

THE CHALLENGE AND POTENTIAL OF PEER ASSESSMENT – ENHANCING PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE LADDER OF FEEDBACK

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Calitatea procesului de predare-învățare-evaluare a unei limbi străine depinde de participarea activă a subiectului, ceea ce de fapt reprezintă cheia succesului procesului de învățare. Predarea unei limbi străine într-un grup mare constituie cu siguranță o provocare majoră pentru orice profesor. O metodă deosebit de promițătoare pentru asigurarea și dezvoltarea calității este evaluarea colegilor (peer-assessment) bazată pe un feedback colegial (the ladder of feedback).

Activitatea de grup necesară aplicabilității acestei metode, stimulează efortul și productivitatea subiectului și este importantă pentru descoperirea propriilor capacități și limite, prin urmare pentru autoevaluare. Articolul dat are ca scop să pună accent pe utilizarea metodei peer assessment care declanșează o dinamică intergrupală cu influențe pozitive, iar subiecții care lucrează în echipă sunt capabili să aplice și să sintetizeze cunoștințele în moduri variate și complexe.

Key-words: large classes, language teaching, peer feedback, peer assessment, ladder of feedback

The big number of students while teaching English as a foreign language has always been found onerous for both experienced teachers and in particular teachers beginning teaching. The concern about the effect of class size is considered by many research studies that point to large classes as one of the major obstacles to ensuring quality education. Hence the large number of students hinders students from improving their level of oral English. Teachers strongly believe that this is a major impediment for the efficient English teaching and learning. Such a conclusion also appeared in a study conducted by J. Harmer [2] confirming that teachers find it difficult to organize effective and creative activities, pay attention or contact with all individuals especially those who tend to hide by sitting at the back.

As a matter of fact, scholars are in favour of small classes, for instance, Miller-Whitehead [6] suggested that “small classes assist raising teachers’ spirit and decrease most of the discipline issues”, Resnick [12], claimed that “smaller classes elevate students’ achievement” while Normore and Ilon [9] concluded that “classes of a small size positively influence the teaching process as they encourage students and teacher engagement and allow students to be more cognitively engaged”.

On the other hand, Heppner [4] views large classes “as a small business which should be set up and handled carefully by the teacher”. Admittedly, this kind of classes require a great and careful preparation from teachers prior to the beginning of the teaching process.

One way that is considered to be significant is to provide feedback to, and receive it from students. Therefore, it is helpful for teachers to divert a lot of class responsibility to students and back up a little and that will give students space to teach each other.

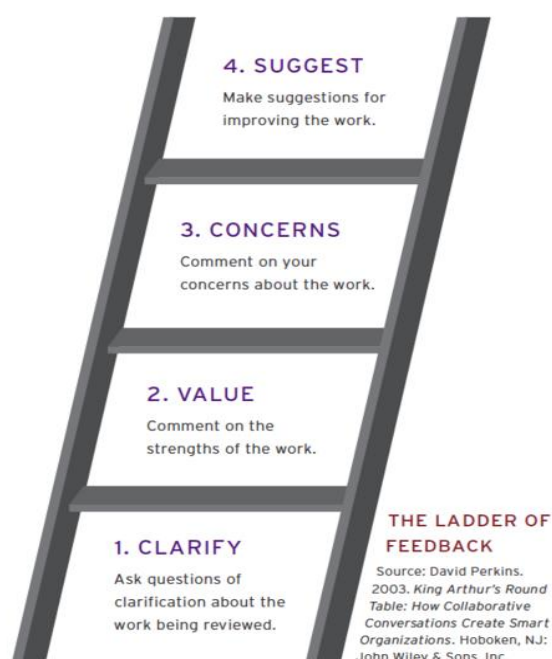
Engaging students in challenging activities where individuals or groups compete with one another would bring positive effects of large number in classes. Some studies of Maged [5], Nakabugo [7], and O'Sullivan [10] have emphasized that it is not the class size that affects the learning process yet it is the teacher's quality and methodology that greatly counts. Moreover, Shepard [13] emphasized the importance of students' evaluation as a way of enhancing the learning.

Fortunately, they are ways to make large classes as effective as their smaller counterparts. In this regard, peer assessment is a valuable tool because feedback from peers can be delivered on the spot and in greater volume than teacher feedback in large classes. As regular feedback and assessment must occur throughout the learning process, it is crucial therefore to train students to provide each other with peer feedback. Peer feedback occurs when students offer each other advice about their work which incorporates reference to [15]:

- what has been done well in relation to the success criteria;
- what still needs to be done in order to achieve the success criteria;
- advice on how to achieve that improvement.

