

FOSTERING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH STRUCTURED PEER EVALUATION: A SOCIOCULTURAL STUDY AMONG ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study examines the impact of rubric-based peer feedback on language learning among Diploma in Engineering students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), grounded within Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Peer evaluations among students were often hindered by reluctance to provide meaningful commentary, typically resulting in vague, one-word responses such as "good" or "okay." These superficial comments reflected a fear of offending peers rather than an assessment of speaking performance. Drawing from the principles of scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this study introduced a structured rubric to guide students in delivering respectful, detailed, and academically appropriate feedback. A quantitative survey comprising 20 Likert-scale items was administered to 74 engineering students following rubric-based peer feedback sessions. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed highly positive perceptions: 91.9% of participants agreed that rubric use enhanced their understanding of speaking skills, self-awareness, and confidence. The structured rubric functioned as an effective scaffold, promoting higher-order thinking, self-regulation, and critical reflection. These

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findings support the theoretical framework suggesting that rubrics scaffold evaluative processes, minimize social anxiety, and promote targeted language development through social interaction. By fostering meaningful peer interaction, rubric-guided feedback activities align with sociocultural learning paradigms and highlight the importance of structured peer interventions in technical education contexts where language proficiency and respectful academic discourse are essential. Implications for practice and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords:

Rubric, Peer Feedback, Language Learning, Sociocultural Theory, Scaffolding

Introduction

Peer feedback plays a vital role in developing communicative competence, critical thinking, and learner autonomy within language learning classrooms. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes that social interaction is fundamental to cognitive development, and that learning is most effective when scaffolded by more knowledgeable peers within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through interactions with more capable peers, learners gradually internalize skills and move toward greater independence (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). However, peer feedback practices often encounter significant challenges, particularly among technical students who may lack confidence in their linguistic skills.

Among Diploma in Engineering students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), reluctance to deliver honest critiques was common, with evaluations frequently reduced to vague one-word affirmations. Fear of offending classmates and damaging social relationships further discouraged meaningful feedback, a phenomenon consistent with findings by Nelson and Carson (1998). Similarly, Hyland and Hyland (2006) noted that without appropriate support, peer feedback interactions could become superficial and overly polite, undermining their pedagogical value.

Main Issues and Rationale

- Superficiality – Evaluations often consisted of vague praise (e.g., “good,” “okay”), offering no actionable insight.

1. • Affective Barriers – Fear of offending peers inhibited honest critique, limiting cognitive challenge.
2. • Lack of Structure – Without clear criteria, students struggled to identify language dimensions (e.g., fluency, coherence, pronunciation).

Addressing These Gaps Is Critical in Technical Contexts Where Communication Skills Are Non-Negotiable for Professional Success (Liu & Carless, 2006).

Research has consistently underscored the benefits of peer feedback in language learning (Topping, 1998; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). Peer assessment encourages critical engagement, reflection, and learner autonomy (Falchikov, 2001; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, peer feedback practices without appropriate scaffolding often lack specificity and depth, limiting their effectiveness.

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning occurs through social interaction, with scaffolding by more capable peers enabling learners to perform tasks within their ZPD. Peer feedback provides opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful dialogue, facilitating language development through social mediation (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). According to Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), effective scaffolding requires contingent, graduated assistance tailored to the learner's evolving needs.

One major problem in peer feedback contexts is students' tendency to provide superficial comments to avoid hurting peers' feelings (Nelson & Carson, 1998). Hyland and Hyland (2006) argue that politeness strategies can result in vague praise, undermining critical feedback. Rubrics offer a practical solution by providing structured criteria that clarify expectations and guide evaluative comments (Andrade, 2000; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013), effectively serving as a scaffold that supports novice reviewers in delivering meaningful evaluations.

Structured rubrics help students focus on objective language aspects such as fluency, coherence, and pronunciation (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Panadero, 2017). Chang (2016) demonstrated that rubric-supported peer feedback improves attention to linguistic features, while Huisman et al. (2019) found that rubrics reduce anxiety during peer evaluations by providing a neutral, supportive framework.

