

THE USE OF FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE THE ECOLOGY OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

This article is in three parts. The first part explains some of the aspects of feedback in practice and in theory. The second part attempts to relate these aspects in a discussion of what is meant by Ecological Feedback in a way that reinforces the complementarities between the various aspects discussed in the first section. The third section is the actual check-list of questions which when answered by the teacher or the student will provide feedback on the feedback practices of the teacher. The first part is intended to contextualize the second part and the first and second parts together are intended to contextualize the third part by explaining the process by which the questions of the third part were developed and organized.

1. Preliminary Observations on Aspects of Feedback

How we evaluate a student depends on many things: our theories of language, communication and learning. On a more abstract level, these three theories are shaped by our theory of reality and how it works or functions. We need to think about this very abstract level because our beliefs and actions are based on our ideas about

1. What things are (ontology).
2. How we know these things (epistemology).

If we think that the world is fixed or static and that facts exist out there in the world waiting for us to see them as already existing, then we will teach in a way that complements those beliefs. This world view informs what we may

think of as “traditional” grammar, communications, learning and language. This world view often leads us to think that there is only one best way to teach.

Put another way, how we evaluate students depends on how we understand language, communication and learning as inter-related actions.

The evaluation of what we do means that we look at the feedback and from it we see things again. So, feedback is a process which allows us to evaluate.

Feedback is part of a system. Within applied linguistics, feedback relates to courses in reading, writing, oral and non-verbal communication, testing, methodology and the grammar, meaning and discourse course. Feedback in this context is an integral part of how one organizes information: that is what effective language does at the functional and the meta-functional level.

Feedback in Practice

Poor Feedback:

1. Is hit and miss in effect.
2. Sees the feedback as a-priori or pre-determined by the correct behaviour to be checked.
3. Uses red ink as it is just a form of error correction.
4. Is not based on what the student says or means.
5. Applies abstract rules of “traditional” grammar.
6. Thinks Grammar = Writing.
7. Demotivates the student.
8. Confuses the student.
9. Shows that the teacher doesn’t care about what the student thinks or does as a human being in language because the teacher has not read the student. The student’s great effort is incommensurate with the poor effort of the teacher.
10. Is linear and so easily forgotten by the student as the feedback is not linked or reinforced later or by relevance to what the student does earlier.
11. Believes that the grammar precedes the meaning in the student’s head.
12. Is a display exercise.
13. Leads to communication breakdown or overload.

Effective Feedback:

1. Sees the communication act as a process between the teacher and student in which BOTH the teacher and student read and write as well as talk about what the student is learning.
2. Is a communication act in real time and in a real communication situation in the real world.
3. Is holistic.
4. Is supportive and builds scaffolding.
5. Is cyclical in that better communication leads to better feedback which leads to better writing which leads to better communication etc.
6. Shows the student that the teacher is a good reader of what the student writes and so shows the student the teacher's mind as a reader and as a teacher. This leads to a better ethical situation.
7. Helps the student understand that TEXT is more than just an abstract product exercise.
8. Is a source of positive backwash.
9. Elicits real language for real continuous feedback. Feedback is given on the feedback and so makes the feedback more effective and important.
10. Is reflexive. It shows and doesn't just tell what the teacher is teaching.
11. Has its goal as communication in order that the student and the teacher understand each other better as they negotiate the meaning the student is developing.
12. Integrates the teacher's and the student's language in a real dialogue.
13. Is cyclical so that each stage repeats, reinforces, expands what has been written and said in all the other stages of the process of communication.
14. Is timely, meaningful, actionable and attainable.
15. Provides information on the teacher's and the course's effectiveness.
16. Creates synergies which means that it is productive and avoids wasted effort.
17. Is humanistic.
18. Understands the feedback-disclosure cycle.
19. Breaks down barriers of poor listening or reception of messages.
20. Builds a cycle of trust between teacher and student.
21. Develops the teacher's voice inside the student's voice and the student's voice inside the teacher's voice.

22. Operates a contingency and transformational model of management in the learning process.
23. Is aware of environmental factors affecting the student and the teacher as communicators.
24. Negotiates meaning as a form of construing language.
25. Builds a Zone of Proximal Development in which the student himself or herself works with the teacher to expand his or her linguistic and communicative competence. The zone is flat, not top-down as the teacher as a reader is a peer of the student or a collaborator and the zone works on a cline between the inside and the outside in the student's writing.

Feedback in Theory

Systemic Feedback:

1. Language and the classroom are ecosystems in which actions, thoughts and wordings influence each other and other aspects of the ecosystem. (See Conlon passem)
2. The ecosystem may be understood as a Chaos System in which feedback is a source of constructive Chaos.
3. Feedback shapes the environment. (see Halliday: 20)
4. Feedback is customized to what each student does and say. (See Halliday: 15). As such it is fractal.
5. Feedback is non-linear, open-closed, self-regulating and a-periodic.
6. Feedback builds in redundancies through feedback loops.
7. Feedback affects and shapes the learning environment.
8. Feedback recycles information.
9. Feedback develops synergies between reading, writing and oral communication skills.
10. Feedback contributes to the better understanding and use of proxemics in the teaching-learning cycle.
11. Builds up a pattern of communicative behaviour through its redundant or repetitive organisation which is a source of meaning.

