

## Peer Feedback: Why Didn't It Work for Adult Learners?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports a part of a larger case study that explores the adult learners' experience in providing and receiving oral assessment feedback. A group of adult learners who attended a research seminar course was chosen as the sample of the study. It was found from the case study that adult learners were inactive in the peer feedback process; as a consequence, this affected two of the course outcomes. Data from the observations of 3 classroom seminar sessions and 3 structured interviews were analyzed using thematic coding to find the reasons for the adult learners' inactive participation in the peer feedback process. 4 emerging themes that were discovered are: attitude, knowledge, culture and face value, and feedback preference. From the findings, recommendations to improve peer feedback practice were made.

**KEYWORDS:** Adult Learners, Andragogy, Peer Feedback, Face Value, Self-Directed Learning.

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### INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Malaysia has been receiving an influx of postgraduate students as the implication of the government's aim to produce 60 000 PhD degree holders by 2023[7]. These students, who are adult learners, have different needs from the traditional learners because they have to assume big responsibilities [24] and juggle work, family, and school duties [2]. Adult educators should help them learn rather than educating them [16] and emphasize the learning process instead of delivering the content [9]. This is due to the fact that adult learners can self-direct their own learning which is different than teacher-directed learning [15]. As a consequence, it was expected from the adult learners in this study to be able to provide insightful feedback to others' work which was translated into 2 of the course outcomes of this research seminar course that they attended. Regrettably, it was found that they were inactive in the peer feedback activity; hence the need to investigate this phenomenon. This paper aims to report the reasons underlying this phenomenon. In this paper, the terms oral assessment feedback, oral feedback and feedback are used interchangeably.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Adult Learners and Self-Directed Learning

Adult learners are different from the traditional learners based on six assumptions of adult learning popularized by Malcolm Knowles. More commonly known as andragogy, the first assumption of adult learning highlights that before embarking on learning something, adults need to know the reasons for doing it [14]. As they are relevancy-oriented and goal-oriented [9], they will not undertake the learning process that does not benefit them. They engage in the learning process when it can satisfy their particular need or solve a problem [17].

The second assumption explains that adult learners' self-concept is to be responsible for their own lives and decisions. Thus, they are treated as capable of initiating and self-directing their own learning process. The third assumption describes adults as possessing a great amount of experience that is of different quality compared to the youths [14]. Their learning experiences should be acknowledged and the learning environment has to be flexible, open and show esteem to them [5]. Failure to acknowledge their learning experiences is regarded as "rejecting them as persons" because their self-identity is developed from these learning experiences [14].

The fourth assumption elaborates on adults' readiness to learn. In order to manage their real-life situations effectively, adult learners become ready to learn the things that they have to know [14]. Beneficial methods like simulation exercises and being exposed to samples of high quality works can help induce adult learners' readiness to learn.

The fifth assumption explains that with regard to learning orientation, adult learners are task-centred or problem-centred. They are motivated to learn when the knowledge can be applied to real-life situations. The sixth assumption describes their motivation. Adult learners can be motivated by external rewards such as better jobs and higher salaries, but internal pressures like self-esteem and quality of life are the most powerful motivators [14].

Adults learn the best in an environment that does not threaten them [22]; when they participate voluntarily in the learning process, it produces a greater amount of learning [5]. Nevertheless, obstacles like negative self-concept, unavailability of opportunities or resources, constraints of time and activities that do not follow the principles of adult learning can reduce their motivation [14]. Moreover, when adults start their learning programs, they are inclined to experience a small amount of anxiety, which as a consequence, can interfere with the learning process if it continues [5].

The main feature that distinguishes adults from children is self-directedness in learning [15]. Knowles' explanations of the differences between teacher-directed learning and self-directed learning are as follows:

**Table 1: Teacher-directed learning and self-directed learning assumptions**

Teacher-Directed Learning	Self-Directed Learning
The learner is a dependent person and the teacher is responsible to decide what and how the learner should learn.	The learner develops ability to self-direct his learning as a result of being matured and this has to be fostered to grow as quickly as possible.
The learner's experience is not as important as the teacher's and other experts' experience, thus the teacher is responsible to ensure that the knowledge from these people is taught to the learner.	The learner's experience is increasingly becoming rich knowledge for learning which should be used together with the knowledge of the experts.
The learner's enters education with the orientation of subject-centred to learning and thus his learning experience should be organised according to content units.	The learner's orientation is task-centred or problem-centred and thus his learning experience should be organised as task achievements or problem solving projects.
The learner is motivated to learn because of external factors and punishments such as awards and fear or failure.	The learner is motivated to learn because of internal factors such as the need to achieve and curiosity.

