THE USE OF PEER ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION TO IMPROVE STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ORAL PRESENTATION PERFORMANCE IN A TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

Dwee Chiew Yen

Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
cydwee@uthm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

21st century classrooms are gearing towards student-centered classrooms where learning is deemed to be more meaningful when students are actively engaged in their learning. In a bid to create more student-centered classrooms, the researcher decided to explore the use of peer assessments and reflective discussions in a Technical Communication classroom as part of an action research to improve student participation and oral presentation performance among thirty 18-year-old diploma students studying in Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. The study revealed students in general have a positive perception towards the use of peer assessment and reflective discussion in the classroom. In addition to increased participation and attentiveness in class, improvement in oral presentation performance for the majority of the students (73.3%) was observed. This research shows that with careful planning and scaffolding, positive results can be achieved by employing these two techniques in the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: peer assessment; reflective discussion; oral presentation; performance; ESP.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Technical Communication has been introduced as one of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses for diploma students in Tun Hussein Onn University, Malaysia with the aim of equipping them with skills to meet the demands of the job market. In this course, students learn how to produce technical documents such as reports and proposals, design questionnaires for data collection and prepare effective oral presentations. Most of the activities in this course such as group discussions and oral presentation require students to be actively involved. Despite that, the researcher observed that the students in her class were rather passive in terms of classroom participation. Whenever questions were asked in class, it was difficult to elicit response as students would remain silent until they were called upon. They rarely ask questions or give feedback when prompted.

This situation could be attributed to a number of factors, one of them being language anxiety. Language anxiety can be described as 'the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning' (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Students' low proficiency in English could have caused their lack of confidence in expressing opinions in class. Moreover, traditional teacher-centered classrooms in the Malaysian education system (Saleh & Aziz, 2012) may

have resulted in passive students who have grown used to being spoon fed with information instead of actively contributing to the learning process.

On a separate matter, many Malaysian graduates face the problem of unemployment in recent years due to "their lack of competence in the English language, evident particularly during interviews" (Chan & Tan, 2006). Hence, it is crucial for educators in higher education institutes to place more emphasis on developing students' speaking skills through ESP courses. After all, the employability of a fresh graduate largely depends on how he or she is able to communicate in a clear, concise and effective manner.

Due to these issues discussed above, the researcher decided to explore the use of peer assessment and reflective discussion focusing on oral presentation as part of an action research to find out how it affects students' participation and performance in an ESP classroom.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of teaching and learning is one that is constantly changing as time goes by. In recent years, fellow academicians have been pushed to gradually move from the teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered approach to encourage active learning among students as it is believed to lead to better learning (Kember, 2009). In fact, Biggs suggests that learning occurs when there are "learning focused activities which are engaged by students as a result both of their own perceptions and inputs and of the total teaching context" (Biggs, 1999). The key words to be noted in this statement are 'engagement' and 'learning focused activities' which imply that for effective learning to happen, it is crucial to ensure that students are both engaged and actively involved with the subject matter. This leads us to two suggested activities in this paper which are the use of peer assessments and reflective discussions in a Technical Communication classroom.

Peer Assessments

In the recent years, focus on teaching in the classroom at tertiary level has gradually changed from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach. In order to create a more student–centered classroom, certain measures should be implemented to encourage students to become more active learners who are able to reflect on their own learning. Peer feedback is one of the main components of metacognition and can be one of the ways to promote student participation and performance. According to Ho (2003), the use of peer assessments is one of the ways to prompt students to think critically and be more proactive in their learning. Furthermore, Ho (2003) also added that peer assessment also helps enhance student motivation in learning. Peer assessment also encourages social interaction and improves interpersonal skills and relationships between learners (Sharifi and Hassaskhah, 2011). Other studies (Ho, 2003; Hsu, 2010; Ahangari et al. 2013) have also confirmed that peer assessments have positive effects on student participation in class.

Reflective Discussions

The goal of language learning and language use is to produce autonomous learners (Little, 2007) who are able to take responsibility for their own learning process. According to Allan and Clarke (2007), students should be encouraged to employ reflective strategies in order to become autonomous learners. Reflective strategies are also known as metacognitive

skills, wherein learners learn how to develop strategies to resolve problems, learn from their personal experience, evaluate and monitor their own learning process (Allan & Clarke, 2007). On the other hand, Boud et al. (1985) defined reflection as "those intellectual and affective activities that individuals engage into explore their experience, which leads to new understanding and appreciations".

Keeping reflection journals or having reflective discussions are ways students can engage in reflection. By reflecting on their own experience either through speech or written form, students can be trained to identify their weaknesses and therefore are better able to improve themselves. According to O'Rourke (1998), the expression of linkages between new information with prior knowledge deepens learning. This is supported by Ong (2000) who mentioned that reflection has potential to help make learning meaningful because it allows the individual to express his thoughts and make connections between old and new knowledge.