In technical education contexts, developing communication skills is crucial for professional success (Liu & Carless, 2006). Engineering students, who often prioritize technical expertise over language proficiency, particularly benefit from scaffolded feedback practices that nurture critical thinking, articulation, and respectful interaction (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

Thus, integrating rubric-guided peer feedback into language instruction provides essential scaffolding, facilitating learners' progression within their ZPD and supporting sociocultural approaches to second language development. More recent studies have reinforced the effectiveness of structured rubrics in guiding meaningful peer feedback across disciplines. For instance, Yuliyanti and Fitriani (2022) observed significant improvements in ESL students' oral presentation skills when rubrics were used to scaffold peer assessment. Similarly, Widana, Parmiti, and Wibawa (2021) found that using analytic rubrics led to higher engagement and self-efficacy in peer evaluation tasks. These findings suggest that rubric-based scaffolding continues to be a valuable approach in promoting linguistic and metacognitive development, particularly in post-pandemic blended learning contexts where student autonomy is crucial.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which posits that social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) drives learning. Rubric-guided peer feedback acts as a form of scaffolding—providing contingent support that is gradually withdrawn as learners internalize evaluative strategies (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). In engineering contexts, such scaffolds bridge the gap between technical expertise and language proficiency, enabling meaningful cognitive dialogue.

Instrument: A quantitative survey comprising 20 Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was developed to assess students' perceptions of rubric-guided peer feedback. The survey items measured comfort in giving feedback, perceived

improvement in speaking skills, rubric clarity, academic tone, and overall satisfaction. The survey was validated for internal consistency, achieving a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89.

Procedure: Students engaged in peer feedback sessions where they evaluated live session speaking presentations in class. Each student used a standardized rubric focusing on four core criteria: Content, Fluency, Interaction, and Language. Rubric explanations were provided in a workshop format to scaffold students' understanding before evaluations. After completing the peer evaluations, students anonymously completed the survey.

Data Analysis: Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and response distributions. Visual representations (bar charts and pie charts) were created to illustrate key findings.

Findings and Discussion

Item	Mean	SD
Giving feedback deepens my understanding of speaking skills	4.42	0.74
Receiving feedback deepens my understanding of speaking skills	4.46	0.69
Rubric focuses my attention on specific speaking aspects	4.53	0.63
I apply peer feedback to future tasks	4.45	0.68
Rubric clarity enhances my confidence in giving feedback	4.52	0.66
Peer feedback builds my confidence in speaking	4.55	0.65

The findings of this study demonstrate that rubric-guided peer feedback was highly effective in supporting the development of speaking skills and enhancing the quality of peer comments among Diploma in Engineering students. Survey results revealed consistently high levels of student agreement with all items, with mean scores ranging from 4.47 to 4.64 (on a 5-point Likert scale) and a standard deviation of approximately 0.65. This suggests strong consensus among participants regarding the benefits of rubric-supported peer evaluation.

