【Research Brief】

Student Perception of Asynchronous Semi-Anonymous Peer Feedback Efficacy in Online EFL Presentation Classes

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to determine whether Japanese university students believed asynchronous semi-anonymous peer feedback helped them improve their presentation skills in an online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) presentation class. Previous studies regarding peer evaluation in EFL contexts rarely focus on oral presentations, and, to our knowledge, none focus specifically on students' experiences in an online presentation course. In this study, students of a lower-intermediate level presentation course at a Japanese university were regularly assigned peer groups and guided to provide scaffolded feedback using an anonymous online peer-evaluation system. At the conclusion of the course, opinions of the implemented feedback methods were collected via a survey that included both Likert-type questions and open-ended questions. The results indicate that students had a generally favorable perception of asynchronous semi-anonymous peer feedback in an online context. In conjunction with teacher and self-evaluations, implementing such peer evaluations may motivate an improved awareness of presentation skills as well as meaningful peer interactions. However, further studies should be conducted to refine best practices.

Keywords: *peer feedback, peer review, oral presentation, online, asynchronous*

Introduction

Peer review is an area of research that has gained traction in the field of L2 education, particularly with regard to student writing. Tsui and Ng (2000) explored a wide range of benefits to peer feedback such as an enhanced sense of audience, raised awareness through the reading of peers' writing, collaborative learning, and a fostered sense of ownership of students' work—all of which may not be achieved through the comments of one's teacher. Despite numerous studies regarding the effects of peer evaluations in L2 writing courses, far less research has been conducted on its potential benefits in contexts related to oral communication.

While peer groups may be able to accurately assess one another's writing with the aid of a well-structured and level-appropriate checklist, there may be discrepancies with regard to feedback quality when it comes to oral communication. In studies of the effectiveness of self-, peer-, and teacher assessment on oral presentations, Nejad & Mahfoodh (2019) found a strong correlation between peer- and teacher-ratings, whereas Saito (2000) reported a high level of consistency between peer- and self-ratings. However, Shimura (2006) highlighted the role of L2 proficiency on peer feedback, finding that assessments by upper-intermediate students most closely resembled the instructor's, while all proficiency levels correlated highly with regard to eye contact and gestures. Despite variations found in different levels and contexts, research seems to indicate that students respond positively to peer feedback on presentations (Nakamura, 2002; Nejad & Mahfoodh, 2019; Saito, 2000).

When classes shifted online due the COVID-19 pandemic, not only was there a stronger need to employ an online peer feedback system, but such a system could have some advantages over face-to-face peer evaluation. Hosack (2003) posited that L2 learners found it difficult to suggest revisions

that may appear critical of a peer's work whereas anonymous feedback helped relieve anxiety about the possibility of hurt feelings. In a related study at the same Japanese university, students took part in both face-to-face and anonymous peer feedback but reported less concern about making critical comments; however, female students overwhelmingly preferred anonymous feedback, suggesting that even gender may affect the efficacy of peer evaluation (Coomber & Silver 2010). Furthermore, the findings of Lu & Bol (2007) demonstrated that anonymous peers performed better on writing performance tasks and provided more critical feedback than those participating in identifiable peer review. Thus, the increased privacy of anonymous feedback may empower students who hesitate to provide necessary constructive criticism. Furthermore, asynchronous feedback can be easily collected, collated, and returned in a streamlined fashion, thus complementing teacher feedback and students' self-reflection.

After ensuring our asynchronous peer feedback system was as easy to understand and use as possible, we considered our implementation in terms of anonymity, peer groupings, and improving peer feedback quality. From the perspective of learning outcomes, the aims of this project were as follows:

1. Increase awareness of target presentation skills.
2. Motivate students to improve target presentation skills.
3. Increase student engagement in peers' performances.
4. Increase opportunities for meaningful presenter-audience interactions.

