

Towards Learner Autonomy in Postgraduate Language Studies: Self and Peer-Evaluation in the Development of Academic Discussion Skills

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Abstract

This brief report sets out, firstly, to present a rationale for requiring students to engage in the evaluation of their own and others' performances in academic discussions. It is suggested that self- and peer-evaluation activities are not simply useful additions to formal institutional reviews of performance, but are the primary means through which students may become increasingly aware of the recursive linkage between learning processes and outcomes, and through which they may learn to become progressively more autonomous in terms of developing self-directed learning styles. Postgraduate students were chosen as subjects for this study because, working in relative isolation on individualized programmes of study, they, far more than undergraduate students, have the need for the metacognitive and pragmatic skills which are developed through systematically applied self- and peer-evaluation exercises. The second section of the report then goes on to describe three techniques used to facilitate the gathering of evaluative data: the double ring technique, the shadowing technique and the reflective journal format. Finally, research outcomes are analysed qualitatively and are found to show positive perceptions of the self- and peer-evaluation processes among students. The report concludes by noting, in addition, the energising effect on teaching of on-going and mostly real-time learner feedback.

Introduction

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Language Centre offers a tailor-made English for Academic Purposes course for its postgraduate student body. Due to the voluntary nature of the course, the urgent language needs of students and that the course is not formally assessed, the necessity of evaluation instruments which reflect students' perceptions of both their own and their peers' performances in oral tasks has become evident. Initial data compilation, as well as the description of the findings, will be further discussed as a means of exploring the inherent learning benefits of student-centred evaluation and assessment.

The research reported here was carried out as part of a funded Action Learning Project and took place during a single academic semester. It was integrated into a 10-hour Discussion Skills unit of the postgraduate EAP course offered every semester. The research participants included 30 students (MPhil, PhD and visiting scholars from various science and engineering departments) from a total course enrolment of 80, of whom the majority were from mainland China (19), some local to Hong Kong (5) and a significant minority from elsewhere: Iran (1), Turkey, India, Italy and Germany (5). This variation in linguistic background is of particular interest as it adds an interesting cross-cultural dimension to the enquiry as well as provides an authentic reason for using English in developing discussion skills.

Pedagogic Rationale

Student evaluation of the outcomes and products of the learning processes in which they are engaged is certainly not a new concept. Moore and Hunter (1993) have suggested ways in which student self-evaluations may be integrated with formal institutional formative and summative assessments. In the UK, Raven (1988) has examined the effectiveness of peer-evaluations on discussions in a senior secondary school setting. In the Hong Kong context, Conway et al. (1991) have examined the effectiveness of the peer evaluation on contributions made to a group project. Most of the research findings, however, derive from studies whose subjects were native speakers using their mother tongue. Moore and Hunter's as well as Raven's subjects were all native speakers of English. There is a paucity of studies into students' self- and peer-evaluations in a foreign or second language context. This element is added to the motivation for the research. The findings presented here were thus gathered in an effort to add to the body of evidence currently available on non-native speaking subjects.

An equally important reason for carrying out the research was to encourage postgraduate students to become increasingly more autonomous and self-directed in their learning. Researchers agree that self- and peer-evaluation promotes learner autonomy by enabling students to 'learn in their own voice' (Haswell, 1993, p.90). Student self- and peer-evaluation helps to establish in the minds of learners the link between learning processes and outcomes by directly engaging students in the assessment of learning processes. This active engagement between the students and their learning is especially important for postgraduates, who often exhibit considerable variation in learning styles. In addition, older adult students usually have fully-formed opinions and substantial experience that must be integrated with new learning if the new learning is to be assimilated effectively (MacGregor, 1993, p.13).

The self-evaluation instruments involve learners in appraising their learning out-comes, and allow them to integrate the various stages of the learning process in a holistic way. As a result, learners develop a metacognitive awareness of the re-cursive nature of the learning, which in turn is likely to help them develop into more effective lifelong learners.

Peer-evaluation helps learners to become established as members of a particular learning community. This is of great importance in counter-balancing the effects of competitive, examination-oriented education, and is particularly important for post-graduate students who, because of the relative isolation in which they operate, may be prone to anomie vis-à-vis the wider university community (Haswell, 1993, p.90; MacGregor, 1993, pp.10–13).