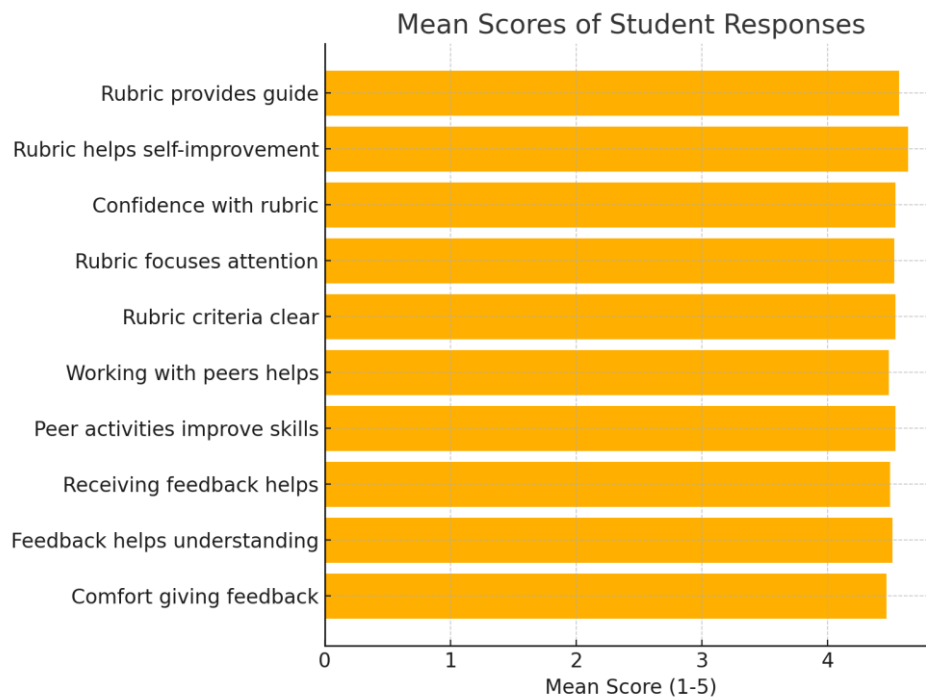


Figure 1:
Mean Scores of Student Responses

The survey findings strongly support the view that rubric-guided peer feedback significantly enhances students’ speaking abilities and the quality of their peer comments. Students consistently expressed agreement with statements reflecting that both giving and receiving feedback deepened their understanding of various speaking skills. For example, the statement “Giving feedback to my peers helps me understand speaking skills better” achieved a mean score of 4.42 (SD = 0.74), while “Receiving feedback from my peers helps me understand new aspects of speaking skills” received an even higher mean of 4.46 (SD = 0.69). These results suggest that the act of evaluating others, as well as receiving structured critique, promotes reflective thinking and heightens linguistic awareness.

These findings align closely with the work of Lundstrom and Baker (2009), who argued that peer review benefits both the giver and the receiver by promoting deeper engagement with language content. Similarly, Chang (2016) found that structured peer feedback improved students’ focus on linguistic features and enhanced their overall speaking performance. In this study, students reported that the rubric helped them pay more attention to aspects such as fluency, organization, and pronunciation—critical areas targeted in speaking assessments. The statement “The rubric helps me focus on specific aspects of my peers’ speaking skills” had one of the highest mean scores at 4.53 (SD = 0.63), demonstrating the rubric’s effectiveness in guiding evaluative attention and reducing vagueness.

Moreover, the statement “I use the feedback I receive from peers to improve my future speaking tasks” (Mean = 4.45, SD = 0.68) indicates that the feedback was not only understood but actively internalized by learners for future improvement. This outcome supports Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) assertion that formative feedback, when structured properly,

becomes a vehicle for self-regulated learning. In addition, 91.9% of participants rated the overall rubric-based peer feedback experience as positive, indicating that students valued the opportunity to participate in such activities. This overwhelmingly affirmative perception underscores that rubric-guided feedback plays a significant role in promoting metacognitive awareness and improving the clarity, relevance, and constructiveness of peer comments.