Method

This survey was conducted at a Japanese university on three freshman-level English Presentation classes of lower intermediate proficiency (within the range of 280-479 combined TOEIC Listening & Reading scores). These classes were conducted online via Zoom due to COVID-19 response policies. Students met for one 100-minute lesson each week over the course of a 12-week semester. Roughly every other week, students gave prepared presentations on various topics. The aim of this compulsory course was to improve presentation skills such as organizing presentations, supporting arguments with evidence, using visual aids, and improving both verbal and non-verbal skills such as intonation, gestures, and eye contact.

Before each presentation, students were assigned three peers and were instructed to pay close attention to their presentations, with the intention of giving asynchronous feedback at the end of the round of presentations. After the presentations concluded, students engaged in self-reflection activities in addition to providing feedback to their peers via Google Forms. The peer feedback was divided into two components: guided questions for their assigned peers and awards voting for all of their classmates.

The guided questions, which were called "T.A.G. Feedback" (Tell, Ask, and Give), instructed students to respond to each of their three peers individually—to **tell** their peers something positive about their presentations, **ask** a question about their peers' presentations, and **give** advice on how to improve their next presentation. In each category, the students were provided with sentence stems to assist them in providing specific feedback to their peers (see Appendix A).

The voting component asked students to select the "smoothest" presentation, the "most interesting" presentation, and the presentation with the "most effective" slides. These categories roughly correlate to the rubric's categories of "physical elements," "content," and "visuals." The winners of each category were announced in the following class, along with a brief explanation from

the teacher about what made each presentation successful in its respective category. After students submitted their peer feedback, the data was collated and returned anonumously via individualized documents for presenters to review (see Appendix B).

The authors' feedback systems were nearly the same, but there were some notable variations. Regarding peer grouping, both assigned three peers. However, teacher B included a mid-semester group presentation and asked students to provide T.A.G. feedback for each of the five groups. The "Ask" feedback questions were then used to practice Q&A skills. In addition, in the second half of the course, teacher B required students to directly ask at least two questions, which negated the need for "Ask" feedback. Therefore, students were required to provide "Tell" and "Give" feedback to all classmates on days they had not been assigned to present.

Following the final lesson, students were asked to complete a survey via Google Forms about the feedback they received throughout the course. The first ten questions (see Table 1) asked the extent to which students agreed or disagreed with the statements using a four-point Likert-type scale. The survey concluded with the following two open-ended questions: (1) What did you like about the peer feedback system? (ピアフィードバック・システムの好きなところは何ですか？) and (2) How could the peer feedback system be improved? (どうすればピアフィードバック・システムがより良いものになると思いますか？).

Results & Discussion

Student responses to Likert-type survey items are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Student responses to Likert-type items on the survey (N=38)

No.	Item	M	SD
1	The peer feedback system was easy to understand. ピアフィードバック・システムは分かりやすかった。	3.63	0.67
2	The peer feedback system was easy to use. ピアフィードバック・システムは使いやすかった。	3.53	0.76
3	When I gave my classmates feedback, I tried my best to give them helpful advice. クラスメートのフィードバックを行う際は、参考になるようなアドバイスをするように心がけた。	3.47	0.56
4	I always read the feedback from my classmates. 常にクラスメイトからのフィードバックを読んで確認していた。	3.05	0.8
5	The feedback from my classmates helped me improve my presentation skills. クラスメートからのフィードバックは、プレゼンテーションスキルを向上させるのに役立った。	3.37	0.79
6	The awards (for smoothest presentation, most interesting presentation, and best slides) motivated me to try my best. 各アワード(最もスムーズなプレゼンテーション、最も興味深いプレゼンテーション、ベスト・スライド)がある事で、頑張ろうという気持ちになった。	3.42	0.83
7	I liked the peer feedback system. ピアフィードバック・システムが気に入った。	3.24	0.75
8	I improved my presentation skills this semester. 今学期で、プレゼンテーションスキルが向上したと思う。	3.74	0.6
9	I always read the feedback from my teacher. 常に講師からのフィードバックを読んで確認していた。	3.66	0.75
10	The feedback from my teacher helped me improve my presentation skills. 講師からのフィードバックは、プレゼンテーションスキルを向上させる助けとなった。	3.71	0.61

Note: 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree

Students reported having positive feelings about the presentation course overall, indicating strong agreement (M= 3.74[0.6]) with the statement that they improved their presentation skills in the course. Regarding the peer feedback system, students indicated strong agreement that the system was easy to understand (M= 3.63[0.67]) and easy to use (M= 3.53[0.76]).

