

An Evaluation of the Approaches to Feedback in ELT

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Introduction

The importance of feedback in language learning is generally met with widespread agreement in the world of ELT (Harmer 2007, Ferris 1997, Ellis 2009). It is seen as crucial for encouraging and consolidating language learning. Writing in 1998, Black and Wiliam note that feedback probably has more effect on success than any other factor. Fanselow (1987, p.267) states that ‘to teach is to provide feedback’. Essentially, it can be justifiably argued that suitable feedback can help learners to perform to the best of their ability. If feedback is to be seen as such a major part of successful language learning, then it also seems acceptable to argue that the approach taken to giving feedback is equally important.

The objective of this paper is to evaluate some of the approaches to feedback, which can facilitate learning in a positive way for the learner. This essay will start by discussing suitable definitions for the term “feedback”. Following this it will introduce and assess a variety of approaches that can be taken towards giving feedback. Firstly, it will address the timing of feedback and address the question of when it should be given. Then, the issue of who should be giving the feedback will be addressed. Following

this it will focus on what form the feedback can take. Finally, there will be an introduction of what parts of a student's work should be given feedback.

Defining Feedback

Before a discussion on the topic of feedback, it seems appropriate to define the term itself. Ur (1996, p.242) states that 'feedback is the information given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance'. This can be anything from a grade on an exam to a brief oral comment made during class. It is important to note that she explains the objective of feedback as improving performance, because this is perhaps the most vital goal of good feedback. It can also be defined as being part of a dialogue or interaction and therefore not one-way communication. This looks at the role of interaction as a key role in the process of giving feedback. Interestingly, this definition only mentions the dialogue between teacher and learner. This paper will go on to address alternative means of giving useful feedback without taking the traditional teacher to student route. Finally, it is essential that a definition of feedback addresses the notion of improving performance by identifying weaknesses and also reinforcing strengths. As a result, feedback should try to distance itself from being limited to the red pen of a teacher focusing purely on errors.

Approaches to Giving Feedback

- **When should feedback be given?**

When considering the best time to give feedback, we need to look at what particular skill is being practiced. Feedback research is dominated by writing; however, there is also some worth in looking at feedback from oral work also. Harmer and Lethaby (2005, p.6) note that the tim-

ing of feedback during oral work depends on the focus of the activity. This manifests itself in a divide between accuracy-based and fluency-based speaking activities. Harmer (2007, p.143) points out that during fluency-based communicative activities, 'teachers should not interrupt students in mid-flow'. The justification behind this is to help provide the learners with the maximum opportunity to communicate, without too much emphasis on accuracy. Feedback during fluency-based activities should be given after the activity has finished, unless the students need specific help in completing the task. On the other hand, due to the nature of accuracy work, the timing of feedback should be different. Teachers need to show students when an accuracy error has occurred immediately, in order to help them become aware of their mistake.

The timing of feedback for written work is rather more complicated as there is a longer process to consider. Essentially, there are two types of feedback commonly used in the world of ELT for writing: summative and formative. The former comes at the end of the writing process and often has a grade and some teacher comments. If feedback is to be given summatively, the most important factor is that 'it must be timely', in order to 'allow students to modify their approach or thinking before the next assignment' (University of Essex, Smart Guide on Feedback, p.3).

However, the latter is the type of feedback that follows the whole process of writing and therefore, takes place from the start to the end. Hyland (1990, p.285) argues that 'the crucial point is that the teacher's role in student writing is not the last event in the process'. It is through this formative feedback that students can reformulate and re-draft written work with the objective of improvement. Students are able to see the transformation of

their work from the initial idea to the final product, with suitable feedback throughout.

- **Who should feedback be given by?**

Traditional classroom methodologies lead the teacher to be the giver of feedback in all cases in the language classroom. Rinvoluceri (1994, p.288) argues that ‘the problem with this feedback situation is that it is parental by nature, with the power on the side of the feedback provider’. There has been a recent shift in ELT of moving the emphasis of giving feedback away from the teacher towards peer review. However, despite this, there is still a real need and value to teacher feedback as Hyland and Hyland (2006, p.3) highlight that ‘ESL students greatly value teacher written feedback’. It seems apparent, therefore, that a combination of teacher feedback coupled with peer feedback is of great value to students.