Needs of the Students

Our postgraduate students find themselves in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand their entry level of proficiency in spoken English is generally poor; on the other hand, however, there are no formal departmental requirements for them to undertake programmes of English language improvement. This situation is in clear conflict with the actual English language demands made on the students. Within the university, postgraduate students discuss and debate complex subject specialisms with supervisors and other colleagues, deliver lectures (if they are Teaching Assistants) and also present seminars for the undergraduates they teach. In addition, our postgraduate students need to be able to discuss specialist issues with colleagues within the wider, international academic community.

In response to this situation, the university's Language Centre introduced English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses for postgraduate students to focus on identified academic English language needs. One great concern is that post-graduate students tend to work in relative isolation from the academic community of which they are members. This is especially true of science and

technology students, as much of their work is carried out in the controlled and remote setting of the laboratory. For this reason, they have a particularly urgent need to become autonomous and self-directed in their learning — what Moore and Hunter have described as ‘lifelong learners’:

Student self-evaluation, like the best of student learning outcomes assessment activities, is situated in a larger context of educational reform, emphasising ‘improving’ as much as, perhaps more than ‘proving’ (1993, p.79)

In this sense, self-evaluation instruments are not just simply tools for judging performance. They also provide students with various means through which they become more aware of themselves as learners.

Criteria and Techniques for Data Collection

In an effort to explore the effectiveness of students evaluating their own and others’ performances, the following aspects were considered in the design of the evaluation instruments:

- a) Functional language use: agreeing/disagreeing, seeking clarification, expressing opinions, etc.;
- b) Paralanguage: body language and eye contact;
- c) Interpersonal group dynamics: holding the floor, helping others to contribute, etc.;

Data collection was carried out using the three techniques outlined by Green (1995). These are described below:

Peer-evaluation

The Double Ring

As a group holds a discussion, it is observed by an equal number of observer-evaluators who complete certain evaluation instruments. Each evaluator collects data on each member of the discussion group.

Shadowing

This is similar to the double ring, but the observer-evaluators sit just behind and slightly to the side of a particular discussion participant. The observer-evaluator collects data on the ‘shadowed’ participant only.

Self-evaluation

Reflective Journals

Individual students are required to keep a written record of their evaluative reflections throughout the project period. This technique was used to gather data for self-evaluation as it provided an informal medium of communication for students to express themselves freely (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Format of a reflective journal

Reflective Journal Format

YOUR OPINION

Name: _____

Instructor: _____

Date: _____

Please:

1. Express how you feel about your own performance in this discussion.
2. Suggest how you could improve your discussion skills in the next activity in which you participate.

It is important to note that all of the discussions in the 10-hour unit were videotaped. This allowed students who did not wish to receive public feedback on their performance the option of being able to review their own and others' performances in the privacy of the Self-access Centre. Several participants felt more comfortable privately reviewing recorded performances, as they had previously expressed a certain level of discomfort with a more public forum for comments, criticisms and suggestions. Feelings of cultural discomfort have also been discussed by researchers as a possible barrier to candid feedback on personal performance since many cultures do not recognise this type of public 'criticism' from peers (see MacGregor 1993, p.41).

Procedure

Before the students were asked to perform any of the evaluation tasks, they were briefed thoroughly about the evaluation techniques and the rationale behind their use. They were then asked to comment on the various categories (functional language use, paralanguage and interpersonal group dynamics) that were initially suggested by their instructors (Figure 2). After considering the suggestions and comments from the students, a set of criteria was agreed upon and the students began to use a modified version of the evaluation instruments (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 2: Evaluation criteria

