

GlobELT: An International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language, Antalya - Turkey

The role of feedback in EFL classes

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Abstract

Enthusiastic ELT teachers are always looking for new and effective approaches and methods which would contribute to the overall improvement of their students' learning and their performance. One of the most effective ways of discovering this is collecting students' responses in the form of feedback. Such responses can provide critical and constructive information about the current course, teacher performance, difficulties or challenges students experience/have experienced during the course and indicate steps which should be taken for the improvement of one's performance in future. Therefore the aim of this article is to emphasize the importance of feedback and focus on its different forms, such as formal and informal; or continuous and end-semester feedback. In addition, the author of this article explores specific benefits and constraints of four types of feedback at the example of teaching a Course of Academic Writing at the Faculty of Informatics and Management in Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: approaches; forms of feedback; academic writing; benefits; constraints;

1. Introduction

Every responsible EFL practitioner tries his best to meet his students' language needs and thus enhance their performance. In so doing, he employs different techniques and strategies to reach this goal. All this can be effectively done provided that he receives some responses, i.e. feedback, from his learners. As Wang (2006: 42) states, 'feedback is the information about current performance that can be used to improve future performance.' Feedback plays a crucial role in any educational process since it can significantly improve both learner's and teacher's performance and indicate some key aspects of their performance which can be improved. Dignen (2014) argues that feedback is the most important communication skill, both outside and inside the classroom because it is

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around all the time; it is just another word for effective listening; it is an opportunity to motivate; it is essential to develop performance; and it is a way to keep learning.

In fact, feedback should be an inseparable part of any assessment and course evaluation. It can be done formally and informally. The formal feedback is sought by a teacher's institution in order to discover the quality of education at a given institution, while the informal feedback is usually collected by a course teacher in order to detect students' difficulties in the process of learning and simultaneously reflect on his teaching practices and approaches. Both can be done either continuously or at the end of semester. In this paper the author focuses only on informal feedback, both continuous and end-semester.

In addition, teachers can employ various feedback strategies such as assessment of students' works, peer review, students' self-reflection, in-class discussions, course evaluation questionnaires, or focus interviews with students. All these feedback strategies can undoubtedly contribute to an overall students' and teacher's picture of their performance. As Hyland (2006: 102-103) claims, 'providing feedback to students is often seen as one of the teacher's most important tasks, offering the kind of individual attention that is otherwise rarely possible under classroom conditions.' Thus, the more frequent and constructive this feedback is, the more performance improvement can be done. Furthermore, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggests, teachers should first emphasize the positive features and then specify in detail those areas which need further improvement. Therefore the following section provides a specific example of feedback practices inside and outside an EFL class of academic writing.

2. Forms of feedback in the Course of Academic Writing and their strength and weaknesses

The Course of Academic Writing (CAW) is one of many EFL classes taught at the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. It is an optional, one-semester (13x 90-minute classes) course, which is run in a blended/hybrid form. That means students meet the teacher once every two weeks to discuss and clarify the errors they made in their assignments, while at the same time, students are expected to undertake deep self-study of the materials that form their online e-learning course. The main aim of the course is to teach students how to write professionally by using formal English. In addition, it concentrates on those features which are different in English and Czech, such as citations, compiling a bibliography or using appropriate English. As for the last aspect, there are independent sections on grammar structures in written English, lexical structures, and punctuation. For more information on the structure and the content of this course see Frydrychova Klimova (2012).

However, since this course is relatively short and the teacher, the author of this article, wants to meet her learners' needs as much as possible, she continuously attempts to collect feedback from her learners. This winter semester of 2014 she has conducted feedback in form of *assessing students' assignments*; analysing *students' self-reflective essays* and their *diary writing*; and doing *focus interviews* with students in order not to develop only students' writing skills but also improve their EFL learning in general.

Each of these forms has its benefits and constraints. The main aim of the *assessment of students' assignments* is to give information about students' results and their performance of their writing development. They usually have to write five continuous assignments during the course. Therefore the teacher can see whether students are making any progress or not and reflect on their work and her teaching practices in order to make necessary changes in learning and teaching strategies. The teacher assesses these assignments every second week and uses analytic scoring (cf. Bacha, 2001). Another strength of this assessment is that students in fact receive double feedback; one in their online course after submitting their assignment and the other during their face-to-face class when the teacher points out some of the common errors students made in their essays and which should be improved. It is important to emphasize here that teachers should not just concentrate on the correction of their students' errors because it could be quite demotivating and discouraging for their students by just seeing their teacher's red marked corrections. In case of the Czech students these errors include an absence of definite and indefinite article; use of personal pronouns in the main text; long, run-on sentences; incorrect use of prepositions, punctuation and collocations; many redundancies; or a lack of persuasive conclusion. There should be always balance between the feedback on form and the feedback on content (cf. Ur, 1996). However, as another survey claims (Zaman & Azad, 2012), the direct corrective feedback is what EFL students in fact want. In their study Zaman & Azad (ibid.) reported that the Bangladeshi EFL learners valued corrective feedback and they believed that it helped a lot to develop their writing

skills. Moreover, their learners felt the necessity of accuracy in writing for their academic and professional life. The author of this article argues that this is also true for the Czech EFL students as their different forms of feedback show below (cf. Hyland, op.cit.). In addition, she suggests following Trupe (2001) who offers seven basis strategies as to how to make such corrective feedback. They are as follows:

