

Improving the Reliability of Peer Assessment in Pronunciation MOOCs: The Case of Japanese

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ABSTRACT

Background

Peer assessment has long been used as an alternative to instructor assessment of students' learning. Yet, its receivers are often skeptical about the effectiveness and validity of the evaluation (*cf.* e.g. [8], [11], [12], [17]). Still, other studies (e.g. [1], [6], [9]) have found peer grading to be reliable and valid when accompanied by proper guidance, and that when used appropriately, it may benefit both the learners who receive the feedback and those who provide it ([2], [7]).

Nowadays peer assessment remains an element vital to the existence of massive open online courses (MOOCs), and is widely recognized by the research community as a topic which needs to be investigated in detail and improved in the future. Massive open online courses whose primary focus is second language learning (LMOOCs) are being offered by various institutions around the world. Nevertheless, scholarly literature addressing issues related to this type of course is fairly scarce (*cf.* [3]).

Aim

Pronunciation routinely accounts for a major share of communication breakdowns in non-native speaker interactions as well as communication between native and non-native speakers (*cf.* e.g. [14], [15]). Yet, in many language classrooms its teaching is brushed off in favor of imparting other skills. Luckily this shortage is increasingly being addressed with the ready availability of CALL. We present a small case study of peer assessment reliability in the context of a Japanese pronunciation MOOC offered by one of the popular online providers.

Method

A phonetic analysis of the first author's speech recordings has been carried out using Praat software ([4]) in order to assess the accuracy of feedback obtained from course participants. On its basis, an evaluation of the pronunciation has been made and then compared with assessment provided by peers, a TA involved in the course, and an independent Japanese native speaker teacher.

Results

Although the peers' comments conveyed a general idea about progress, their feedback was not sufficiently detailed. More reliable was the assessment by the TA. Still, an evaluation completed by an independent Japanese native speaker showed that a person not involved in any way in the MOOC was easily able to make even more observations. Thus, assessment turned out to be objective and reliable only after triangulating all the available sources of feedback.

Conclusions

The study has revealed that peer assessment may not produce reliable results if the process of evaluation is not sufficiently facilitated; namely, when there are no explicit guidelines and preparatory training exercises provided for the participants. The peer evaluation was difficult to perform in a helpful manner since the assignments lacked clearly constructed rubrics. Thus, future language courses, particularly those that concentrate on productive skills such as speaking, ought to implement clear rubrics together with a grading tutorial.

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