



Peer Formative Assessment Improves Student Fluency

Harry Grover Tuttle

Abstract: The author describes the advantages of using peer formative assessments for speaking, explains how peers can assess each other, and presents the range of the peer assessments. Through peer formative assessment, students improve in fluency.

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Introduction

At the beginning of Spanish 2, Jason describes what is happening in a picture. He says a short, simple sentence, pauses for a long time, says another short, simple sentence, pauses even more, and, finally, says a third short, simple sentence. He has said three short sentences at eleven words per minute. By the seventh week of the course, he selects which restaurant he prefers and tells why with six and a half complex sentences (13 simple sentences at 52 words per minute). Each sentence states a different preference term and the reason for each preference. For example, he says, “I really like the french fries in Bob’s restaurant because they have a lot of salt.” Jason’s fluency has increased by 480%. Peer formative assessment causes students’ fluency to improve dramatically.

In many modern language classrooms, the teacher calls on students in a one-on-one, or ping-pong, fashion. Mr. Webster calls on Johnny and Johnny answers. Then Mr. Webster calls on Joellyn and Joellyn answers. As Mr. Webster goes through the class calling on each student, each student has to wait for the 27 other students in the class to be called on before he or she gets called on again. The teacher may spend 15 seconds with each student in asking a simple question and receiving an answer. If the teacher does this for a whole 50-minute period, then each student talks seven times or says seven sentences for a total of 1 minute and 40 seconds of speaking time. Obviously, students have very little speaking time in the target language.

Likewise, in the ping-pong style class when the teacher hears an error, the teacher usually recasts the statement by saying the correct form and having the student repeat that correct form. Omaggio (2001) argues that this technique has proven to be ineffective. Students need to understand the concept and practice the concept, rather than just parroting the specific words back.

When the modern language classroom changes from a ping-pong game into a soccer game in which all players are on the field at the same time, then each student participates much more. If students peer monitor and give feedback to each other, their speaking time increases (Tuttle, 2011). Hazel says six sentences explaining why she likes basketball in the first speaking formative assessment and then says eight sentences describing the basketball team in another assessment. Within six minutes, she has said 14 sentences. These 14 sentences in six minutes from the soccer style class far surpass the seven sentences in 50 minutes from the ping-pong style class; in fact, forty-six minutes still remain in the class for more talking.

Students do well in peer assessments when the teacher helps them develop these skills (White, 2009). Furthermore, students will peer review when they know that the ultimate goal

focuses on their own improvement. Tuttle (2009) adds that peer assessments works well when students know that it has no formative grade attached to it and when they know that peers will offer them suggestions for instant improvement.

The teacher starts the peer assessment process by sharing with the students the learning goal of speaking. The teacher explains to the students that speaking consists of many different language functions, such as socializing, giving reasons, and contrasting. The educator shares examples of statements using these functions. Then the teacher plays a recording of a narration about a party and demonstrates how to record the number of spoken sentences. Next, the teacher plays another recording and has the students count the number of sentences; the students use their fingers to indicate to the teacher how many sentences they counted. The teacher verifies that the students can correctly count spoken sentences. Likewise, the teacher will go over a recording to indicate when sentences are not appropriate, not comprehensible, or not meaningful, and then plays another recording for the students to practice identifying non-valid statements.

Mr. Cooper asks the students to form pairs for the peer assessment of speaking. Student 1 speaks first. Student 2, the peer reviewer, listens and records the number of sentences. Student 1 speaks without the help of Student 2. Often when a student participates in a conversation, that student depends on the partner. If the partner does not answer the question, pauses a long time before answering, or answers the question incorrectly, the other speaker cannot demonstrate his/her own speaking proficiency. Therefore, these peer formative assessment focus on one student talking to the listening partner.

Mr. Cooper assigns the peer speaking assessment of “describe your house to your classmate.” Sarah, who is Student 1, speaks. Student 2, Alan, listens and records the number of sentences. If Sarah does not finish a sentence, says a sentence that does not fit the topic, or says a

sentence that does not make sense, then Alan, the peer reviewer, does not record it. After Sarah finishes, Alan first tells her the number of simple sentences she said; he counts a compound or complex sentence such as “My room is small but my parent’s room is big” as two sentences.

Then, Alan gives his peer, Sarah, formative suggestions for additional things she could say in describing her house. He may give her feedback in the form of a single word such as “Kitchen,” “Colors,” or “Chores,” a phrase such as “living room furniture,” “cooking in the kitchen,” or “times in the room” or questions such as “What do you like about your room?” “What do you do each night in your house?” or “Who does what in the house?” As Alan says these suggestions, Sara writes them down on her formative assessment sheet. Then she uses these suggestions to say additional sentences to describe her house. If Sarah originally said six sentences and Alan has suggested four more topics, Sarah increases her number of sentences to ten, an increase of 40%.

Peers provide a valuable role in widening the speaking perspective of their partners. To illustrate, when James narrates his weekend activities to his partner, Rowan, he talks about the sports he plays. James runs out of things to say since he only talks about sports. Rowan suggests that James can talk about what he eats, where he goes, what he does with his friends, what TV shows he watches, and how much he sleeps. James has had only a sports focus while Rowan thinks of many other aspects of a weekend. James’s reaction of “Oh, I forget about those things. I’ll put those in,” indicates that he has widened what he can retell about his weekend.

The peer assessors can do more than count the number of sentences. The assessors can indicate how many things from a checklist the speakers include in the speaking assessment. For example, a checklist may contain the question words and Bob checks off each question word as Charlotte includes it. Peers may use a more complex checklist. An “I can” checklist contains

different functions about the same topic. An “I can” checklist for the topic of school may include such items as identifying classes and the teachers of each class, describing one teacher, narrating what happens in the class, expressing likes and dislikes for a class, and explaining some changes they would like in the class. The peer reviewers have to carefully listen to see if the partners have included all of the items in the checklist. Likewise, peers can listen for specific tenses; Eleanor listens for the correct verb endings for the imperfect tense as Sean tells about a past birthday celebration.

Some teachers may think that students will not be as critical or as thorough as the teachers. These teachers might want to consider the peer assessments as initial screenings with the teachers doing any necessary follow-up. For example, Albert listens to Helen and reports that she says only two sentences for the function of explaining why she likes certain foods. The teacher then listens to Helen and realizes that this student lacks adjectives to describe foods. The teacher provides her with such a list and Helen practices so she can speak more extensively about her food choices. Students do become very proficient at counting sentences, even compound or complex sentences, and at listening for different language functions.

After the peers generate the speaking data and provide initial formative feedback, the teacher analyzes the information. As the instructor goes over a speaking assessment that many students did poorly on, he or she can ascertain which students did well and ask them to share their strategies with their peers. Jack offers that as he narrates his day, he sees himself doing each of the action. Meanwhile, Butch suggests another strategy in which he uses the time he does things, such as “At 6:30 I get up,” to narrate his day. Students hear from their peers who have been successful and select one of the strategies to help themselves be better speakers.

Peer formative assessment provides a dynamic assessment process for daily assessments and daily improvements with a commitment of very little class time. Students involved in peer assessment of speaking become fluent in their speaking!

Works Cited

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