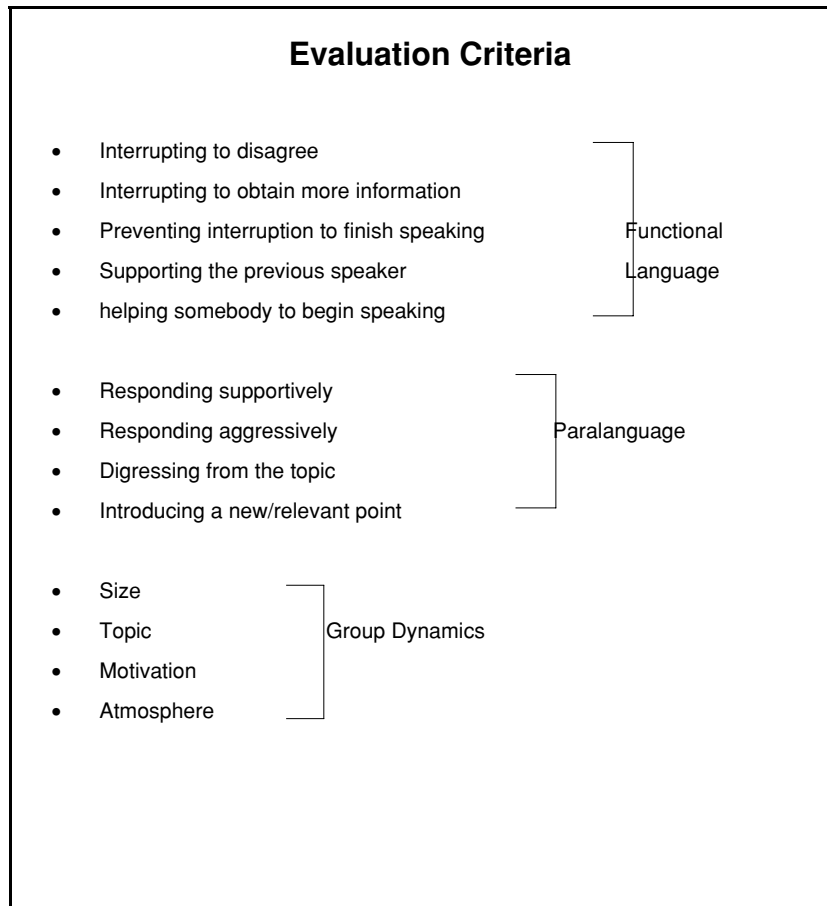


Figure 3: format of peer-evaluation form for use with double ring technique

**Double Ring Technique:
Peer-Evaluation Form
Final Version**

	Behaviour	Participants				
		Dave	Mike	Ken	Mary	Lily
1.	Agreeing					
2.	Disagreeing					
3.	Maintaining the rhythm of the discussion					
4.	Clarifying					
5.	Helping others to contribute					
Total number of contributions						

Figure 4: Format of peer-evaluation form for use with shadowing technique

Shadowing Technique: Peer-Evaluation Form

Final Version

	Behaviour	Language Used	Gestures Used (you can use Chinese to describe)	Appropriacy (3 /X/?)	
				Language	Gesture
1.	Agreeing				
2.	Disagreeing				
3.	Maintaining the rhythm of the discussion				
4.	Clarifying				
5.	Helping others to contribute				

In addition, students were also asked to set goals for their future discussion work in terms of frequency and relevance of contribution according to each criterion. Targets were then set to bolster the impetus to progress. This exercise was completed immediately after students had evaluated their performance in the current discussion (Figure 5). Discussions were videotaped and students were each given a tape in order to privately review their own or their classmate's performance in the discussion. After reviewing the videotapes, students completed the appropriate evaluation forms and returned them to their instructors and/or classmates.

Figure 5: Format of a self-evaluation form for student use

Self-Evaluation Form Final Version

	Behaviour	Language Used	Goal of contributions set last time (in frequency)	Actual contributions	
				Total	
1.	Agreeing		5		
2.	Disagreeing		4		
3.	Maintaining the rhythm of the discussion		5		
4.	Clarifying		5		
5.	Helping others to contribute		3		
Total number of contributions					

The final stage of the evaluation process involved students writing about their personal reactions and feelings toward their performance within the discussion. They were also encouraged to make suggestions concerning ways in which they might improve their performance in future discussions. These written comments were offered in a reflective journal format which, in turn, formed the basis for personal reflection and goal-setting in terms of possible future improvements. A representative sample of comments is given in the next section of this paper. The assessment criteria were repeated over and over again in the various evaluation forms in an effort to focus the teaching points of the evaluative process, as well as use the instruments as 'training tools' whereby students could become more aware of their roles as discussion participants.

Reflective Journal Entries

Student 1: Alireza Afshar Mehrabi (Iran — Ph.D., Comp. Sc.)

Date: March 3, 1995

Discussion #1 Topic: 'What characteristics make a good post-graduate student?'

My first impression was that my performance was better than what I expected, although I had a lot of deficiencies. Before the beginning of the discussion, we decided who would be the leader of the group I therefore think our discussion was quite well organized, without a lot of interference. However, this makes the weakness of our language skills more significant. After watching myself in the discussion group, I am now sure that developing my language skills will improve my overall performance, especially my ability to express my ideas better.

