

Japanese University Students' Reflections on Peer Marking

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Abstract

Peer assessment is a common activity within many educational contexts, incorporating practices such as checking classmates' answers after a quiz to providing full formal feedback on a peer's written project. While some teachers and students express concerns, research has indicated generally positive results (Sivan, 2000) and student grading has been found to be reliable (Marcoulides & Simkin, 1995). This paper reports on the opinions of 78 students at a Japanese university in relation to peer assessment undertaken as part of an oral communication course. The results indicate that students valued the opportunity to do peer assessment, but also reported significant levels of worry and nervousness. It is posited that it is necessary to consider the potential fit between the use of peer assessment and the students' future goals to ensure the benefits of peer assessment are maximized while the drawbacks are minimized.

Keywords: Peer assessment; assessments; grading; student perceptions; classroom behaviour.

Introduction

Peer assessment, a process in which students grade and/or comment on the performances of their classmates and consider the success of their outcomes in a particular task (Topping, Smith, Swanson & Elliot, 2000), is an activity that many students experience at some point during their educational careers (Tsui & Ng, 2000). Peer assessment can range from quickly marking a neighbour's answers after a class quiz to providing full formal feedback on an unidentified peer's written project.

The implementation of peer assessment in a class can provide many benefits (Chen, 2004) and interest in peer assessment in the context of EFL classrooms has steadily increased since the early 1990s (Neff, 2006). At its best, peer assessment boosts student motivation by improving student ownership of the assessment process, increases student autonomy, and develops students' ability to make judgements (Brown, Rust & Gibbs, 1994). Furthermore, the collaborative, non-authoritative, and non-judgemental aspects of peer assessment can build confidence (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), and empower students to use English (Bury, Sellick & Yamamoto, 2012) in an authentic context for their language development (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

When engaged in peer assessment, students are often provided with different perspectives related to their work (Hu, 2005), which can be perceived as more specific and immediate than when relying solely on teachers (Gibbs, 1999). Thus, peer assessment is commonly accepted as a sound pedagogic activity (Keh, 1990) and is regularly adopted in many classrooms (Mangelsdorf, 1992).

The sharing of knowledge between students that is a key to the successful implementation of peer assessment (Jawah et al., 2004) and the development of a dialogue in which two-way feedback is established

(Rollinson, 2005) can enhance students' Zones of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). This sharing of knowledge also leads to improved cooperative learning, where students pool information and contribute to the development of their shared knowledge (Brown, 2001) in a social-constructivist process, which is distinct from a top-down, teacher-led approach (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). In addition to developing a sense of acceptance towards peer criticism, this exchange can benefit students cognitively, as they need to articulate their explanations to peers and express context-specific knowledge (Liu & Carless, 2006). It has also been claimed that this feedback process can lead to improved social skills (Dörnyei, 1997) and help develop the skills necessary for success in the workplace (Boud & Falchikov, 2006).

In addition, using peer assessment during oral presentations can aid classroom management by increasing student participation in discussions, which has been reported as valuable by students (Figl, Bauer, Mangler, & Motschnig, 2006). It also assists teachers in maintaining students' attention on their peers' presentations (Sellick, 2016).

However, despite the many benefits of peer assessment that have been identified, some teachers still express concerns (Lu & Bol, 2007). These concerns include unequal participation created by student resistance due to a lack of confidence in assessing their peers (Falchikov, 2005) and cultural issues such as grading peers' work making students uncomfortable (Min, 2005). Furthermore, Sluijsmans and Prins (2006) state that the skills involved in peer assessment are particularly complex and difficult to acquire, with students that have not been adequately prepared and trained being prone to miscommunication (Taferner, 2008) and the possibility that students will assess their peers based on their relationships rather than their actual performance (White, 2009).

While student trepidation in assessing their peers has been identified as an issue (Cheng & Warren, 2005), student assessments have been found to be both reliable (Marcoulides & Simkin, 1995) and to correlate closely with teacher marks, albeit with a tendency to undermark (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Stefani, 1994).

Reviews of student opinions regarding the use of peer assessment have generally indicated positive results, with students reporting that they find the process to be fair, valuable, and enjoyable (Sivan, 2000). White (2009) investigated oral presentation peer assessment among female Japanese university students, and found that while the vast majority of students reported peer assessment to be a useful experience, 62% of students reported finding it difficult to do, 34% reported being uncomfortable assessing their peers, and 25% reported discomfort in being assessed by their peers. This is in contrast to results obtained by Cornelius and Kinghorn (2014), who also investigated peer assessment among Japanese university students and found that the majority (77%) were comfortable with the use of peer assessment, but also that a majority of the students (64%) lacked confidence in their ability to assess other students' language ability.