1. Respond as a “real” reader of a text rather than as an academic authority controlling a student’s text. Comment on what interests you, what you question, what you want to see more information about.
2. Make as many positive comments as you can about what you see in the student’s text.
3. Be specific in your positive comments.
4. Ask questions in the margin to elicit amplification, reorganization, sharper focus, or transitional wording.
5. Make suggestions that encourage global (whole-text) revision in addition to local (word or sentence-level or punctuation) revision.
6. Comment in general terms rather than editing a student’s writing, leaving some of the editing work for the student while giving sufficient explanation for the student to understand what is wrong. You may wish to reference handbook sections, encouraging students to develop better understanding of the principles involved.
7. Avoid *ad hominem* negative comments.

One of the most effective feedback forms seems to be the writing of a *self-reflective essay* by students at the end of the semester. This can have many advantages, both for the students and the teacher. Students can critically think about what they have learned during the course and also convey some of their personal experience, experiences and feelings. On their basis, teachers can then draw conclusions about their teaching practices and reconsider some of their teaching approaches and strategies. Therefore, on the one hand, the self-reflective essay has many benefits for students such as awareness of their strengths and weaknesses; awareness of their learning styles; development of their writing skills; or expansion of their meta/cognitive skills. As Race (2006: 1) says:

Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we’ve learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-known pitfalls. Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general. (Race, *ibid.*: 1)

On the other hand, however, teachers can be also discouraged by some of students’ opinions since students might be too critical of their teaching approaches and techniques. In addition, students can feel uncomfortable to reveal their thoughts or be reluctant to do such reflection. In CAW students write this self-reflective essay the last contact lesson and it is not part of their course evaluation. Students are just asked to reflect on what they have learned and experienced in the course in order to help improve the course, including the teacher’s performance in the course. However, it is advisable to provide students with a few guiding questions (Appendix A). The questions were adapted according to Race (*ibid.*). Although students’ responses varied, there were some common features. Most students appreciated learning the rules of academic writing such as citing sources, the whole format of formal paper which is completely different from informal English and grammar structures such as learning how to use determiners or punctuation as it is demonstrated by the following student’s quotation:

The subject is very valuable for the amount of useful and important information its students get. Honestly, there is hardly a student who knows at least a half of the rules taught in Academic Writing. How many students know what a linking word is? How many of them know where to put commas, capital letters? How to structure paragraphs, write quotations? The fact that short sentences should be used and many other important things. These are generally unknown facts that this subject teaches its students. It is also nice that this subject is a bit like a conversation and grammar lessons. All the rules are often discussed and significant rules like articles are practiced. Neither silent, nor too vigorous lessons are what most people want. Academic Writing is the most beneficial but also the most time demanding English I have ever come through in such a short time. Especially, the first lesson was like the water of life that suddenly made me advance significantly after three-year stagnation.

Perhaps the most difficult for them was to find the right collocations, determiners, use commas in English or upload the last essay/article into the English version of Wikipedia. The biggest challenge and also the most difficult seemed to be the final assignment which was an article published in the English version of online Wikipedia. As one of the students puts it:

The greatest challenge for me was editing the Wikipedia article, it was quite difficult and I did not find much help on the Internet. However, at the end I was more proud of myself that I have completed this homework.

The most straightforward part of the course was writing an argumentative essay because its structure is very transparent. Probably, the only boring part of the course as one of the student stated had been drilling of determiners and capital letters. However, overall, students found the course very useful for their further studies at FIM. In addition, they considered the online course useful since they could receive fast feedback on their written assignments and the information in the course was clearly structured. They would recommend this course to other students (and some of them have already done so) since there is no other subject at the faculty where students could acquire the skill of academic writing. Furthermore, they reported that they had learned about themselves that although they would never become *a real professional writer*, at least they would be able to write a short essay in formal English language.

Another form of students' reflective feedback for the teacher is *diary writing*. In comparison with the self-reflective essay, diaries represent continuous writing. Moreover, they play an important role in the learning of languages. As Rubin (2003) points out, more successful learners are in control of their learning; they know what they are doing and what they want to achieve; they know when they make mistakes; and they know how to go about correcting them. And in this process teachers can help their students provided that students allow them to see their diaries, comment on them and make relevant suggestions. In their classes teachers can then employ the technique of scaffolding, a kind of support which would help students in their learning and overcoming their learning difficulties.