Date: March 7, 1995

Discussion #2 Topic: 'Which books should be printed?'

I think my performance in this discussion was better than in the first discussion. I think my better performance was due to two main factors:

- a. The language of agreement and disagreement we learnt in the class helped me a lot, especially in starting a discussion.
- b. This time I was much less anxious and nervous about being videotaped.

Date: May 5, 1995

Discussion (Final) Topic: 'Smoking — for and against'

I think we had a good debate and were able to express and discuss our ideas. In this discussion I was not nervous or uncomfortable and tried to practise some of the techniques we were taught during our class. Whether or not I performed well in this debate is a point that must be considered by others. However, I hope that answer will be that I performed well, which I think must be due to the performance of the whole discussion group.

Student 2: Qinbiao Li (China — visiting professor, Chemical Engineering)

Date: March 3, 1995

Discussion #1 Topic: 'What characteristics make a good post-graduate student?'

Even though our group was of a good size and the discussion in our group was very active, I could not talk much and for most part just listened. During the discussion, I basically used hand action to express my opinions, which was not helpful to the discussion. When I tried to state my views, I had a difficult time in organizing even a good sentence, as I had to spend much time in recalling the word pronunciation and looking for the word. The only way which may improve my performance in discussions is, as my teacher said, that I should read, talk (both out loud), watch and listen more.

Date: May 5, 1995

Discussion (Final) Topic: 'Smoking — for and against'

I think my performance in this discussion was better than the last time. I was active on this topic and expressed my own opinion confidently. I could speak English more fluently and was able to express my opinions in fuller sentences. The pronunciation was also more correct. After the instruction on the language of agree and disagree, I find that I have been using them all through the discussion. But there are also some aspects that I can still improve upon in the future. For instance, I can use more appropriate body language which plays an important role in discussions.

Student 3: Yacine Atif (Algeria — PhD, Computer Science)

Date: May 5, 1995

Discussion (Final) Topic: 'Smoking — for and against'

I think that one of the most helpful aspects I can have in good communication skills is to defend my point of view in a group discussion. Today, though in my own opinion I do not agree with what was written in the text assigned to me by defending the right to smoke, I could find the linguistic tools to communicate enough for the benefit of the 'smokers'. It definitely shows a great improvement in my ability to 'dare' to talk in English within a group discussion, since before I just was not taking these kinds of 'risks'! Also, I found that I listen more to others before building an answer based on their arguments. The debate has shown both sides of improvement in communication — listening and speaking.

Conclusion

The reflective journal entries from the initial, medial and final discussions provide some qualitative evidence that the aims of the project had been met, although the small research population involved means that any findings are necessarily tentative. Evidence of input from class materials and peer- and self-evaluation instruments can be noted in the reflective journals as students refer to the specific language points that were taught during classroom sessions. Improvements in overall confidence in oral ability and fluency can also be discovered from each of the students' reflective journals. Students mention such points as an increased awareness of themselves as discussion participants, a growing sense of assuredness when taking 'risks' during group discussions and an overall sense of personal satisfaction in goal setting with regard to their oral contributions in the group. In a more general sense, the personal comments offered by the students illustrate two major improvements in their perceptions of themselves as learners:

- a) An increase in confidence and competence in the use of English in oral discussion tasks.
- b) An increase in awareness of functional language use.

The approach taken by the project was learner-centred and aimed at developing discussion skills with the main focus on the derivation and implementation of peer- and self-evaluation instruments. Despite the qualitative, small-scale nature of the research, we conclude that the learners perceived that the experimental process described increased their confidence and competence in participating in and evaluating their performance in academic discussions, and that their individual awareness of the participatory nature of the discussion process was significantly increased. Teaching, too, was energised by continuous student feedback and the resultant modifications to the pedagogic approach that this suggested.

Comments made by students about self and peer assessment in the post-course questionnaire:

Question: Have the self assessment tasks made you more aware of your own performance? Why or why not? Please explain.

Responses:

- Actually, it made me more aware of my own performance and the good and badpoints in my performance, which can be learned from the self-assessment tasks.
- Yes, because I did not assess my own performance before, so I did not know my shortcoming in English. After this class, I learnt to follow through with what I think must be improved.
- Yes, I also did not want to give a poor performance because I felt ashamed especially when I looked at myself in the videotape.
- Yes. From this task, I can see some of my unconscious small actions. Also, it is a good way to behave like an outsider to view myself.

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