While students' attitudes towards peer assessment are important to its implementation and effectiveness (Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), teachers also have personal beliefs that influence their classroom practices (Borg, 2003). As teachers' attitudes impact on how they teach (Kember, 1997), the way peer assessment is conducted, or whether it is implemented at all, will depend on the teachers' conceptions of teaching. The way in which a peer assessment activity is prepared and implemented directly impacts on the extent to which students engage in and learn from the process (Black & William, 1998). If teachers do not perceive peer assessment to have much

value, it is likely that students will not fully engage in the activity (Gielen, Dochy & Onghena, 2010).

Having previously introduced peer assessment of oral presentations successfully in junior high school (Sellick, 2016) and senior high school contexts (Bury & Sellick, 2015) in Japan, the authors subsequently introduced peer assessment of oral presentations into their university classes. The particular interview assessment used in this study has been described in Sellick (2018). That report was aimed at teachers and investigated the practicalities of, and student responses to, the interview assessment method used. This article investigates students' opinions regarding the use of peer assessment in general, and outlines the consequent pedagogical implications. The methodology described below was derived from Sellick (2018).

Context and Participants

The peer assessment activity was implemented at a private university in Japan. Students at this university are required to take English oral communication classes in their first year, with additional elective and semi-elective oral communication classes open to students from years two through four who wish to continue to improve their English communication skills. Student English ability ranges from false beginner to upper-intermediate, and in most cases students are not sorted by ability, but according to their faculty and major (students majoring in education will study together, for example). Each oral communication course includes three or four different kinds of productive speaking test spaced through the course: recitations, presentations, skits, and interviews.

A total of 78 first year students took part, 60 from the Faculty of Teacher Education (33 male, 27 female) and 18 from the Faculty of

Information Technology (11 male, seven female). Participating classes were taught by the authors and thus the students were recruited via convenience sampling.

Method

The final test of the oral communication courses was an interview in English of three to seven minutes duration. One lesson was set aside for the students to prepare a set of ten interview questions which were based on the course material and which the students wanted to ask their peers. Some time during that preparation lesson was also used to teach and to practice incidental language appropriate for both the interviewer and interviewee roles. The interviews took place during the penultimate lesson of the course, with the students sitting face to face at the front of the class. The interviews were conducted in a chain-like fashion, such that Student A interviewed Student B, Student B then switched seats and interviewed Student C, and so on, until the final student interviewed Student A to complete the chain. Students were allowed to reference their question sheet when playing the interviewer role, but not when playing the interviewee role.

In order to ensure that the other students in the class paid attention to the interviews rather than rehearsing for their own, each student was given a mark sheet requiring them to provide their own marks for each of their classmate's performance as both interviewer and interviewee. The students were informed that their score for the test would be a combination of the peer marks and the teacher's score (which used the same criteria). A sample cell for the peer assessment is provided below. In order to provide peer assessment training for the students and to set a scoring standard, the teacher produced sample language which

the students assessed. The student grades were then elicited orally and discussed.

Table 1. Peer assessment cell for one student

Name:		Interviewee	
Interviewer		Interviewee	
Pronunciation Score:	/5	Pronunciation Score:	/5
Delivery Score:	/15	Content Score:	/10
Total Score:	/20	Delivery Score:	/15
		Total Score:	/30
Comments:			

During the final lesson of the course, after the students had been informed of their scores, they were asked to reflect on their peer assessment experiences by completing an eight-item survey questionnaire (Appendix). Responses to open items were provided in English.

Results

Of the 78 questionnaires distributed, all were returned, representing a 100% response rate. However, one respondent failed to provide responses to items 2, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the questionnaire.

The results obtained from multiple option items (in which students could select multiple options if desired) and the binary items are presented below in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Table 2. Item 1, 3, and 4 (Multiple Option) Results

Response	1. How did you feel when your teacher told you about this activity?	3. How did you feel about being assessed by your classmates?	4. How did you feel about assessing your classmates?
Interested	21	20	15
Excited	7	8	14
Happy	0	1	1
Worried	16	9	10
Nervous	20	23	24
Surprised	20	12	6
No Feeling	12	18	15
Other	1	1	3

In response to Item 1 (How did you feel when your teacher told you about this activity?), the students' responses indicated that the peer assessment was unexpected, but an activity that interested them while at the same time creating a sense of trepidation. Only a single 'Other' response was obtained, which was presented as the question, 'Why?'

Item 3 investigated the students' feelings about being assessed by another student, with students expressing roughly equal amounts of unconcern, trepidation, and interest in doing so. One student also reported feeling that it would be difficult to experience.

