Empowering students: The roles of peer- and self-evaluation in the development of discussion skills in English

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INTRODUCTION

It has been widely accepted that regardless of cultural and linguistic background, a common concern among adult language learners is not having direct control over their own learning. This concern has been further emphasised by research that has considered not only the inherent benefits associated with independent learning, but also the value of student-centred evaluation. The implications of student-centred learning and evaluation in the second or foreign language context have been researched and reported in numerous studies (e.g. Candy 1989; Esch 1994; Nunan 1994). In each case, varying degrees of student empowerment were achieved through the establishment of a sense of personal ownership among learners. It was based upon this assumption that our study was carried out and implemented among postgraduate students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

BACKGROUND

There is, of course, nothing startlingly new in students’ evaluating the outcomes and products of the learning processes on which they are engaged. Moore & Hunter (1993) have suggested ways in which students’ self-evaluations may be integrated with formal institutional formative and summative assessments. In the UK, Raven (1988) has examined the effectiveness of peer-evaluations of discussions in a senior secondary school setting. In the Hong Kong context, Conway et al. (1991) have examined the effectiveness of the peer evaluation of 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 & Hunter’s, and 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 and this added to the motivation for the research.
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology offers an English for Academic Purposes course to its postgraduate student population from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Most of them are from non-English-speaking countries, such as China, Iran and India and their native languages are not English. 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 ten-hour Discussion Skills unit of the postgraduate EAP course offered during the semester. The research population involved thirty MPhil and PhD students and visiting scholars from various Science and Engineering departments. Nineteen students were from mainland China, five from Hong Kong and the rest from Iran, Turkey, India, Italy and Germany.

An equally important reason for carrying out the research was to encourage the postgraduate students to become increasingly more autonomous and self-directed in their learning. Researchers agree that self- and peer-evaluation promote learner autonomy, by enabling students to ‘learn in their own voice’ (Haswell 1993:90). Students’ self- and peer-evaluations help them to become increasingly aware of the link between learning processes and their outcomes by directly engaging them in the assessment of such processes. This active engagement between the students and their learning is especially important for postgraduates, who may have great variations in their learning styles. In addition, older adult students usually have fully formed opinions and substantial experience that must be integrated with new learning if this is to have value (MacGregor 1993b:13).

The self-evaluation instruments involve learners in appraising their learning outcomes, 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 recursive nature of the learning, and this, 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 postgraduate students who, because of the relative isolation in which they operate, may be prone to anomie vis-à-vis the wider university community (cf. Haswell 1993:90, MacGregor 1993b: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 real-world English language demands made on the students. Within the University, students discuss and debate complex specialist subject matter with supervisors and other colleagues, carry out Teaching Assistant duties, and also lead seminars for the undergraduates they teach. In addition,
these 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. Of great concern is the fact that postgraduate 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 controlled settings such as laboratories. For this reason, they have a particularly urgent need to become autonomous and self-directed in their learning. Thus self-evaluation instruments are not simply tools for judging performance. They also provide students with various means through which they become more aware of themselves as learners.

METHOD

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

• functional language use — agreeing/disagreeing, seeking clarification, expressing opinions etc.;
• paralanguage — body language and eye contact;
• interpersonal group dynamics — holding the floor, helping others to contribute etc.

Data collection was carried out using three basic techniques: peer-evaluation (the ‘double ring’, and ‘shadowing’) and self-evaluation (reflective journals).

Peer-evaluation

The double ring: As a group hold a discussion, they are 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 (cf. Green 1995).

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 (Figure 1).

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.

Figure 1: Reflective journal.

It is important to note that all of the discussions in the ten-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. The need to review recorded performances privately was more comfortable for several of the participants, 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 been discussed by researchers as a possible barrier to candid feedback on personal performance, since many cultures do not advocate this type of public attention (cf. MacGregor 1993a:41).