This feedback technique was also used in CAW this semester. During the first lesson students were introduced to diary writing and they were provided with a few guidelines on how to write their diary entries (Appendix B). In addition, one of the essays given to them in the third course assignment was on diary writing. The main drawback of the diary writing is that it is very personal and not all the students are willing to share their experience and feelings with the teacher. This was also true for CAW students because only five out of 15 were submitting their diaries. Therefore, a new strategy for encouraging students to submit their diaries will have to be employed next semester. For example, the teacher might ask their peers to look at each other's diaries and make suggestions or there could be some time allocated to diary writing at the end of each contact lesson. Nevertheless, these students' entries showed that students were quite aware not only of their shortcomings in the learning of English, but also of the strategies which could help them to improve their process of learning. The only obstacle in the improvement of this process seemed to be their procrastination which was also mentioned in their entries. Appendix C illustrates one of the students' journal entries.

The last form of feedback in CAW this year was done in the form of *focus interviews* which were also conducted during the last lesson of the course. As Mudra (2014) points out, such interviews give the participants a chance to think of answer deeply as it is not static on one type of question only and the interviewer is able to explore the participants' answers to other possible responses or explanations. Thus, in these interviews students were mainly asked about their writing difficulties, learning strategies, learning preferences and their preferred form of instruction so that the teacher could reconsider some of her strategies for CAW which will be run again in the summer semester of 2015. Furthermore, by these questions the teacher also checked and reassured herself that she was following the right track by clarifying some of the information collected from students' self-reflective essays and diaries such as follows:

- Is the choice of the right collocations your main problem when writing in formal English?
- Do you really prefer blended form of instruction to the traditional one? or
- Do you learn English by listening to the English films or do you also write down the words you hear?
- What is your biggest problem when learning English?

Simply, the teacher wanted to get as much specific feedback as possible so that the next semester course could be even more efficient than in this winter semester. Moreover, the teacher also advised her students on how to raise so much needed confidence while developing their speaking skills and on how to expand their vocabulary, which appeared to be their greatest problem when studying EFL. Therefore these focus interviews which are run face-to-

face during the last lesson and sometimes even beyond its time span because students are really keen on discussing their experiences, beliefs and difficulties of EFL learning with the teacher seemed to be quite effective feedback for students, too.

3. Conclusion

Although not all forms of feedback have been employed in CAW this semester due to time constraints and a high number of students who enrolled in the course, the teacher tried to implement at least a few feedback strategies and illustrate how these feedback forms can enhance student and teacher performance, both quantitatively (assessment of students' assignments) and qualitatively (analysis of self-reflection essays, diary writing and focus interviews), in any learning and teaching situations. All of them except the diary entries appeared to be working well and were appreciated by students.

In conclusion, I believe that any kind of feedback which can promote personal and professional growth of an individual and help him identify and realize his strength and weakness, assets and limitations, can lead to better understanding and development of his skills in the future. Moreover, providing constructive feedback can contribute to student's motivation to work on the development of his language skills regularly.

Acknowledgements

The paper is supported by SPEV project no. 2108.

Appendix A. Appendix A. Guiding questions for writing a self-reflective essay (cf. Race, 2006).

1. What did I actually achieve while attending this course? Which were the most difficult parts, and why were they difficult for me? Which were the most straightforward parts, and why did I find these easy?
2. How have I developed my knowledge and skills?
3. What were three greatest challenges in doing this course?
4. What was the most boring or tedious part of doing this course? What are your recommendations for a possible improvement?
5. In what way did this course help me in my future learning and career?
6. Did you find the online course useful, not useful?
7. What advice would I give a friend about to enroll in this course?
8. What have I learned about myself while doing this course?

Appendix B. Appendix B. Guidelines for writing a diary.

Try to record your entries after class, at least once a week. Record in your diary any thoughts about the lesson on Academic Writing or any other lesson of English. Write date/day and a few sentences about your achievements or problems in learning English.

Appendix C. Appendix C. An example of one of student's diary entries

September 24, 2014. Today I had the first lesson of Academic writing. It was rather interesting. I understood that I do not know quite a lot of important rules of official writing.

October 8, 2014. I have learnt many new linking words and phrases.

October 21, 2014. I've started reading a book in English. Almost everything is clear. I abstract new words and phrases into cards.

October 25, 2014. I've done some exercises on phrasal verbs from the book by Murphy. Practiced conversational English by chatting on Facebook.

November 9, 2014. Watched some educational videos on phrasal verbs. Things are getting better

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