Taking the responsibility of giving feedback out of the teacher’s hands and allowing the students to be involved in the process themselves can add an extra dimension to the classroom, particularly in the writing process. Perhaps the most significant benefit of peer feedback is that it increases learner autonomy as ‘students take more responsibility for their work and are less dependent on the teacher’ (Morgan 2002, p.29). Huimin (2006, p.40) adds that it can actively increase the students’ involvement in the writing class and therefore create a more interactive environment for students to share their ideas with their peers.

Another reason peer feedback can help facilitate learning in a positive way is that it can ‘make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing’ (Rollinson 2005, p.24). The very nature of giving feedback to peers should encourage students to think more deeply about their own

work and also revise their essays with more care than previously.

The implementation of peer feedback is something that needs careful planning and this can be ‘a time consuming activity’ (ibid. p.29). In order for peer feedback to be a success, learners must go through a form of training. Stanley’s (1992) research has shown that the quality of peer feedback is improved by training the students on how to do it effectively.

Nelson and Carson (2006, p.43) point out that training is incredibly important because students tend to prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback. Therefore, students need to be made explicitly aware of the reasons and potential benefits of peer feedback for it to be a success. Furthermore, on a more practical note, learners need to be made aware of how to give suitable feedback that can help both their peers and themselves.

Despite there being a general belief that peer feedback can be a useful practice (Huimin 2006, Morgan 2005), there are occasions when it may be deemed unsuitable. Adapting peer feedback into cultural contexts where students are expecting a certain level of teacher-led response may prove problematic. As Morgan (2005, p.31) argues, there may be difficulties in achieving effective peer response in mixed nationality groups due to a lack of confidence in evaluating their peers’ work. However, she goes on to point out that ‘each teacher knows their class best and can experiment to find what is most appropriate for their teaching situation’ (ibid.).

- **How should feedback be given?**

The way in which feedback is delivered to the student depends very much on the particular situation. Just as a full written commentary on a short

oral exercise would be unsuitable, so too would a brief spoken comment for a draft of an essay. The three methods of giving feedback are basically, orally, written and computer-mediated.

Firstly, the computer-mediated approach is discussed by Milton (2006), who introduces the notion of using the Internet as a resource during feedback to help develop learner autonomy. This is a useful way of allowing the student to look at their own work more carefully and then use the relevant resources on the Internet to improve the piece of work in question.

Another way of using computers for giving feedback is the process of online computer conferencing between the student and the teacher through email. Warschauer (1997) argues that during this process students can take a more active role when seeking feedback, as they can choose to ask questions when they want. However, the possible downside of this, as discussed by Kannan and Towndrow (2002) is that students can become demanding of the teacher and therefore it can become a time consuming activity. With a clear set of guidelines for practice, agreed by the students there are benefits to be had with this process of feedback if it is practically feasible.

Feedback for spoken work tends to be oral in form because it can be provided instantly. Techniques of showing incorrectness include repetition with raised intonation, echoing what has been said with emphasis on the mistake, and also subtle reformulation from the teacher. Whilst these methods are particularly useful for accuracy-based activities, teachers need to allow more room for error. From here the teacher can pick up on good and bad points of language produced and introduce this in a feedback session after the activity (Harmer and Lethaby 2005, p.7).

The majority of research into feedback has gone into the use and effectiveness of what is written by teachers. Written commentary can vary in quality and quantity, but when done effectively it can be of great value to the student. The major benefit of teacher written feedback is that it provides a critical instructional opportunity for students and allows convenient access to the possibility of a one-to-one communication with the teacher directly. The following section will look in greater detail at the types of written feedback that can help facilitate learning as best as possible.

- **What feedback should be given?**

The question of what feedback should be given to students can be a difficult one to address and has led to some heated debate. A series of exchanges between Truscott (1996, 1999) and Ferris (1999, 2004) highlight the turbulent nature of what is and what is not seen as suitable feedback to students. Another example that displays a possible need for a radical change in feedback approaches is Lee's (2011) article asking for a "feedback revolution". The very fact that there is such literature indicates that there is room for new and innovative methods of feedback to be used.

Traditionally, the first piece of feedback students are likely to receive on a piece of writing is a grade. There are many occasions when a summative form of assessment is given to a student with a grade, however; if at all possible it can help the learner when this is delayed. Harmer (2007, p.140) notes that giving grades can lead to teacher error and result in demotivated students. Kozlova (2010, p.97) adds that 'another obstacle to feedback having the desired effect is the mark'. It seems to be apparent that returning a piece of work to a student with a clear grade results in a form of closure for the activity. Without this closure students can remain

motivated to improve their work and continue the cognitive process.