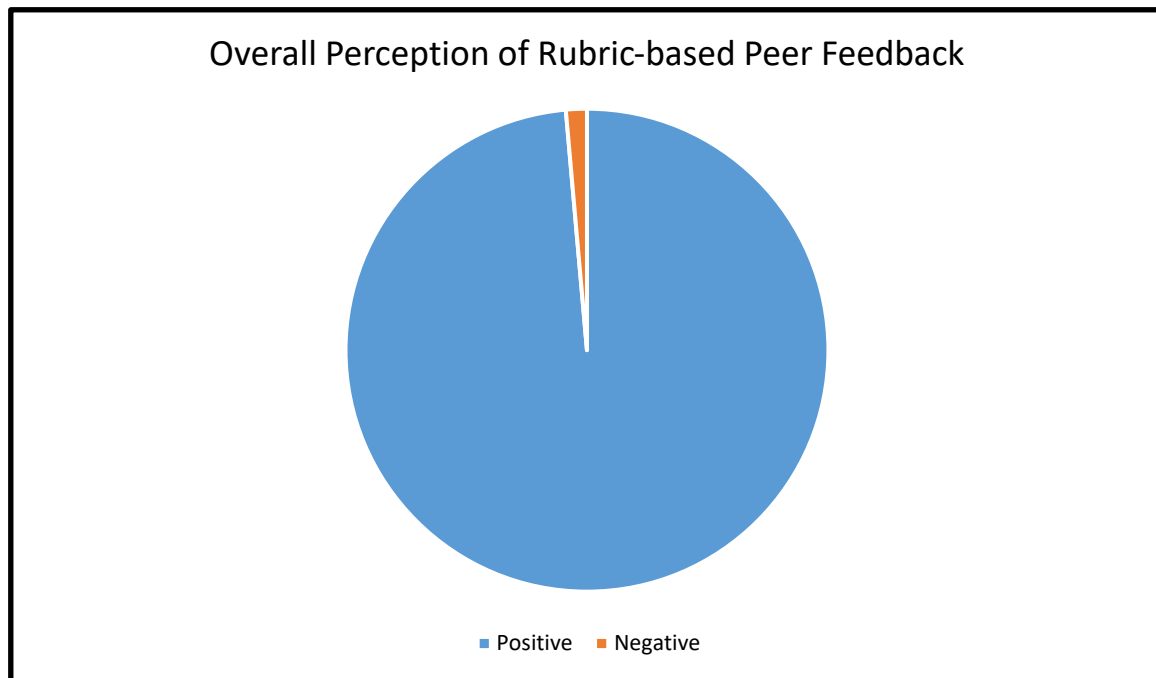


Figure 2:
Overall Perception of Rubric-Based Peer Feedback

The second research objective explored how rubric-supported peer feedback impacts learners' affective dimensions—namely their confidence, autonomy, and ability to communicate in respectful, academically appropriate ways. The data revealed strong support for this proposition. The statement “I am more confident when providing feedback to my peers by using the rubric” garnered a mean score of 4.52 (SD = 0.66), while “Feedback from my peers helps me build confidence in my speaking abilities” achieved an even higher score of 4.55 (SD = 0.65). These responses illustrate that the rubric served as an effective scaffold, reducing the emotional uncertainty often associated with peer evaluation and enabling students to participate more confidently.

This outcome is echoed in the literature. Hyland and Hyland (2006) observed that peer feedback interactions often become superficial and overly polite in the absence of scaffolding, leading to generic, uncritical responses. In this study, the rubric provided a clear and objective framework, allowing students to critique constructively without feeling rude or disrespectful. Qualitative feedback from students confirmed this sentiment, with comments such as “The rubric showed the proper way to comment without sounding rude” and “It helped me know what to say” suggesting that students found both linguistic and social value in the structure. The impact of rubric-guided peer feedback also appears consistent in recent blended and online learning environments. As noted by Gunawan et al. (2020), when structured rubrics are implemented in virtual peer feedback sessions, learners not only gain clearer insights into evaluation criteria but also exhibit greater confidence in offering constructive comments. This aligns with the present study's finding that students at UniMAP found the rubric useful in maintaining respectful tone and precision in their assessments. In addition, Khan et al. (2023) emphasized that structured peer evaluations improved students' reflective practices and communication awareness, especially among learners in technical and engineering disciplines.

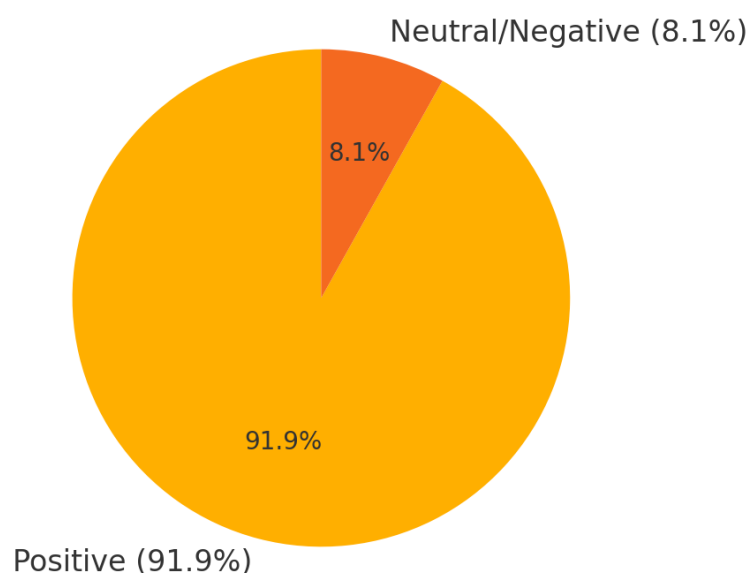


Figure 3:
Descriptive Statistical Analysis Revealed Highly Positive Perceptions

The rubric's role in building student autonomy was also evident. The statement “The criteria in the rubric (e.g., pronunciation, fluency) are clear to me” (Mean = 4.43, SD = 0.65) indicates that students were able to independently navigate and interpret assessment criteria. Furthermore, “I believe that regular peer feedback with a structured rubric will help me improve my speaking skills” (Mean = 4.54, SD = 0.62) underscores a belief in the long-term efficacy of such practices. These results corroborate the findings of Panadero and Jonsson (2013), who argued that rubrics empower learners by making evaluation criteria transparent and actionable, thus supporting self-regulated learning.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a powerful lens through which to interpret these findings. The rubric acted as a scaffold—an external support mechanism within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—enabling students to engage in evaluative practices

they might not have managed independently. As Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) proposed, effective scaffolding must be contingent, graduated, and dialogic. In this context, the rubric facilitated those conditions by guiding learners progressively toward greater evaluative and linguistic competence. Peer interaction, mediated through the rubric, thus became a site of social learning and cognitive development, validating the theoretical foundations of this study.