These studies indicate that peer assessment and reflective learning have huge potential to engage students in their learning through active participation.

The research questions which guide this action research are as follow:

1) What are the students' perception towards peer assessment and reflective discussion?
2) Does peer assessment and reflective discussion help improve students' performance in class?
3) What can be done to improve the practice of peer assessment and reflective discussion in ESP classrooms?

3.0   METHODOLOGY

For this action research, classroom observation, student reflections, peer assessment forms and a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale and a few open-ended questions were employed for the purpose of data collection. Convenience sampling was used in this study. Higgin bottom (2004) defined a convenience sample as a sample which is made up of "participants who are readily available and easy to contact". The researcher had ready access to the diploma students studying in Tun Hussein Onn University, Malaysia as she is a language teacher there. The samples consisted of 30 diploma students aged 18 enrolled in an English course called Technical Communication 1.

The classroom observations were held during Week 7 and Week 14 of Semester 1 2014/2015 as students had their oral presentation during those weeks. Students were divided into six groups of five students each. During Week 7, before students started to present, peer assessment forms were distributed to each student (also known as feedback forms) and clear instructions were given on what to do with the form. It was a simple form which contained four items namely title of the presentation, a question on what the student liked most about the presentation, a question on suggestions for improvements and another item for the student to rate that group's performance on a scale of 1(very poor) to 5(excellent) based on four criteria. The researcher decided to keep the criteria simple namely 1) Organization of the presentation, 2) Content of the presentation, 3) Fluency and preparedness level of the presenters and 4) Attractiveness of the visual aids. This is in line with the recommendation by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) in implementing effective

peer assessment. They proposed the use of overall global marks with clearly defined criteria instead of giving students too many aspects to assess. The students were not required to write their names on the feedback form so that the comments remain anonymous. At the end of the evaluation, marks allocated for peer assessment was 7.5, which is 50% of the total marks for oral presentation whereas marks given by the teacher for each group presentation was also 7.5 which made up another 50% giving a total of 15 marks per oral presentation.

After the oral presentation for all groups ended, the students were asked to return the feedback forms to the respective groups. After that each group was given a list of questions to guide their reflective discussion based on the feedback forms they have received. The questions are as follow:

1) What were some of the challenges faced during the field trip?
2) What did you like/enjoy most about the field trip?
3) What did you think of your presentation? Were the objectives successfully achieved?
4) Which group's presentation did you like the best? List two reasons.
5) What are the challenges encountered during the presentation? List down a few things which can be done to improve future oral presentations.

The researcher (also the teacher) monitored and observed the students, taking down field notes as they carried out the discussion in their respective groups. At the end of 25 minutes, a group representative was selected from each group to present the results of their discussion. The groups were asked to prepare a group reflection report based on the reflective discussion conducted in class as a means of recording the important points they have discussed.
The same procedure was repeated in Week 14, during and after the oral presentation.

In addition to the classroom observation and reflective discussion by the students, a questionnaire was emailed to all students in class at the end of the semester to find out more about their perception towards the use of peer assessment and reflective discussion in class. The students were asked to rate the statements given using a 5-point Likert scale and answer 5 open-ended questions.

4.0   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Classroom Observation

During the first observation where students had to give an oral presentation on their field trip, they were given detailed instructions on what they should do as it was their first time doing peer assessment and reflective discussion. The students were given the feedback forms and asked to grade their peers while they presented. They seemed more focused when the each group presented. No one toyed with their smart phones or did other tasks while the oral presentation was carried out. The questions on the feedback form helped to guide their responses and made students pay more attention as they were required to write down their comments.

During the group discussion, the students were noticeably excited and enthusiastic about reading out the feedback forms that they have obtained from their classmates. Most students were able to give their peers useful comments. For example:

"They can avoid refer notes too much"

"Some of slide contents very hard to read because of not suitable colour and size. Maybe next time they can improve the slide by choose the different colour."

"They should use a video as proof of their journey in Malacca and can make their audience more interested."

"Some of the group members couldn't speak English fluently so they must practise more."

At the same time, there were also students who were not very satisfied with the comments given, claiming that they were too general or unclear. For example:

"Need to work on their teamwork"

"The font not clear"

"Management of time"

"Please serious in your presentation"

Overall however, the feedback received from their peers kept the group discussion lively, made the reflective discussion more interesting and provided each group with food for thought. The students conducted the discussion based on the guided questions shown on PowerPoint slides.

