engaging in a discussion of their research and actively using lexical items and grammar they learned before or during the course. They specifically reported that they felt more comfortable with the use of various phrases. Over half of students in both academic years confirmed that the coherence and cohesion of their messages have improved as well.

There were many areas of improvement and benefits reported by students, e.g. presentation skills, enhancing and sometimes changing their research projects, developing new innovative ideas. More generic comments addressed the issues of improved collegiality and teamwork in the group and even "a possibility of asking fellow students for an informal feedback outside classroom" (1-1-b-2and 2-2-b-10). Students also appreciated that they would get more feedback on all aspects of their presentations and research as a whole.

7. Conclusion

Our research allowed us to confirm that formative in-class oral peer review can contribute to the development of language, presentation, and research skills at postgraduate level of studies. In view of the current globalisation processes and recent changes in the Higher Education linked to the coronavirus pandemic which resulted in the accelerated development of online teaching and academic communication across the world, it is becoming even more urgent to increase student engagement in teaching and learning using various new approaches. The current study also confirmed that the UCL's connected curriculum framework clearly puts research skills and the progression of students in their research projects at the centre of all educational activities.

Our findings also showed that apart from developing necessary skills mentioned above, the formative in-class peer review allows to develop soft skills, e.g. teamwork, the opportunity to learn from each other, the ability to provide and receive constructive feedback, thus creating better cooperation in class and enables all participants to develop some elements of community of practice and engage more effectively with learning across all disciplines.

This research allowed to observe the attitudes towards the formative in-class oral peer review in development, i.e. at the beginning and end of modules. Many challenges and fears of getting engaged in

direct feedback expressed at the beginning of the academic year did not materialise. On the contrary, our study based on one academic year showed that peer review allowed students to progress better in their research, taught them how to develop the ability to stay alert and respond immediately, construct appropriate academic questions, formulate spontaneous but well-structured feedback and conduct an unprepared discussion on a research topic in a foreign language. In addition, this approach of peer review taught them critical and analytical thinking beyond their disciplines since presentations were made on the topics of subjects students were majoring in. Apart from the fact that this allowed to expand the horizons of many students, it enabled cross-disciplinary approach which is central in the connected curriculum framework.

The study also confirmed the results of previous studies that formative in-class peer review does not substitute the formative feedback students receive from their teachers, however it adds another salient perspective and allows students to liaise more effectively with their peers and the audience. The link between the speaker and the audience allows academic presenters to get constructive feedback which may enhance their current research or even open new exciting areas or establish important links.

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