Overall, the findings affirm that rubric-guided peer feedback enhances not only technical speaking skills but also learner confidence, autonomy, and the ability to engage in respectful academic discourse. By combining structure with collaboration, the approach supports a holistic model of language development grounded in both sociocultural and constructivist paradigms.

The findings of this study underscore the pedagogical value of rubric-guided peer feedback in enhancing communicative competence among engineering students. Students' overwhelmingly positive responses suggest that the integration of structured rubrics into peer evaluation practices serves not merely as an assessment tool but as an active scaffold that fosters critical thinking, self-regulation, and respectful academic discourse. These outcomes align closely with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which posits that learning is socially mediated and occurs most effectively within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) when scaffolded by more knowledgeable others or structured tools.

In the context of this study, the rubric served as a scaffold that enabled students to engage in evaluative practices with greater clarity and confidence. Prior to the introduction of the rubric, students expressed reluctance in delivering honest or detailed critiques, often resorting to vague affirmations such as "good" or "okay"—a phenomenon also observed by Nelson and Carson (1998), who identified fear of offending peers as a significant barrier to meaningful feedback. By providing a structured and neutral framework, the rubric minimized this fear, allowing students to articulate their feedback in a more professional and constructive manner. This finding is consistent with Huisman et al. (2019), who demonstrated that rubrics reduce anxiety and support more focused peer evaluations.

Furthermore, the results affirm the argument by Hyland and Hyland (2006) that without appropriate guidance, peer feedback may lack specificity and depth. In this study, the rubric clarified expectations, enabled precise evaluation of key speaking components (such as fluency, coherence, pronunciation, and organization), and promoted academic politeness in feedback. Students not only became more comfortable in providing feedback but also reported improved awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in speaking—thus internalizing the rubric criteria as part of their self-regulated learning processes, as theorized by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006).

This study also supports Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) conception of "graduated assistance," in which scaffolded interventions evolve based on the learner's growing proficiency. The rubric acted as a flexible guide, empowering students to evaluate more critically and with increasing independence. These findings are also reflected in the work of Panadero and Jonsson (2013), who emphasized that structured rubrics improve both the quality of feedback and learners' metacognitive skills. Notably, the highest-scoring survey items related to rubric clarity, peer-to-peer respect, and confidence in communication—all indicative of a successful alignment between rubric use and sociocultural learning principles.

Importantly, these findings hold particular relevance in technical education settings. Engineering students often prioritize technical proficiency over language competence (Liu & Carless, 2006), and they may lack both the confidence and framework needed to critique communication performance meaningfully. This study shows that when such learners are equipped with structured tools like rubrics, they not only engage in more thoughtful evaluation but also begin to value communication as an essential academic and professional skill. The rubric transformed peer evaluation from a socially awkward task into a meaningful educational experience, fostering a learning environment built on collaboration, clarity, and mutual support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that rubric-guided peer feedback, implemented within a sociocultural framework, significantly contributes to the development of communicative competence, critical feedback literacy, and learner autonomy among Diploma in Engineering students at UniMAP. By offering students a scaffolded structure for peer evaluation, the rubric enabled them to provide detailed and respectful feedback, become more reflective about their own speaking performance, and participate more confidently in academic discussions.

Students reported that the rubric helped them focus on specific language features, articulate their thoughts professionally, and reduce the social discomfort commonly associated with peer assessment. These findings affirm that rubrics are not merely evaluative instruments but transformative pedagogical tools that align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and broader sociocultural learning theories. The evidence also reinforces the claim that when learners are given the right tools and context, they are capable of progressing toward higher-order thinking and self-regulated learning.

The study's implications for teaching are significant. Educators, particularly in technical disciplines, should consider embedding rubric-supported peer feedback practices into their communication-focused courses. Doing so not only improves the linguistic and analytical capacities of students but also nurtures essential soft skills such as empathy, clarity, and constructive criticism—qualities that are indispensable in professional and academic environments.

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