

THE ROLE OF PEER REVIEW IN DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE SKILLS

The paper examines the role of student peer review in language training and specifically addresses the issues of developing presentation, research and analytical skills at postgraduate level. The current research analyses two groups of postgraduate students and their perception and engagement in peer review activities before and after the course, in which peer review of students was regularly used in the provision of feedback after in-class presentations made by other students. The findings confirm the value of peer review for the formation of presentation and analytical skills and contributing to the overall development of language skills. The paper raises a number of issues encouraging further research in the field.

Key Words: peer review, presentation and analytical skills, language training, provision of feedback

Peer review remains key in developing a new cohort of scholars, researchers and specialists in Higher Education. In a way, peer review validates the completed research work and contributes to quality enhancement of published research. Although there has been some criticism about the application of peer review in the validation of research completed by scholars, it is still widely used by most publishers and research agencies around the world. However, we always ask a question whether we need to teach peer review especially at postgraduate level, and whether peer review of other practises can contribute positively to the development of necessary skills and learning. This is becoming even more important since we have moved from teacher-focused to learner-centred approaches in educational theory and practice. Numerous studies addressed the issue of peer review in various fields, e.g. medicine, biology, mathematics, physics, English language training and many other subjects. Scholars and teachers see more and more benefits in using peer feedback as another way of engaging students in teaching and learning. The provision of feedback is becoming critical for the development and progress of students at all levels of their studies.

Since the end of the last century, researchers have explored actively the use of peer review and what influence it may have on enhancing various skills of students. Their studies confirm positive impact of peer review on enhancing students' writing skills (Huisman et al., 2019; Liu & Carless, 2006; Malyuga, 2009; Min, 2006; Mulder et al., 2014; Nicol 2014). In many instances described by researchers, peer review is usually conducted within a very specific and well-defined framework or as described by some authors "calibrated peer review" where students provide feedback within clearly specified parameters in writing (Saterbak et al., 2018). However, formative oral peer reviews and student perceptions of peer reviews remain relatively understudied (Mulder et al., 2014), especially in the field of in-class peer reviews of presentations made by other students. In our current research,

formative in-class peer review is defined as an arrangement whereby students communicate information to peers of similar status, which may contribute to the enhancement of their presentation, language or any other relevant skills of the students delivering presentations. By other relevant skills, we mean research skills, the use and applications of methodologies in their research as well as knowledge relevant to a particular domain or subject, or other issues covered in student presentations. Our definition is based on the description of peer assessment proposed by Topping (1998) and formative peer feedback for writing performance as it was defined by Huisman et al. (2019).

There are a few compelling reasons for postgraduate students acquire excellent oral presentation skills: to fully prepare the student for employment, and to develop effective communication and analytical skills in a foreign language which allow the students participate in the discussion on the topic of their research and engage in the examination of research findings made by other students. The School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) at the University College London (UCL) offers a number of degrees to postgraduate students in politics, security studies, economics, literature, cultural studies and many other subjects. Students doing various degrees usually join the same language class, e.g. Advanced or Intermediate Russian language modules. It means that during their language classes, students regularly do presentations on various subjects of their research ensuring the interdisciplinarity of our discussions and supporting the UCL's connected curriculum framework¹ for research-based education aimed at ensuring that the curriculum of all modules support students' research projects and developing their research and related skills. Postgraduate students in our Advanced and Intermediate Russian language modules were asked to make several presentations in Russian on the progress of their research in their specific domains during the academic year. The presentations usually start from four to five minutes in the autumn semester to eight or ten minutes towards the end of the module in the spring semester. The presentations are based on students' specific research themes, and they normally depend on the subject they are majoring in. As part of our research, an anonymous short questionnaire was developed and tested for postgraduate students. It included open questions asking participants to comment on various aspects of peer feedback. Students were asked to provide their reasons and explain why they viewed it as a useful or not very useful exercise.

They were also asked to think about challenges either in giving and receiving peer feedback as well as make any other comments or observations. Students were invited to complete the same questionnaire at the beginning and the end of Advanced and Intermediate Russian Language modules over the period of two semesters. The majority of students were engaged in research in politics, international politics and policy and security, i.e. 83% of the cohort. There were also two students engaged in literature and arts research, and one – in economics and finance. We received completed questionnaires from 26 postgraduate students at the beginning and at the end of their modules. The majority of students had studied previously in the UK and overseas being exposed to a range of approaches in Higher

¹ Please see for more information Connected Curriculum: a framework for research-based education at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/connectedcurriculum-framework-research-based-education>

Education. When analysing the comments provided at the beginning of the modules, it was established that only 14% of postgraduate students were not familiar with the term and concept of a “peer review” and were not able to comment at the beginning of the module. All other students confirmed that they previously received and gave feedback, however, only 28% of respondents confirmed that they had been engaged in the provision of peer review orally in class before, while other students used to provide written peer feedback or orally in one-to-one situations. These results indicated a possible challenge for the lecturer when introducing oral peer feedback as part of formative in-class assessment of research presentations. Comments in the initial questionnaire also confirmed that students giving and receiving peer feedback may encounter a variety of challenges. Students particularly mentioned different perceptions of research work and presentations based on previous experiences in their home or study countries. Culture specific issues were identified as key in engaging students representing various cultures and experiences they may have had when studying at educational institutions around the world.

The above feedback from students allowed us to conclude that at the beginning of the module, students were concerned about the usefulness of in-class formative peer review and the ability of other fellow students to provide clear, constructive, and inoffensive feedback that would allow them to improve their skills and develop their research further. At the same time, they showed some uncertainty and doubted whether they would receive clear guidelines and how it would be organised effectively during their classes.

At the very end of the module in the second semester, 85% of respondents thought that peer feedback was extremely useful for developing their presentation and language skills and further progress in their research projects. Almost 78% of students thought that they considerably improved their presentation and language skills, while 72% of students reported that peer feedback allowed them to rethink the methodology or approaches and develop new ideas in their research projects. Almost 60% of students mentioned that peer feedback enabled them to come up with new innovative ideas in their research. The remaining 15% were generally satisfied with the peer review approach in the formative peer assessment of presentations, however, they thought that their own skills of providing peer feedback should be improved.

While considering presentation skills, all students reported that the peer feedback they received after their presentations allowed them to improve or significantly improve (36% of respondents) their skills. They reported particular skills they learned or enhanced in both semesters, e.g. voice projection, the ability to communicate clearly and liaise with the audience, how to engage with the audience more effectively and ask rhetorical questions. They specifically stressed that formative peer assessment allowed them to rethink their approaches and put the audience in the centre of their attention when presenting the results of their research. Some students mentioned the importance of eye contact and the ability of the speaker to receive immediate feedback by observing the audience. They also commented that they had better confidence and the ability to convince the audience in their presentations and considered these skills as “newly-acquired”.

The format of this paper does not allow showing all our results, however, our findings confirm that oral formative in-class peer review can become a vital tool in effective development of presentation, language and research skills. In view of the current globalisation processes and increased exchange of information through conferences, webinars and other electronic forms of communication, it is becoming even more important to allocate more time in our modules, which will allow students to practise and enhance those skills. The research confirmed that the UCL's connected curriculum framework allows the development of those skills and ensures that the curriculum of all modules support students' research projects and effectively develop their research and related skills.

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