Measuring the Unmeasurable: Reflections on Designing a Peer-Evaluation Sheet for Student Presentations

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Abstract:
In this reflective piece, I share my experience designing a peer-evaluation sheet for student presentations in an English Communication Techniques course. I describe how the process revealed both the challenges and possibilities of applying psychometric thinking in everyday classroom practice. I reflect on how students assess their classmates' presentations. I also share key lessons learned about creating student-friendly criteria and using peer assessment not merely for grading, but as a meaningful tool for learning and reflection.

Assessing oral presentations in English communication courses often feels like measuring the unmeasurable. This challenge stems not only from the subjective nature of communication skills but also from the wide variation in students' linguistic confidence, presentation styles, and interpersonal sensitivity. In my English Communication Techniques class, students come from diverse educational backgrounds and demonstrate uneven levels of English proficiency. These differences complicate assessment because students are asked not only to perform but also to evaluate peers whose strengths and weaknesses may differ substantially from their own. As a result, evaluation is shaped as much by emotion, relationships, and self-comparison as by observable performance.

In this course, peer evaluation was designed as an integral component of developing communication competence. Beyond serving as a grading mechanism, peer assessment aimed to help students practice critical listening, recognize effective communicative behaviors, and articulate constructive feedback. Research suggests that peer evaluation can promote learner autonomy and deepen understanding of performance criteria when students are positioned as active evaluators rather than passive recipients of grades (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Guided by this pedagogical goal, I designed a peer-evaluation sheet consisting of five equally weighted criteria: clarity and accuracy of content, organization, speech clarity and pacing, body language, and

audience engagement. Each criterion was rated on a ten-point scale, followed by a short open-ended comment section.

1. Is the content clear and correct?
2. Is the presentation well-organized?
3. Did the speaker talk clearly and at a good speed?
4. Did the speaker use good body language?
5. Was the presentation interesting?

The design of this sheet reflected a psychometric mindset applied to classroom realities. Drawing on Brown's (2010) principle that classroom assessment should be performance-based yet comprehensible to learners, I attempted to operationalize communicative competence through linguistically simple and behaviorally observable descriptors. Each criterion corresponded to a core dimension of oral communication. However, translating abstract constructs into student-friendly language proved challenging. For example, "interesting" could refer to topic choice, delivery style, or visual support. To reduce ambiguity, I embedded brief explanatory prompts such as "Did the speaker keep your attention and show confidence?" to support shared interpretation.

When first implemented, the peer-evaluation results revealed a strong leniency bias, a common issue in peer assessment (McMillan et al., 2021). Most students awarded near-perfect scores, and several admitted during class discussions that they were reluctant to judge friends critically or feared reciprocal low scores. A few students skipped the comment section entirely. At that stage, I had not provided explicit training on how to give constructive feedback, assuming students would intuitively know how to complete the form. In retrospect, this assumption underestimated both the emotional difficulty of peer evaluation and the need for pedagogical scaffolding.

In response, following Boud and Falchikov (2007), I reframed peer evaluation explicitly as a learning-oriented activity rather than a grading mechanism. I emphasized that the purpose of the form was to support improvement, not judgment. Over time, students reported feeling less pressured and more comfortable giving honest feedback. In later presentation rounds, written comments became more specific, often referencing concrete behaviors such as eye contact, pacing, or slide clarity. Scores also showed greater variation, suggesting more differentiated judgment.

This process prompted deeper reflection on my role as a lecturer. I learned that assessment tools do not function independently of classroom relationships, emotions, and trust. As McNamara (2000) notes, all assessment is social and interpretive, and its validity depends not only on design but on learner engagement. Through iterative use and reflection, the peer-evaluation sheet evolved into a tool that helped students and me view evaluation as an act of shared growth rather than judgment.

References

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