When delivering peer feedback, it can be very useful for students to follow a constructive process or protocol. For example, the “*Ladder of Feedback*” which is a tool for providing communicative feedback about an idea, a plan, or a behavior developed at Harvard’s Project Zero to guide a constructive process for improving understanding through ongoing assessment and dialogue. Due to it, the teachers are enabled to develop and use a technique based on the ladder of feedback which guides them through four steps: clarification, value, concerns and suggestions [11].

Prior to applying this method, the teacher ought to explain clearly the aims of the activity and the overall procedure to their students. First of all, the teacher identifies students who have strong language skills to act as group leaders. Students form small groups and a leader is assigned to each group [17]. Afterwards each group is given six topics. Each member of the group selects a different topic. For instance, let’s take a speaking activity relevant to the chemistry department students. The topic of the activity would be: “*How do we separate mixtures and solutions?*” Since there are many ways to separate mixtures and solutions, the method depends on the properties of the different materials in the mixture. Read the following methods and explain them: *sifting, magnetic attraction, floatation, filtration, evaporation and chromatography.*



Students work individually to prepare a short oral presentation on the selected method to separate mixtures and solutions; the group leader will assist their group members provided they seek help. Here, the teacher introduces the ladder of feedback tool to gather peer feedback and finally perform the peer assessment. Before giving peer feedback the first step on the ladder gives the assessor a chance to ask questions about any unclear points or missing ideas. Questions of clarification are those that can be answered with very brief, often single word, responses because the students sometimes need to check definitions and contexts, for instance: “*When you said x, did you mean y?*”. Further the students proceed to the value rung in order to identify something they value in their peer’s work to help him or her build on strengths. Students need affirmation to

help. Here, the teacher introduces the ladder of feedback tool to gather peer feedback and finally perform the peer assessment. Before giving peer feedback the first step on the ladder gives the assessor a chance to ask questions about any unclear points or missing ideas. Questions of clarification are those that can be answered with very brief, often single word, responses because the students sometimes need to check definitions and contexts, for instance: “*When you said x, did you mean y?*”. Further the students proceed to the value rung in order to identify something they value in their peer’s work to help him or her build on strengths. Students need affirmation to

confirm that their efforts were heard and it is amazing how much they appreciate this, for example, *"I really like how you propose...."*. The third rung on the ladder is when the assessor raises concerns. What is of great importance here is that the assessor should own the feedback by using language carefully. For example: *"I'm concerned that you have several..."*, *"I wonder if..."*, *"It seems to me..."*, *"It might be interesting to explore..."*, *"I wonder what would happen if..."*, *"Perhaps you have thought about this, but..."*, *"A question this raised for me was..."*, *"One of the things this got me thinking about was..."*, *"A concern raised for me was..."*, *"When you talk about doing x, I think about..."* or *"When I have done x in the past..."*, *"What do you think would happen if..."*. The students should perceive this rung as the rung for honest and constructive concerns avoiding criticizing personal character or ability and focus on ideas. On this account, the climate between them can keep conversation going.

What comes next is making suggestions about how to improve things. This step is sometimes blended with step three: students state concerns and then offer suggestions for addressing them: *"I wonder if would make a difference?"*, *"Once I tried in a similar situation, and z happened."*, *"I've heard of someone doing in the face of such challenges, and I was so inspired by that idea!"*, *"What if you?"*, *"I wonder if you have tried?"*.

The key here is staying genuinely open to the possibility that students don't know what is best for this situation, but that they hope they will be able to offer something helpful.

In a large class setting it is very difficult to provide every student with individualized feedback. Nevertheless, this method makes students acting and reflecting and has the potential to have a significant effect on student learning achievement.

By and large the ladder of feedback is a useful tool which:

- allows students to play an active role in class and involve them in all decision making about the classroom life as minimizing the level of disturbance in class and maximizing the level of learning;
- elevates students' autonomy and arises their responsibility towards learning by eliminating the problems of student anonymity and passivity [13];
- boosts students' awareness of the task and elevates their self-confidence through correcting others' work;
- another positive aspect of the peer feedback process is that students get to see other students' work which can also deepen understanding of the learning goals;
- while students are carrying out peer assessment, the teacher is able to visit the different groups, gain feedback by listening to the conversations and make comments and suggestions that they feel will be helpful;
- peer assessment reduces learners' dependency on to the teacher, and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. As a result, the impact of assessment on the learning process can be greatly enhanced.
- and finally it relieves the burden on the teacher.

Generally speaking, it should be emphasized that teachers have to be flexible and adventurous by using various teaching strategies, detecting problems created by large classes, identifying their students' needs and then gear teaching to overcome the learning problems [1]. Once a teacher shares this with their students, it becomes a guide to a language learning activity as an assessment tool. Overall, the evidence suggests that when conversation around assessment and feedback is extended and the students are more active participants in the whole process, then feedback is likely to be most useful to students' learning.

From all that mentioned above, the ladder of feedback used as an interactive tool for teaching and learning English offers a great interaction between the teacher and the students and among their classmates.

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