Exploring targeted peer feedback processes and discussing the value of peer feedback

What this research was about and why it is important
University learners, including language learners, are increasingly encouraged to judge the quality of their classmates’ work and provide what is called peer feedback. Educational researchers have suggested that active participation in peer feedback can help learners better understand assessment tasks, identify features of quality in classmates’ work and in their own, and, ultimately, achieve higher grades. As an English for Academic Purposes teacher, I reflected on this and was consequently puzzled by my learners’ apparent lack of enthusiasm for peer feedback. I therefore worked with my academic and business English learners, curious to explore their views about peer feedback. I observed how they responded to a peer feedback innovation which required them to provide feedback to classmates delivering oral presentations, with the feedback targeting areas chosen by the presenters themselves. The study showed that most learners agreed that peer feedback was potentially of value and I saw many learners take part enthusiastically in the peer feedback tasks and produce detailed feedback for their classmates. However, it was also clear that some learners saw little value in the peer feedback they received, with a small minority deeply critical.

What the researcher did
- I used Exploratory Practice, a form of Practitioner Research, to investigate my peer feedback processes.
- Between weeks 2-7 of a 12-week semester, I required learners (29 academic English, 14 business English) to decide for themselves which aspects of their oral presentations they would most like to receive peer feedback on in preparation for a later assessed oral presentation task. Each week, different students as ‘presenters’ gave a practice presentation in class and before starting asked classmates as ‘audience members’ to provide feedback targeting 3 specific assessment criteria (e.g. grammar, pronunciation, relevance) felt to be especially important.
- I regularly discussed peer feedback with learners. For example, one week we compared composing peer feedback and receiving it. Another week we discussed how peer feedback skills developed at university might transfer usefully to the workplace. I also surveyed learners on their attitudes towards and beliefs about peer feedback.
- As a tutor and module leader, I collected data through a combination of reflection, research, classroom discussion with my learners and through observation and analysis of the peer feedback my learners produced.

What the researcher found
- Most of my learners strongly agreed that peer feedback processes were potentially worthwhile and the detailed peer feedback they gave, and way they discussed it in class, suggested they saw value in it. Learners successfully used language frames/chunks that I provided to them as their teacher (e.g. to praise, to suggest, to sensitively critique) to help them engage in discussions of peer feedback.
- Meanwhile, only a few students mentioned psychological and/or cultural concerns about peer feedback.
- However, my learners remained lukewarm about the usefulness of the actual peer feedback they received from classmates and a few learners were strongly critical of the peer feedback processes, in many cases explaining that this was because they felt that some peers did not have the necessary expertise to judge classmates’ work.

Things to consider
- In this study, the detailed peer feedback that many learners composed and the discussions that took place in class strongly suggested that many saw value in principle in the peer feedback processes even if the reality of the peer feedback product they received was not always useful. It reminded me that understanding learners’ attitudes and beliefs is often complex and that teachers must have courage in their convictions to proceed with classroom innovations, even when the reception is lukewarm in some quarters.
- This study showed me how peer feedback can create space for my teacher feedback, enriching the overall feedback resource available. It also highlighted two key areas for support: 1) help in choosing areas for peers to target with their feedback 2) language chunks/frames to engage as fully as possible in and with peer feedback processes.
- This research showed me that while requiring presenters to consider which areas they would like peers to target with their feedback in advance did result in a more actively engaged audience, audience members’ interests in relation to peer feedback should not be overlooked. They should have the option to provide peer feedback in areas of their choice. This in turn might help to counter accusations of a lack of expertise, allowing them to choose areas in which they could credibly claim to have expertise.

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