At the end of the group discussion, a representative was picked from each group to share with the class a summarized reflection based on the questions provided. The students were able to give appropriate and succinct responses. Based on their discussion, each group was required to submit a group reflection. This served as a reference for the researcher to cross check with the field notes taken during the discussion. A brief discussion was also conducted with the students about the comments given during the peer assessment and they were given examples of how comments can be more constructive and helpful instead of being too harsh or critical. The students were also reminded not to give comments which were too general.

For the second observation in week 14, the students were more familiar with peer assessment and reflective discussion so only very brief instructions had to be given on what they should do. There were noticeable improvements in the quality of the comments given by the students. The students were able to make more detailed comments with elaboration and examples. For instance:

"Make their presentation short but informative. Their presentation was very long."

"Always prepare a backup plan because they had to delay their presentation just because of a technical problem."

"Their elaboration on their point can be improved. They just give the main point. There's no opinion."

It was also noted that the groups which did the reflective discussion took note of their mistakes made previously were careful not to repeat them. For instance, group 2's members used to read too much during the first presentation but for the second presentation, they only referred to notes written on small index cards and did most of the elaboration on their own. Group 3 made improvements on their slides by sticking to two contrasting colors and by using clearer fonts which were easier to read.

The group discussions based on the peer assessment was also more organized during Week 14 because the students already knew what to expect as well as the main points they should talk about. During the session where students were chosen from each group to give a summary of their reflections, the presenters were able to pick out their main weaknesses and provide solutions on how to improve their future oral presentation. The reflections submitted by the students via email showed the results of their discussion of their weaknesses and suggested solutions to improve themselves.

Perception of Students towards Peer Assessment and Reflective Discussion

No	Statement	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
1	I usually reflect on what I've learnt in class	26.7%	73.3%	-	-	-
2	It is important to reflect on what I've learnt in class	60%	40%	-	-	-
3	Having a guideline makes it easier for me to do my reflection	43.3%	40%	16.7%	-	-
4	Reflective discussion helps me to become a better learner	50%	26.7%	23.3%	-	-
5	Reflective discussion helps me to think of ways to improve myself	50%	30%	20%	-	-
6	I pay more attention in class when I am asked to do peer assessment	20%	60%	20%	-	-
7	My classmates' feedback was useful for me to carry out the reflective discussion	86.7%	13.3%	-	-	-
8	It is motivating to read feedback given by my classmates	93.3%	6.7%	-	-	-
9	It is troublesome to do reflections after the lesson		46.7%	30%	23.3%	-
10	Reflective discussion and giving peer assessments help me think critically	93.3%	6.7%	-	-	-

Through the questionnaire, more in-depth information was obtained from the respondents regarding their perception of the use peer assessment and reflective discussion in class. According to the close-ended questions, the majority of the respondents have a positive perception towards the use of both methods in class. 26.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they usually reflect on what they have learnt in class whereas 73.3% agreed with that statement. 60% strongly agreed that it is important to reflect on what they have learnt in class whereas 40% agreed with the statement. For the statement about "having a guideline makes it easier for me to do my reflection", the response was as follows: 43.3% strongly agreed, 40% agreed whereas 16.7% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. This shows that some of the respondents felt that having a guideline might not be easier for them as guidelines may restrict what they would like to discuss or reflect upon. In general, 76.7% of the respondents agreed that reflective discussions helps them to become better learners whereas 80% of them think that reflective discussions help them think of ways to improve themselves. This result is supported by a study done by Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011) which found that reflective practice facilitate the development of critical thinking skills when students receive continuous support and feedback.

As for the next statement "I pay more attention in class when I am asked to do peer assessment", 20% strongly agreed, 60% agreed whereas 20% were neutral. 86.7% of the respondents thought that their classmates' feedback was useful for them to conduct the reflective discussion but 13.3% neither agreed nor disagreed. On the other hand, 93.3% of the respondents found it motivating to read feedback given by their classmates but 6.7% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. It was interesting to note that 46.7% of the respondents thought that it was troublesome to do reflections after the lesson, 30% were neutral about this statement whereas 23.3% didn't think that doing reflections was troublesome. Finally, 100% of the respondents agreed that reflective discussion and giving peer assessments helped with their critical thinking.

Through the open-ended questions, it was found that 28 out of 30 respondents (93.3%) preferred to write reflections individually. Only four respondents said that they preferred writing reflections in groups. The majority liked doing reflections on their own because it allows them think critically about their own weaknesses and formulate ways to improve themselves. Others also mentioned that it is better to write reflections individually everyone has a different opinion as they evaluate the task given differently. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for writing reflections individually is convenience, as the students do not need to seek confirmation from others when giving their own opinion about something. However, the two students who preferred writing reflections in groups mentioned that it is easier to do so because they are able to get many ideas and also learn about their own mistakes from their group members.