However, it must be noted that not every adult is able to fully self-direct their learning. Thus, playing the role of facilitator, adult educators help adult learners to self-direct their learning when they create an environment that permits time to learn, tolerates errors, provides feedback on progress, challenges the adults to transform from their status quo and respects differences in learning abilities and styles [8].

### Peer Feedback

The proponents of peer feedback advocate its use because it motivates and assists metacognition development by allowing students to participate in their own learning to discover "which learning, teaching and assessment strategies work best for them" [6]. Moreover, it is often more useful than teacher feedback as the students can provide comments that can be understood better than the ones given by the teacher [19]. A study by [11] reported that students found providing feedback to their peers helped them to notice the areas in their own work that should be paid attention to. Other issues of peer feedback in higher education that presented by [6] are:

1. More than one markers are preferred over a single marker for accuracy
2. When peer assessment is included in a holistic assessment design, it becomes the most effective
3. Not all students experience peer feedback positively
4. The role of providing and receiving the assessment and the implementation affect the outcomes
5. Providing feedback has more powerful effects on future performance than receiving feedback
6. The academic ability of the ones who give and receive the feedback is important
7. The provision of choice is as important as the affective aspect –peer assessment is recommended to be used formatively instead of summative
8. The nature and type of feedback peers are asked to give impacts on performance
9. The importance of training feedback providers
10. The need to improve research design and results reporting

Nevertheless, a lot of educators hesitate to apply peer feedback in their class due to factors like fear of responses given by their students, feedback capabilities of their students, the process is unfamiliar to them and constraints of time in the class and outside of the class. These factors were addressed in a research by [23] that studied developmental peer feedback based on academic journal review process. It was found from the research that students' ability in giving feedback was developed while improving the quality of their product. Moreover, they appeared to prefer being the feedback provider than being the receiver of the feedback. However, it was reported that although the students spent long hours to learn receiving feedback, some of them still struggled in the feedback process.

### Affective Domain, Face Value and Culture

Affective domain is described by [3] as "the manner in which we deal with things emotionally such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivation and attitudes". Previous studies have discovered that feedback can negatively influence students' self-esteem and emotions, while weaker students might face more

detrimental effects [1]. Thus, attention should be given to the emotional state of the students when giving feedback to them in order not to decrease their motivation in learning.

Face value is an element that relates closely to the emotional state of the students. Face is defined by [21] as the public self-image that a person desires to claim for himself. This face can further be explained in 2 sections which are negative face-the desire for the actions to be unhindered by other people-and positive face-the desire that the wishes are wanted by at least some other people. This study focused on the positive face of the adults in the course by paying attention to the verbal and non-verbal actions that suggested a feedback provider to have negative judgements towards the feedback receiver's positive face. Those actions as stated in [21] were:

1. Expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints and reprimands, accusations, insults (feedback provider indicated that he did not like/ want one or more of feedback receiver's wants, acts, personal characteristics, goods, beliefs or values)
2. Contradictions or disagreements, challenges (feedback provider indicated that he thought feedback receiver was wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issues such wrongness can be related to disapproval)

Emotional reactions occurred when students took the feedback meant for the task level at the self-level, which as a consequence shifted their attention from the task to their self-image [4]. When the students misinterpreted the feedback as criticism, they might doubt themselves and feel frustrated and angry. In a study by [25], the students who had proactive attitude reported inspired/ confident experience while the ones who had reactive attitude reported frustrated/ uncertain experience. On the other hand, it was discovered in [1] that better students were more open towards the feedback while weaker students had the tendency to feel disheartened and misunderstand the feedback given to them.

Face value connects closely to the Malay society's culture. In this society, the individual and the group are both responsible in maintaining or saving the face value of its members [10]. This can be further explained through the concept of "budi" (deed):

1. Adab (individual level)-always responsible in portraying courtesy in word, deed and action
2. Rukun (social level)-responsible in attaining harmony in the family, community or society by using actions.

