The Impact of Peer Learning on Improving Feedback & Reflection in the Interpreting Course

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Abstract. Practice, feedback and reflection are the most important elements in achieving interpreting competence. In the traditional classroom teaching, large number of students and limited class hours make it almost impossible for the teacher to ensure each student enough opportunities to do interpreting practice and get personalized feedback. Peer learning activities were designed and conducted to solve this difficulty. This study reports the effectiveness of peer learning on improving feedback and reflection in the interpreting course. It is found through questionnaire and interview that peer feedback enhances learning as students were actively engaged in articulating evolving understandings of the interpreting process. Peer-assessment also helps students think more deeply and develop important cognitive skills such as critical thinking and self-reflection. Therefore, the outcome of this study is to propose peer learning strategies in improving feedback and reflection in the interpreting course.

Introduction

As the most important aspect of the learning process in raising achievement, feedback and reflection are vital components in shaping and improving students’ learning experience. Unfortunately, feedback and reflection activities can be a challenge in the traditional classroom, because teachers are constrained with heavy workloads and limited class hours. The use of peer learning strategies has the potential to supplement traditional pedagogies in addressing this bottleneck by offering enriching possibilities for feedback and reflection.

Peer learning is becoming an increasingly important part of many courses, and it is being used in a variety of contexts and disciplines in many countries (Slavin, 1983). Many scholars have carried out researches on peer learning. However, there has been no study of the impact of peer learning on improving students’ feedback and reflection targeting the interpreting course. This study is aimed to explore how peer learning influences students’ feedback and reflection in the interpreting course through both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Review of Literature

Peer learning is a student-centered approach that transcends knowledge acquisition and helps nurture graduate attributes of collaboration, problem solving and teamwork. In peer learning, students construct and negotiate their own meaning and understanding of content and concepts. Essentially, students will be involved in searching for collecting, analyzing, evaluating, integrating and applying information to complete an assignment or solve a problem.

One of the most visible approaches to peer learning comes out of cognitive psychology, and is applied within a "mainstream" educational framework: "Peer learning is an educational practice in which students interact with other students to attain educational goals (O’Donnell & King, 2000).” In this context, it can be compared to the practices that go by the name cooperative learning.

In the recent decades, more and more institutions promote instructional methods involving active learning that present opportunities for students to formulate their own questions, discuss issues, explain their viewpoints, and engage in cooperative learning by working in teams on problems and projects. As a form of cooperative learning, peer learning enhances the value of student-student
interaction and results in various advantageous learning outcomes. Landis (2000) asserts that research shows that students who engage in collaborative learning and group study perform better academically, persist longer, feel better about the educational experience and have enhanced self-esteem.

The Role of Feedback and Reflection in the Interpreting Course

Interpreting is a communicative act in which the interpreter transfers accurately and quickly what is expressed in one language into another language in order to convey the message. It is a basic linguistic tool that people depend on in cross-cultural communication (Mei Deming, 2000: 6). The characteristics of interpretation imply that it takes a lot of practice to achieve interpreting competence. Therefore, the interpreting course is supposed to be student-centered and practice-oriented.

In traditional classroom teaching of interpreting, interpreting exercises are usually organized by the teacher, in which students listen to a speech chosen by the teacher, and interpret it into the target language segment by segment. After listening to each segment, the teacher chooses one student to interpret; or record everyone’s interpreting performance, then pick one or two to listen to and points out the possible mistakes or gives suggestions about interpreting strategies. Students benefit a lot from teachers’ feedback. The teacher may also ask students to listen to the recording and reflect on their own performance to find out problems and how to improve. Both feedback and reflection are perceived as enabling students to become more critical, work in a more structured way and think more deeply. Practice, feedback and reflection are the most important elements in achieving interpreting competence.

However, the problem with the traditional classroom teaching of interpreting is that only a few students have the opportunity to get feedback from the teacher during the limited class hours. It is difficult to ensure the engagement of each student in class, especially in large classes. More interpreting practice and exercise after class may make up for the loss. But constrained with heavy workloads, the teacher may find giving feedback to each student is both impractical and too time-consuming. Students could not make much progress if they do not have enough feedback and reflection.

Implementation of Peer Learning Strategies in Improving Feedback and Reflection

Peer Feedback as a Peer Learning Strategy

A form of peer learning in the feedback process is peer feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2006) defined peer feedback as a formative developmental process which provides the students the opportunity to discuss and discover diverse interpretations of their written texts. Falchikov (2002) had illustrated that peer feedback plays a significant role in learning because it enables students to perform better self-assessment (Liu & Carless, 2006). Peer feedback should be capitalized as students received more feedback from peers and more quickly in comparison to receiving feedback from lecturers (Liu & Carless, 2006). Therefore, Peer feedback, which involves learners judging and evaluating the work or performance of their peers, was applied in the design of the peer learning strategies for the interpreting course.

Design of Peer Learning Activities for the Interpreting Course

The interpreting course was a 2 credit subject. It was a compulsory subject for Bachelor of Translation and Interpretation students at a public university in Shanghai, China. This course was aimed at introducing students to the basic theories and skills of interpreting and cultivating students’ interpreting competence. Besides meeting face-to-face during the two-hour interpreting class each week, the students participated in the peer learning activities in small groups.

In the peer learning activity designed for the interpreting course, students carry out autonomous learning in groups of three after class. Each member of the group plays a different role in the group, including a speaker, an interpreter and a reviewer. The speaker needs to prepare a short speech in
advance and gives the speech, while the interpreter needs to interpret the speech into the target language. The reviewer’s task is to give feedback to the interpreter’s performance, pointing out possible mistakes and highlighting any strength, and complete the Peer-assessment Form, which involves the use of rating instruments and checklists to meet the interpreting task list. At the end of the group activity, members will pool their wisdom to reflect on their performance and find solutions to the problems in the speaking and interpreting activity. Group members take these roles by rotation.