The next question dealt with whether or not the respondents prefer to use peer assessment and reflective discussion again in class. The majority of the respondents preferred the use of peer assessment in class because they felt that the opinions of others are essential in order to learn about one's own weaknesses and to improve. Another respondent commented that peer assessment is important because it enables them to know everyone's opinion and not just from the lecturer. One respondent mentioned that while the feedback may not always be helpful, he preferred peer assessment because he felt more comfortable when friends give suggestions or comments. Another said that she would like to use both methods again because they help improve communication skills in English and build self-confidence. It

was also found that the respondents preferred these methods as they could build stronger friendships by helping each other in the learning process.

What is interesting, however, is that four students mentioned that they did not prefer reflective discussion because they are *"not used to it"*. They felt that *"students may not learn something if they feel uncomfortable or awkward during reflective learning in class"*. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents supported the use of reflective discussion because it helps them to reflect on their weaknesses and mistakes and think of new ways to improve. They also felt that these methods helped to improve their oral presentation performance.

Peer Assessment, Reflective Discussions and Performance

According to the results of oral presentation 1 and oral presentation 2 generated from UTHM's Student Assessment System (SAS), there was an overall improvement in marks ranging from 0.5 to 4 marks for 73.3% of the students evaluated. 13.3% of the students' marks remained constant for both evaluations whereas another 13.3% of the students' marks went down by 0.5 marks, which is 3.3%. This showed that the peer assessment and reflective discussions have a positive impact on the students' oral presentation performance.

Based on the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, all respondents agreed that participating in a reflective discussion was helpful for their second oral presentation. One of the respondents said that the reflection allowed her to *"look back at all the imperfections that were present in the first presentation"* and *"acted as a reference"* when she did the second presentation. Other benefits stated were, the reflections helped them to improve some of their grammatical mistakes, to make their sentence construction clearer, to identify their weaknesses (time management, task delegation, organization of the presentation and etc) and be more motivated to make an improvement on presentation day. However, one respondent said that reflective discussions and peer assessment only did well theoretically because he felt that a few of his group members didn't take the comments or feedback given seriously and hence their second presentation was slightly more disappointing compared to the first.

Additionally, all respondents concurred that peer assessment makes them better learners. Written feedback allowed them to see how the presentation was from the perspective of their classmates whereas oral feedback allowed them to obtain the opinions of others on-the-spot, which as one respondent puts it, *"allows me to learn from my mistakes faster"*. The respondents also thought that peer assessment makes them a better learner because they can learn how to accept criticism from other people in positive way and share their opinions with one another.

Steps to Improve the Practice of Peer Assessment and Reflective Discussion in the Classroom

In the final question, the respondents were asked to give suggestions on how to improve the use of reflective discussion and peer assessment in class. Among the suggestions included putting on soft music in the background while the students are doing the activities. It was also suggested that instead of peer assessment forms provided by the lecturer, the presenting groups could also provide customized survey forms or questionnaire for the

audience so that they could find out more about what they want to improve on. One of the respondents pointed out that the lecturer should request members of each group to take turns in giving oral feedback to the presenting group.

Another useful suggestion included creating two separate criteria for individual and group presentation so that the audience can evaluate in detail. A few respondents also said that they would prefer that a few classmates be chosen randomly to share their reflections with the class. It was also recommended that all students should keep a journal of their reflections or peer assessment so that they can constantly monitor their improvements. Finally, a respondent provided the idea that all presentations can be video recorded and uploaded on Edmodo so that all students can rewatch their own presentation as well as that of others so that it is easier for them to compare and do their reflections after class.

Finally, it was also suggested that the allocation of percentage for marks given by students and teachers to be adjusted to 80% for teachers and 20% for students (through peer assessment) to allow reduce the possibility of bias in the awarding of marks.

5.0   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above results and discussion, it can be concluded that peer assessment and reflective discussion are suitable methods which can be employed in classrooms to produce more active and engaged learners who are able to improve on their performance by reflecting on feedback from their classmates as well as from their own experience. However, lessons which include these two techniques need to be planned carefully with clear guidelines and sufficient scaffolding by the instructor so that students know what is expected of them and will be able to perform accordingly. It is also important for the instructor to encourage students to give constructive feedback instead of comments which are too general or harsh. This can be done by showing students examples of constructive feedback, or by using the students' own examples as samples.

For future studies, it would be interesting to find out if peer assessment can be improved by getting students to prepare their own set of evaluation criteria instead of using the ones provided by the instructor. This way, students may have more control over what they want to evaluate and how they want to be evaluated.

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