Item 4 (How did you feel about assessing your classmates?), found that students were more likely to feel trepidation about assessing their peers than unconcern, with feelings of interest and excitement also common. Three 'Other' responses were obtained, with students indicating that it was difficult to do, that all their peers were the same, and that it was confusing.

Table 3. Item 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 (Binary Item) Results

Item	Yes	No	Modified Wald
2. Have you done peer assessment before?	31	46	0.4026*
5. Was it difficult to do peer assessment?	61	16	0.7922*
6. Do you think you needed more training in how to peer mark?	12	63	0.8182*
7. Would you like to do peer assessment again?	26	51	0.3377*
8. Do you think peer assessment should be used in other classes?	44	33	0.5714*

*falls within the 99% confidence interval

Item 2 asked the students, 'Have you done peer assessment before?' While the majority of the students stated that they had no such prior experience, a significant minority did report having experienced peer assessment before. These experiences included while studying abroad, in elementary school when making group presentations, in junior high school Social Science classes, in senior high school English and Art classes, and in different courses at the same university; in particular English Conversation and Teaching Practice lessons.

Item 5 followed up on the students' feelings by asking them if they felt the peer assessment was difficult to do. A large majority of students responded that this was the case. Feedback included, 'I didn't understand how to distinguish people,' 'I worried that I would score people on how hard they tried rather than their ability,' 'I was worried that my English was not good enough to allow me to score others,' 'Each person was different, so how could I mark them?', 'It was difficult because I didn't know the students,' 'Everyone did well,' and, 'I didn't have confidence, so I was nervous and worried.'

The response to Item 6 (Do you think you needed more training in how to peer mark?) showed very strongly that the students felt the training was sufficient. Feedback included, 'I cooperated and I was able to do it,' 'We needed to think for ourselves,' but also, 'I didn't know if my way of thinking was correct.'

Item 7 asked whether the students would like to undertake peer assessment again, with the response being strongly negative. Feedback included, 'Just once is okay,' and 'I want to forget it.'

The final item, 'Do you think peer assessment should be used in other classes?' found a slim majority of students responding that this should be the case. Student comments included, 'We can find our weak areas,' and, 'I

Table 4. Item 7 Results by Class

Class	Yes	No	Modified Wald
1	2	18	0.1000*
2	1	9	0.1000*
3	1	9	0.1000*
4	7	14	0.3333*
5	15	2	0.8824*
*falls within the 99% confidence interval			

can learn many things,' but also, 'It isn't accurate.'

While the results obtained from each class on the survey questionnaire were indistinguishable for most items, there was a distinct variation in the results obtained for item 7 (Would you like to do peer assessment again?), as shown in Table 4. While classes 1 through 4 were clearly opposed to repeating peer assessment, the contrary opinion was expressed by class 5. The reasons underlying this discrepancy become clear when it is understood that class 5 was made up of English Education students, i.e. future teachers of English. Unlike the students in classes 1 through 4, for whom English was a required subject of greater or lesser utility, the class 5 students faced a career of ongoing assessment of their English ability both formally, in tests and by the their peers, and informally, by their future students. For these students, gaining experience in giving and receiving peer feedback is an essential part of their training. That the students understood this can be seen in their feedback comments: 'We can study each other,' 'I can hear everyone's opinions, and it is good for me,' 'I can see my strong and weak points,' 'I want to assess people to learn their ideas,' 'There are many things I can learn,' 'It is important for us to evaluate other people,' 'I think it is good experience for the future,' and, 'We get better if we do this.'

Pedagogic Implications

While students found the peer assessment activity interesting and exciting, significant levels of worry, nervousness, and surprise were indicated, both in terms of being assessed by peers and assessing peers. These data indicate that it is imperative teachers adopt teaching strategies that promote collaborative learning and the sharing of knowledge in order to help build a sense of community within the classroom and lower any possible stresses that students may be experiencing. It may be that adopting a social constructivist perspective is the best approach for achieving this where learning is the product of "a social and collaborative activity that is facilitated rather than directly taught by the teacher" (Holmes, Tangney, Fitzgibbon, Savage, & Mehan, 2001, p.2).

The data indicate that the majority of students in this study had no previous experience of peer assessment, which may explain why the large majority of respondents found the activity difficult to do. That so many students indicated finding peer assessment a challenge illustrates it is essential for teachers to provide their students with enough practice. This supports previous research in which it was found ineffective peer assessment is most commonly a direct result of lack of adequate preparation of students (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001; Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel, Van Merriënboer, & Martens, 2004; Sadler, 1998). However, it is only teachers that have had training in peer assessment themselves that can pass the knowledge and skills on to their students. Therefore, it can be stated that teachers across all schools must be sufficiently trained in the practice of peer assessment for it to be successfully implemented on a large scale.