Setting up mock interpreting situations and role-play with study partners provides an opportunity for timely feedback to enhance learning. The students get to know interpreting theories and understand interpreting skills in depth when roles are assigned to them. The activity was designed to provide prompt verbal and written feedback on the interpreting practice. Commenting on others’ performance also help students to reflect on their own performance.

Creation of a Conducive Learning Environment

Students need guidance in working in a group. A right guidance from teachers is necessary to overcome the reluctance to adopt the novel idea of peer learning. Thus teachers need to assist the students as they attempt to unravel the learning issues and act like a coach or facilitator rather than just a information provider or knowledge transmitter. It is essential for the teacher to work with the students to guide their reflection on peer learning together.

Peer learning settings provide a favorable platform for giving and receiving feedback on the learner’s work and a context for comparing oneself to others (Boud, 2001). To realize the benefits of peer learning, teachers must provide “intellectual scaffolding”. Teachers select topics that all students are likely to have some relevant knowledge of. Teachers also raise questions/issues that prompt students towards more sophisticated levels of thinking. Above all, collaborative processes are devised to get all group members to participate meaningfully.

In the interpreting course, the teacher provided ongoing explanation and support to students, helping them solve problems in peer learning. Besides, the topics for interpreting in peer learning and progress arrangement of interpreting skills were prepared in advance considering students' interest and ability.

Impact of Peer Learning on Improving Feedback and Reflection

Methodology

Sampling. The aim of this study was to explore the impact of peer learning on improving feedback and reflection in the interpreting course. Hence, the students of the interpreting course were the samples for this study. The number of students from the course was thirty.

Questionnaire. The students were issued with questionnaires and asked to complete them within a week. The questionnaires were handed at the end of the interpreting course to gauge students’ opinion on their experience in peer learning. The questionnaires allowed the researcher to generate quantifiable data and to identify the impact of peer learning.

Interview. Semi-structured guided interviews were conducted on the selected fifteen students using informal, open-ended questions to gain more information about their experience in peer learning. The purpose of the interviews was to uncover their perceptions and impressions from their experience, and to collect their suggestions and recommendations for future use. The students were selected based on their active participation in peer learning process.

Findings

This section illustrates the findings from the data collected from questionnaires and interviews. Across the data, a number of common themes have emerged and these were discussed in the following paragraphs. The findings revealed the outcomes of the implemented peer learning strategies in improving feedback and reflection.
The questionnaires showed peer learning was well accepted among the students as 90% of them felt that this form of interaction made them think more and learn more (83%) and become analytical (77%). The majority of students (73%) perceived peer-assessment was helpful. Peer-assessment has been shown to enhance the constructive feedback giving skill. Most importantly, 63% of the students felt that they learnt from the feedback. 40% of students found peer-assessment challenging while 33% and 53% felt that peer-assessment was easy and enjoyable, respectively. However, 60% of students found peer-assessment rather time consuming 40% of students found peer learning made them more dependent (Table 1).

Table 1. Students’ Responses to Peer Learning Questionnaire (n=30).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The peer learning makes you:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think more 27</td>
<td>Not think more 3</td>
<td>Neither 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn more 25</td>
<td>Did not learn anything 2</td>
<td>Neither 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical 23</td>
<td>Not analytical 4</td>
<td>Neither 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent 10</td>
<td>Dependent 12</td>
<td>Neither 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn from my peers' evaluation</td>
<td>Did not learn from my 4</td>
<td>Neither 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The peer assessment is:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful 22</td>
<td>Not helpful 6</td>
<td>Neither 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time saving 4</td>
<td>Time consuming 18</td>
<td>Neither 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable 16</td>
<td>Not enjoyable 7</td>
<td>Neither 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy 10</td>
<td>Hard 14</td>
<td>Neither 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging 12</td>
<td>Not challenging 10</td>
<td>Neither 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the interview conducted after the questionnaire, students said peer learning activities after class provided them more opportunities for interpreting practice and increased feedback from study partners. The interview showed students felt peer-assessment helped them learn to reflect and be able to be aware of their own mistakes in interpreting practice. Peer learning activities have an advantage over other teaching and learning strategies in that they have considerable potential to promote critical reflection, provided the climate of reciprocal communication and openness is encouraged. Students also agreed that being involved in peer learning helped them improve interpersonal skills. However, some students expressed they had had difficulties giving detailed feedback to others’ interpreting performance.

Conclusion

Due to heavy workload and limited class hours, the teacher could not ensure each student enough opportunity to do interpreting practice and get feedback. To address this problem, peer learning strategies were designed and conducted to improve feedback and reflection. Questionnaires and interviews were used to capture students’ ideas and experiences on the peer learning. When the subjects were asked about the effect of peer learning, the majority commented that peer learning provided tremendous assistance in improving feedback to interpreting practice, the ability to reflect on their performance, and identifying their weaknesses. Feedback from peers is especially highly rewarding as students become analytical after giving feedback to peers and learn more from the given feedback. Properly designed and conducted, peer learning has the potential to help students to develop into “reflective practitioners”, who are able to critically reflect upon their interpreting practice. However, the questionnaire and interview also reflected peer-assessment incurred extra time and some students found it hard to give detailed comment on others’ interpreting performance. This suggests that training is essential to develop student assessment skills for peer-assessment.

The findings of this study are simply initial observations based on a very small sample of data, i.e. 30 students. More quantitative survey research in combination with qualitative research
involving interviewing the respondents could be conducted to compare the effect of teacher- and peer-assessments, and the effect of peering learning on enhance students’ interpreting competence.

References