This concept is vital in the Malay society because it shows a person's name and status in the society [10]. 2 forms of orientations are taken by an individual in interactions with other people for the purpose of maintaining or saving face:

1. A defensive orientation towards saving his own face
2. A protective orientation towards saving other people's face of whom he or she interacts with.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study used case study approach in order to understand the reasons for inactive participation of adult learners in a peer feedback process. The adult learners were required to critique other students' research proposal professionally and formulate ideas and opinions on other students' research proposals, which were stated as the course outcomes. Observations were carried out during all the 3 seminar sessions. Descriptive and reflective notes were written and an observation checklist was used for the observations. Three structured interviews were carried out with the course lecturer and 6 students that were selected using convenient sampling. Data from the observations were typed immediately after each session while data from the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The prepared data were then analysed by using thematic coding.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Adult ESL Learners Do Not Provide Oral Assessment Feedback**

The observation showed that only two students from the class provided oral assessment feedback to their classmates. Throughout all three seminar sessions, the feedback was provided only four times: it was given two times in the first session and once in the second and third session. It is important to note that the feedback provided in the last session was prompted by the lecturer; she asked the students to help improve the presenter's work. It is also worth mentioning that the feedback was given by the same female student in all sessions. Another male student gave feedback only in the first session. These findings revealed that two of the course outcomes were not fulfilled by the students which are: (1) students should be able to critique other students' research proposal professionally and (2) students should be able to formulate ideas and opinions on other students' research proposals upon the completion of the course.

In order to understand this phenomenon, the lecturer and 6 selected students were asked in three structured interviews to find out their opinion regarding this situation. The analysis of the structured interviews revealed three emerging themes:

- a) Attitude

- b) Knowledge
- c) Culture and Face Value

Meanwhile, the observations revealed another theme namely feedback preference.

### **Attitude**

A majority of the participants in the structured interviews related the phenomenon with the students' attitude based on the following reasons:

- a) The students were lazy and refused to think
- b) The students were daydreaming and refused to pay attention to their classmates' presentations
- c) The students thought they were clever enough
- d) The students had a lack of interest in their classmates' presentations
- e) The students were more concerned and worried about their own presentations

Some of the responses that demonstrated the reasons are as follows:

- "...they don't want to give any feedback...because they are lazy to think about what the study is...they don't want to think about the WH-questions: what happen, why it happens, how it happens in the study and how to encounter the problems or situations in the studies."-A1
- "...it's just that most of the time we actually presenting on the same day. So, we actually more concern on our own presentation, that's why we actually did not really pay attention to our friends' presentation because we are worried about our own presentation."-A3
- "The first one obviously they are not interested in the presentation. So, obviously they don't know what feedback that they should give...And finally is because they feel that it is not important for them to give comment."-B1
- "...all depends on attitude. Some of them are lazy to ask questions...Maybe they are daydreaming or maybe they just don't want to ask questions...or maybe they just have that negative attitude of not asking questions because they might think that they are clever enough..."-B2

These responses were triangulated with the lecturer's responses and the observations. It was found from the observations that the students were more absorbed in their smartphones and conversing with their classmates than giving attention to the presentations. Furthermore, most of them were also getting ready for their own presentation; they were practising or completing their slides in their laptop for the presentation.

The lecturer was also aware of this situation. She believed that the students were too engrossed in their work when their classmates were presenting in front of the classroom.

- "...they are not listening, they are too engrossed in their own work or their own presentation or they are preparing for their own presentation while the others are presenting..."-L

These findings are in line with the findings in other studies [13,20] that students have low motivation for the peer feedback process. This specifically applies to condition where the peer feedback process has no influence on summative assessment namely marks or grades [13].

In addition, the lecturer also thought that the students disliked giving feedback, which appeared to be a general problem in the universities and schools.

- "...but I think this is not just a problem in the class that you have observed, I think it's a general problem in universities as well as in school. Students just don't like to give feedback."-L

This response relates to other studies regarding peer feedback which have discovered that students are not comfortable to give feedback to their friends' work [12,20]. They are not comfortable to be a "counsellor and judge" who have to assess performance and give comments for improvement [12].

### **Knowledge**

Students' lack of knowledge was discovered as another reason to avoid giving feedback to the classmates' presentations. The participants of the structured interviews stated that the students lacked the necessary knowledge with regard to the presentation topics and skills on providing effective oral feedback. The following responses illustrate this theme:

- "...why this thing happen because...actually for some of the students they don't read that much..."-A1
- "...they don't know what to comment, so they don't know what to give feedback."-B1
- "...some of them maybe they are lacking that particular knowledge, so they don't have any idea."-B2

This issue of students' perceived expertise is also found in the previous studies by [13, 18]. Students are reckoned to be unreliable in giving "insightful feedback" because they are deemed to possess "less knowledge

and expertise” than the instructors [13]. Students also lack confidence to give feedback for improvement because “their knowledge in the area was limited” [18]. Meanwhile, the students in this study avoided giving feedback because of the perceived knowledge with regard to the subject matter.