Due to possible differences between a prescriptive curriculum, teacher beliefs, and actual teacher practices, the implementation of peer assessment

can be varied (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2002), especially in the context of oral presentations. The large majority of participants in this study indicated that while they found it difficult to do peer assessment, they did feel that they had received enough training. It is therefore suggested that one successful approach in this context is the one set out in this article in which particular importance was placed on discussing the grading criteria and ensuring they were fully explained rather than just transmitted to the students in a top-down manner.

While overall, the group indicated that their preference for peer assessment was as a one-time experience, it was identified that students studying to become English teachers wanted to conduct further peer assessment in the future. White (2009) showed that well-conducted peer assessment could be valuable as a learning opportunity in itself, and the statements made in response to Item 7 of the questionnaire by these students indicated that they saw peer assessment in this way. These results indicate that peer assessment can be introduced into any English course at university – once, at least – and that the students will perceive it to have benefits and express interest in the process, while also finding it difficult and nerve-wracking.

Students' attitudes towards peer assessment play a central role in both its implementation and effectiveness (Zhu & Mitchell, 2012). These attitudes can vary depending on the extent to which students have been persuaded that such approaches will lead to improvement, trained to provide peer group feedback effectively, provided with clear goals and guidelines, and whether group members are held accountable for their feedback. Consequently, if the intention of the instructor is to make peer assessment a central part of the course assessment scheme, it is necessary, as noted by Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001), to consider the students'

motivation for studying English, their needs, and the potential fit between the use of peer assessment and the students' future goals on a course by course basis. In this way, the benefits of peer assessment are maximized while the drawbacks are minimized.

Conclusion

The results obtained show that students valued the opportunity to take part in peer assessment, and endorsed the idea that other classes should use peer assessment. Alongside these positives, however, the students also reported significant levels of worry, nervousness, and difficulty. It is suggested that teachers employ the social constructivism teaching methodology in order to best create a positive atmosphere in which students can feel comfortable both assessing peers and being assessed by peers.

It is also posited that students need adequate time and training to be able to successfully engage with peer assessment. However, this can only be achieved if teachers are also sufficiently trained. Furthermore, the training of students should involve discussion and not be conducted using a purely top-down approach.

Finally, it is imperative that teachers remember that each class is different and responses to new activities will vary. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers assess how peer assessment fits into the overall aims and objectives of the courses they are teaching.

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Appendix – Peer Assessment Questionnaire

1. How did you feel when your teacher told you about this activity?

先生から他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつけるようにと言われたとき、どのように感じましたか？

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Interested ・興味を持った | e. Nervous ・緊張した |
| b. Excited ・わくわくした | f. Surprised ・びっくりした |
| c. Happy ・うれしかった | g. No feeling ・何も思わなかった |
| d. Worried ・心配した | h. Other ・その他 _____ |

2. Have you done peer assessment before?

今まで他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつけたことはありますか？

Yes ・はい No ・いいえ

If Yes, when? 詳しく教えてください _____

3. How did you feel about being assessed by your classmates?

他の人に点数をつけられることを、どのように感じましたか？

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Interested ・興味を持った | e. Nervous ・緊張した |
| b. Excited ・わくわくした | f. Surprised ・びっくりした |
| c. Happy ・うれしかった | g. No feeling ・何も思わなかった |
| d. Worried ・心配した | h. Other ・その他 _____ |

4. How did you feel about assessing your classmates?

他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつけることを、どのように感じましたか？

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Interested ・興味を持った | e. Nervous ・緊張した |
| b. Excited ・わくわくした | f. Surprised ・びっくりした |
| c. Happy ・うれしかった | g. No feeling ・何も思わなかった |
| d. Worried ・心配した | h. Other ・その他 _____ |

5. Was it difficult to do peer assessment?

他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつけるのは難しかったですか？

Yes・はい No・いいえ

Please explain. 詳しく教えてください _____

6. Do you think you needed more training in how to peer mark?

他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつけるトレーニングは、もっと必要だと思いますか？

Yes・はい No・いいえ

Please explain. 詳しく教えてください _____

7. Would you like to do peer assessment again?

他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつける機会が、またあるといいと思いますか？

Yes・はい No・いいえ

Please explain. 詳しく教えてください _____

8. Do you think peer assessment should be used in other classes?

他の人のプレゼンテーションに点数をつける機会が、他の授業でも必要だと思いますか？

Yes・はい No・いいえ

Please explain. 詳しく教えてください _____

(アンソニー セリック・准教授、ジェームス ベリー・准教授)