Survey results also indicated strong agreement that they tried to give each other helpful feedback (M= 3.47[0.56]) and received helpful feedback (M= 3.37[0.79]), suggesting that students were engaged and took their social responsibility to provide feedback seriously. However, students indicated only moderate agreement that they always read the feedback from their classmates (M= 3.05[0.8]), suggesting that presenter-audience interactions could be improved, perhaps by incorporating the reading of peer feedback into in-class assignments or self-reflection activities. In contrast, students indicated strong agreement that they always read the feedback from their teacher (M= 3.66[0.75]). Likewise, participants indicated that teacher feedback was more helpful (M= 3.71[0.61]) than peer feedback (M= 3.37[0.79]), which would seem to support Tsui and Ng's (2002) assertion that L2 students favor the feedback of instructors over peers. Despite this, one respondent wrote, "I understand that other people concentrate [on] my presentation," emphasizing the impact of what Tsui and Ng (2000) described as an enhanced sense of audience. Students know that those who lack the motivation to pay attention will now be tasked with listening carefully to their ideas, which in turn compels speakers to improve their performance. However, it remains unclear whether this sentiment is applicable to the student-selected awards as participants did not elaborate on this aspect of peer-feedback despite strong agreement indicating such awards had increased motivation (M= 3.42[0.83]).

Semi-Anonymous Feedback

Although students knew who their peers were, our system made it difficult to identify which member of their peer group made a particular comment. In addition to the constraints of online classes, our decision to partially anonymize peer feedback was motivated by research indicating L2 students tend to feel less hesitant about providing critical feedback anonymously (Hosack, 2003; Lu & Bol, 2007). Overall, our survey results support this notion. One student wrote:

I'm happy to know what I did well in my presentation, but more importantly, because it's anonymous, I can ask people to point out exactly what I'm lacking and what I need to improve on, and conversely, I can honestly tell them what other people did well and give them advice. (自分のプレゼンの良かった点が分かるのも嬉しいですが、それ以上に、匿名であることもあって、自分の足りない点や改善が必要な点を的確に指摘してもらうことができ、反対に私からも他の方の良かったところやアドバイスを率直に伝えることができます。)

Two more students echoed this preference for anonymity, noting that they were happy to receive "candid" or "objective" opinions. In addition, another student wrote, "I think it would be better if I could use chat, etc." (チャットなどが使えたらよりよくなると思う). Although less anonymous than our system, using a chat function would still provide increased privacy over direct face-to-face or video communication, as students wouldn't see each others' faces or reactions. Thus, some anonymity appears to increase students' comfort with giving and receiving peer feedback.

Peer-group Size

In attempting to strike a balance between over- and under-utilizing students' attentive resources,

we decided to use peer groups typically of four students in our peer-feedback process, with three peers for each presenter. Student reaction to peer-group size was mixed. Many expressed that they were happy to receive the attention of their peers, but a student in Teacher A's class seemed to prefer larger peer groups: "I would prefer that the number of people giving feedback be more than three" (フィードバックを返す人の人数を三人から増やす).

However, as teacher B's final presentations required students to provide feedback for up to ten peers, students had differing opinions about peer-group size, with one student saying, "Reduce the number of people who write" (書く人数を減らす). Conversely, another student acknowledged the challenge but seemed to find it worthwhile:

It may increase the workload for both of us, but I felt that I could develop my skills better if I could get feedback from as many people as possible. (互いに負担は増えてしまうかもしれませんが、できるだけ多くの人からフィードバックがもらえると、より力を伸ばせるように感じました。)

In future iterations of this feedback system, it may be worth reconsidering the size of peer groups, as some prefer feedback from more peers while others might find it too taxing or unnecessary.