Much of the literature on the topic of feedback focuses on how to give corrective feedback regarding student mistakes (Gass and Mackey, 2006). There is a need for teachers to be aware of how to provide positive feedback appropriately alongside correction. Without positive feedback, students can be left feeling unsure as to whether they are doing things well and this can lead to dissatisfaction with the teacher. Furthermore, it can be an extremely demotivating experience to speak or write in a foreign language and receive no compliments for successful usage. There is, however, a danger in the over-use of positive feedback. Wong and Waring (2009) describe how teachers need to use specific techniques when giving positive feedback to ensure it does not become detrimental to the learners. They argue that 'positive feedback should be meaningful and authentic...without suppressing learning opportunities' (ibid. p.202).

Once positive feedback has been dealt with, the main part of feedback is corrective. Many teachers use correction codes to highlight student errors in written work. These codes can range from fairly simple to much more complex and detailed. For the use of this system to be effective, students must have a clear understanding of the codes and be able to react to them. A problematic issue can arise in the use of codes as explained by Lee (2005, p.34) when teachers can over-use them and result in confusion for the student and teacher. Therefore, if codes are to be used, they need to be explicitly clear.

Alongside the use of correction codes is a more indirect form of corrective feedback by simply indicating an error has occurred without diagnosing

the type. This can either be highlighted with a line under the mistake or noted in the margin, leaving the students to locate the error themselves. This form of feedback is recommended by Hyland (1990) because it means that the teacher does not take on too much responsibility and the students have to be active in correcting their own work. He argues that due to this method of indirect corrective feedback, 'students are able to correct up to three quarters of their errors without further prodding, and the experience seems to help them avoid the same problems later' (ibid. p.281).

Valenzuela (2005) offers another alternative to correction codes with a system of colourful highlighting that highlights not only errors, but also good work. She argues that this method is simpler and essentially more effective. Once the teacher has indicated, using coloured highlighter pens, students can work together in order to recognize the error and hopefully produce a corrected version. A form of minimal marking with this method can be useful, especially with younger learners, as it can ensure motivation levels remain high and learners can focus on particular mistakes.

The notion of minimal marking is addressed by Lee (2005, p.34) who argues that comprehensive error feedback is 'not only exhausting for teachers, but can also be very frustrating for students'. Usage of minimal marking allows the learner, who may be making copious errors, the chance to focus on a specific area of weakness and aim to improve that without feeling overwhelmed by an excessive use of corrective red pen. Research conducted by Ferris (2002) has shown that students respond better to minimal marking that allows them to target selected error types. The major issue to deal with when using this approach is that students, often due to their educational background, have an expectation of their teacher to mark all errors. This

can be resolved by ensuring the learners are made aware of the benefits of adopting such a process.

Handwritten commentary on written work is often the most fundamental style of feedback given to students (Sugita 2006, p.34). However, there are various approaches to giving this form of feedback. According to Ferris (1997, p.330), the most substantial improvements were made by students following requests for information in the margins and summarized comments on grammatical issues. Sugita (*ibid.* p.40) disputes Ferris' argument by stating that 'questions are unlikely to produce substantive changes, or rather they result in minimal changes'. It therefore, becomes apparent that there is some disagreement in the literature regarding the merits of different types of teachers' comment types.

It is important that teachers' handwritten commentary does not mark the end of the feedback process. This can be an ideal time to introduce teacher-student conferences once the initial written feedback is given. From here, students can pick up on any points they want to address and discuss them orally with their teacher. The major benefit of this is that it allows the student to take some control over what is discussed and as a result, they are actively involved in the feedback process.

Conclusion

Having come to the conclusion that feedback is of great importance to learners, it is apparent that there is not one definitively "best" way to give feedback. However, a move away from purely teacher-led corrective feedback seems to be more beneficial for the students and can help them to improve. Johnson (1988, p.93) notes that simply being told about mistakes

from your teacher is insufficient, as learners need to ‘see for themselves what has gone wrong’. This handing over the responsibility to the students should play a key role in the giving of feedback. Despite this, it is important to remember that teacher feedback is not abandoned, but combined with self-reflection and possibly peer-review.

With this combined approach to feedback, the style of teacher feedback remains an incredibly important factor. Whether teachers choose to selectively mark using codes or more indirect methods such as underlining errors, they need to allow room for the students to continue their cognitive process. Kozlova (2010, p.97) makes the valid point that the feedback students ‘receive is tailored to their personal learning needs’. Therefore, as educators, we need to be able to assess the students and make a judgment as to what type of feedback would suit them best.

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