### **Culture and Face Value**

The interviews also revealed culture and face value as another reason for the students to avoid from giving feedback. Their Malay culture played a role in this case and they were also worried that providing feedback would threaten their face value and the presenter’s face value. The descriptions are as follows:

- “...they don’t want to hurt their friends because...actually sometimes they just accept their friends as just what they are.”-A1
- “...they don’t have enough confidence to ask about it because...other people might perceive these people who are asking questions or giving oral feedback...did not understand what...are already presented by their friends.”-A2
- “...it could be due to...attitude of the Malays because all of my classmates they are Malays. So, they feel that “No, we don’t need to ask question because the presenters might don’t want to answer the questions” and...they’re afraid that it might bring down their face value.”-B1
- “...I think the most important reason is they are shy. Actually, they have the points to comment or to give feedback but some people they are scared, when they give feedback, the other side will...I mean they will feel angry with the people who always give feedback especially in class, especially for the presentation session.”-B3

The lecturer’s opinion was in line with the students’ descriptions that culture and face value became a reason not to give feedback to their classmates’ presentations. She stated that the students felt obliged to keep their comments to themselves and they were afraid that the comments would appear offensive and rude. In addition, if they made any mistake, they might be laughed at or ridiculed by other people.

- “I think you have to relate this to culture as well...when they are with adults or someone who is more superior than them...they are supposed to be quiet only and listen...or if they want, but they are scared because the culture is such that they are scared that they might say something which is offensive...this culture of wanting to say only the right thing, of not wanting to make any mistakes. And also, they feel that if they make mistake, they’ll be laughed at or they’ll be ridiculed by the other people...”-L

This situation can be linked to the politeness theory by [21]. These students wanted to “save face” and protect the presenter’s and their own positive face by avoiding any chance of “disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints and reprimands, accusations, insults, contradictions or disagreements and challenges” from happening in the classroom. The students realized that the act of providing feedback needed to be done carefully because they “would not want to offend anyone” [18].

The Malay’s concept of ‘adab’ can explain the Malay culture as mentioned by the participants in the interviews. There was a need to show courtesy in their word, deed, and action as these would reflect their names and status in the society [10]. Therefore, the act of providing feedback is unsafe as it might hurt the presenter’s feelings; avoiding this act of providing feedback can help them maintain the presenter’s and their own face value.

Moreover, adults learn best when they do not feel threatened [22]. The students would not engage in the learning activities if they felt threatened or inhibited. In this study, the students felt that the peer feedback process threatened their face value thus participation in this process was avoided.

### **Feedback Preference**

It was found from the observations that the students preferred to provide feedback in private. Some of them were seen giving feedback to the presenter after the presenter had returned to his seat. This situation was also observed by the lecturer. She believed that those students were not comfortable to give feedback in public. They might not “comfortable as yet with the other members in that group”, but they were comfortable with the presenter, therefore they gave feedback to the presenter in private.

It was found that the adult learners in this case study did not engage actively in the peer feedback process even though they were aware of its benefits. The reasons of this avoidance were revealed in four emerging themes from the structured interviews and the observations: attitude, knowledge, culture and face value, and feedback preference.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper reports the factors underlying the phenomenon where adult learners were inactive in a peer feedback process although 2 of the course outcomes reflected that they should be able to provide insightful feedback to their peers in the classroom. 3 emerging themes were discovered from the structured interviews: attitude, knowledge, and culture and face value, while 1 theme was discovered from the observations: feedback preference. Several suggestions to improve the peer feedback process among adult learners are as follows:

1. Discuss the rationale for peer feedback-Adult educators should explain the importance of peer feedback because adult learners need to find that the activity is relevant [9] in their learning process.
2. Train students to provide feedback-Adult educators should train students to provide feedback effectively by providing them with guidelines and demonstrating the different types of feedback namely poor, good and excellent feedback [23].
3. Arrange students to provide feedback in small groups-Adult educators should assign students to provide feedback to a small number of peers in order to make them concentrate on the topics presented by these peers only. This would help them to understand the topic better and provide better feedback.
4. Award marks for peer feedback process-Adult educators should award marks when students provide feedback to their peers' work because it makes the activity relevant and important in their learning process.

It is recommended that further research explores other variables in a peer feedback activity involving adult learners such as the steps taken by the adult learners in improving their work based on the feedback given by their peers and the effects of peer feedback to adult learners' final products. Following this line of research, quantitative studies are also recommended to better generalize the findings.

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