Guided Feedback (Tell, Ask, and Give)

When responding to peers, students were given guidelines in terms of the kind of feedback to provide, along with sentence stems (see Appendix A). The aim of this guided feedback was to simplify the process by providing points of focus for students while also enhancing the overall quality of comments. Many students agreed that the prompts were helpful. One student wrote that "I can get specific advice on how to improve my presentation skills" (自分のプレゼンテーションのスキルを上げる具体的なアドバイスを知ることができるところ). Two others commented on the structured nature of the T.A.G. system by saying, "topics were still set, so I can advice classmate easily" and "the questions were clear, and I was able to write my impressions more smoothly compared to tasks that just ask for a reaction" (質問が明確で、感想をかく課題よりスムーズにできた). However, other students were more critical, saying, "I would like to get more specific advices" and "let me write more freely" (もっと自由に書くことを決められるようにする). This would indicate that perhaps it needed to be explicitly stated that the sentence stems were a guideline rather than a requirement, which might provide guard rails for students with less confidence while liberating some students able to express themselves more freely.

Conclusion

In face-to-face classes as well as online classes, peer review can be a valuable tool for helping students reflect on their achievement of course objectives. As L2 students often lack confidence in their own ability and may therefore hesitate to provide direct criticism, asynchronous peer feedback may be preferable—even in face-to-face contexts, as students have time to independently reflect on their peers' performances. In addition, curriculum-oriented sentence stems can support students in giving meaningful and specific feedback, though some students may prefer to write more freely. Yet on the whole, participants in this survey generally reported both providing and receiving helpful peer feedback, suggesting overall approval of the system.

One downside of asynchronous feedback is that it needs to be read and applied after it is received. Although most students reported that they read their peers' feedback, some reported that

they did not. In addition, although students' perceptions are that the feedback helped them improve, whether the peer feedback actually impacted future performances is a question for further research. In a relevant study discussing Japanese university students enrolled in a similar presentation course, Shimura (2006) suggested that the proficiency of learners may impact their ability to provide accurate and meaningful peer feedback. Indeed, variations among groups of learners may occur for any number of reasons, so it may be difficult to draw broad conclusions about the efficacy of peer feedback in terms of improving language or presentation skills.

While the survey would seem to indicate marked support for the system of feedback used in this study, it cannot be overstated that peer feedback in isolation is not a silver bullet for increasing students' motivation to improve. Peer feedback can be valuable for obtaining a direct response from one's audience. However, teacher feedback, peer feedback, and student self-reflection should be seen as complementary, as each yields a different perspective of the presentation and has the capacity to assist students in improving different aspects of their presentation abilities.

However, while most literature about peer review focuses on writing, it is important to do more research on peer feedback as it relates to oral tasks such as presentation. Another needed direction of research is to further explore the relative values, strengths, and weaknesses of peer, self, and teacher evaluations and how they can better complement each other.

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Appendix A

Question items on the peer feedback form completed by students via Google Forms after presentations.

Section 1 – TAG (tell/ask/give) feedback:
1. **TELL** something you like about your classmate's presentation (i.e. The best part of your presentation was...because... / One thing you did really well was...because... / I'm really impressed with...because...)

2. **ASK** something about your classmate's presentation (i.e. Wh-...? / I wanted to know more about... / One thing that was not clear to me was... / What did you mean by...?)

3. **GIVE** a suggestion for improvement (i.e. To make your presentation better, I would suggest... / You need more/less...because... / Your presentations will be higher quality if you...)

Section 2 – Awards:
1. Whose presentation was the smoothest? (i.e. appeared confident, good delivery, natural intonation, etc.)

2. Whose presentation was the most interesting? (i.e. you learned something new or surprising)

3. Whose slides were the most effective? (i.e. made the presentation more enjoyable or easier to follow)

Appendix B

Example of peer feedback as received by a presenter via Google Drive document.

<u>TELL</u>
The best part of your presentation was explaining because it is simple and clear to understand.

The best part of your presentation was speaking speed because it was easy to understand.

It's a place I want to go, so it was fun to listen to.

<u>ASK</u>
I wanted to know more about attractions.

I wanted to know more about character.

Do you live in Osaka?

<u>GIVE</u>
To make your presentation better, I would suggest emphasizing.

You need more inflection of words.

I want you to speak a little more slowly.