Criteria for evaluation
Students’ discussion results

- Interrupting to disagree
- Interrupting to obtain more information
- Preventing interruption to finish speaking
- Supporting the previous speaker
- Helping somebody to begin speaking

- Responding supportively
- Responding aggressively
- Digressing from the topic
- Introducing a new/relevant point

- Size
- Topic
- Motivation
- Atmosphere

Functional language
Paralanguage
Group dynamics
Figure 2: Criteria for evaluation.
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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Agreeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Disagreeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Maintaining the rhythm of the discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Clarifying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Helping others to contribute</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of contributions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Peer-evaluation form (double-ring technique).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Language used</th>
<th>Gestures used</th>
<th>Appropriateness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(you may use Chinese to describe)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Agreeing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Disagreeing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Maintaining the rhythm of the discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Clarifying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Helping others to contribute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Peer-evaluation form (shadowing technique).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Language used</th>
<th>Goal of contributions set last time (in frequency)</th>
<th>Actual contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Agreeing</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Disagreeing</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Maintaining the rhythm of the discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Clarifying</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Helping others to contribute</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of contributions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Self-evaluation form.

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. The assessment criteria (see Figures 4, 5 and 6) 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. The following are extracted from some of the participants’ journals and the comments made by them in the post-course evaluation, which clearly reflect their attitudes.
towards the effectiveness of self- and peer-evaluation as learning strategies and their perceptions of themselves as learners.

**Student 1: Alireza (Iran — PhD, Computer Science)**
Date: March 3, 1995
*Discussion topic: ‘What characteristics make a good postgraduate 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, therefore I 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, now I am sure that developing my language skills, will improve my overall performance, especially my ability to express my ideas better.*

Date: March 7, 1995
*Discussion 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 2 main factors:

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

Date: May 5, 1995
*Discussion topic: ‘Smoking — for and against’*

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

**Student 2: Li (China — Visiting Professor, Chemical Engineering)**
Date: March 3, 1995
*Discussion topic: ‘What characteristics make a good postgraduate student?’*

*Even if our group is of a good size and the discussion in our group is very active, but I could not talk more and for most time I just listened. During the discussion, I had more nonuseful hand’s action which was not helpful to the discussion when I tried to express my opinion, it seemed to be difficult for me to organize even a good sentence, because I had to spend more time to recall the word pronunciation and look for the word. The only way which may improve*
my performance in discussion is, as my teacher said, that I should read more, talk more, both loudly and watch and listen more, both broadly.

Date: May 5, 1995
Discussion topic: ‘Smoking — for and against’

Self-evaluation about my performance in the discussion, I think my performance in this discussion is better than the last time. I am active on this topic and express my own opinion confidently. I can speak English more fluently and am able to express my opinion in fuller sentences. The pronunciation is also more correct. After the instruction on the language of agree and disagree, I find myself have been using them all through the discussion. But there are also some aspects that I can still improved in the future, like that I can use more appropriate body language which plays an important role in the discussion.

Student 3: Yacine (Algeria — PhD, Computer Science)
Date: May 5, 1995
Discussion topic: ‘Smoking — for and against’

I think that one of the most helpful aspects to have good communication skills, is that I can defend my point of view in a group discussion. Today, though in my own opinion, I don’t 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 wasn’t taking these kind of ‘risks’! Also, I found that I am more listening to the others before building an answer based on their arguments. The debate has shown both sides of improvement in communication—listening and speaking.

Comments on 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 let me more aware of my own performance, the good and bad in performance can be found from the self-assessment tasks.

Yes, because I didn’t assess my own performance before, so I don’t know my shortcoming in English, after this class, I learn to take care of what I think must be improved.

Yes, I also don’t want to give a poor performance because I feel shame especially when I look at myself in the video tape.
Yes. From this task, I can see some unconscious small action of myself. Also, it is a good way to behave like an outsider to view myself.

CONCLUSION

After having carefully examined the reflective journal entries from the initial, medial and final discussions, it would appear that the aims of the project had been met, although the size of the 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 discerned 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 group settings. In a more general sense, the personal comments offered by the students illustrate two major improvements in their perceptions of themselves as learners: an increase in confidence and competence in the use of English in oral discussion tasks, and 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, 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 the continuous student feedback and the resultant modifications to pedagogic approach that this suggested.
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Reference