Feedback in M.A.K. Halliday's Functional Grammar:

1. Anaphora, cataphora, repetition and lexical density.

2. Deixis and discourse markers shape feedback inside a text.
3. Lexical chains provide feedback loops in the text as well as repetitions.
4. Grammar interprets wording in terms of what it means. (See Halliday: xvii). Lexis and grammar work together to build synergies in the language.
5. The functions of elaborating, extending and expanding create feedback loops in the lexicogrammar. (See Halliday Section 7.4)
6. There is a feedback cycle in and around Noun Group organization. (Halliday: 106)
7. The dialogical cline between the inside and the outside of a text and the connection to intertextuality (other writings and examinations) generate feedback opportunities.
8. Each stage of feedback repeats, reinforces expands earlier feedback.
9. Feedback is a process which brings together the three metafunctions of the ideational, interpersonal and the textual. Much of this process is to be understood in terms of Transitivity in the system. (See Halliday Sections 5.6 and 5.8). It is also to be construed in terms of the process of the Word Groups: Process, Participants and Circumstances. (See Halliday: 107)
10. Feedback develops complementarities between text and meaning, the spoken and written forms of communication and between lexis and grammar. It also develops the complementarities between the Teacher and the Student in the teaching-learning process and between the writer and the reader.
11. The student's language may be the Given or Theme and the teacher's language may be the New or Rheme. The feedback then leads to the next cycle in the student's writing which can be a theme or a rheme.
12. Language is construed for meaning. This meaning is construed in the process of Message, Exchange and Representation. (See Halliday: 34)
13. Feedback addresses issues of the texture of the language used in communication; ellipsis and substitution, referential chains, narrative, ideational meaning and issues of coherence and cohesion. It also is *in* dialogue on the Interpersonal level. The referential chains work through the feedback provided in the various speech actions of Request/ Assent, Question/ Answer, Acknowledgement/ Statement/ Challenge/ Justification/ Qualified Acceptance. In these actions, feedback enables the shifting roles between interactants in the communication process. (See Halliday: 337)

2. Discussion of Ecological Feedback

Feedback is an important and yet often undervalued part of the teaching and learning process. Feedback is ecological when it is given in the context of a classroom learning environment in which all the aspects of the course are related to each other in a humanistic and supportive way.

Language is meaningful when it is related to its environment and it receives sustenance from the organic network of feedback loops which operate in a non-linear way. By closely monitoring his or her relationship with each student, the teacher may be more aware of the sensitive dependence of the communication cycle on the initial conditions that constantly arise in the learning process.

If communication breakdown occurs, it may have far-reaching results if not remedied quickly. For this reason, a process needs to be implemented by a teacher which will enable the teacher and the student to identify exactly where and why the process has been damaged. In this process, the repairs necessary to sustain the ecological system may be implemented. By closely monitoring the process, a fractal understanding of every new move, change or development may be documented and reviewed. Any intervention by the teacher in the remedial stage may be focused at the point where communication has been damaged. The remedy is not so much the correction of the student's mistake or error as it is the maintenance of the communication process which gives the student's writing a real environmental support network which functions as an on-going dialogue between the student and the teacher.

While feedback may lead to a more motivated and focused learner when done well, it may create a less motivated and more confused learner when done in a haphazard fashion. Effective feedback is timely, actionable, meaningful and attainable for the student. It should also take into account certain ecological aspects of the teaching-learning process which have been mentioned in part 1 above. These ecological aspects relate to the ways the teacher sees each student's work holistically and develops avenues of communication between himself or herself and each student which demonstrate that the teacher is concerned with and involved in the student's learning. Until a student finds the confidence to express his or her own thoughts and feelings in the language being studied, there will be no meaningful material on which the teacher may work with the student to shape the expression of that material coherently and cohesively.

The following check-list of questions is intended for a teacher who may wish to monitor his or her feedback to students. The check-list looks at

the feedback process in an ecological way, as an organic whole, which offers the potentiality for the teacher to achieve synergies in his or her efforts to communicate in a meaningful way at all stages of the writing process. It can be expanded to encompass other areas of learning.

Importantly, the feedback process should be seen as a cyclical structure which operates at many different levels simultaneously. In the check-list offered below, the process is seen as starting with a student's text in which the teacher makes comments and responds to the meaning and the expression of the text. The second level comes at the end of the text where the teacher may write more extensively to relate the student's work to other writings done by the student or to the wider picture of what the student and the teacher are trying to achieve in the learning process.

The interview stage which should come shortly after the student has received back the piece of writing needs to give the student the opportunity to initiate the discussion (to clarify or explain) and to follow up on any matters raised by the teacher's feedback. It is in this stage that the sensitive teacher may gain new insights into the student's needs and understanding of the process.

While these three stages are repeated often within the course, it is important for the teacher to reinforce this feedback cycle with any examinations done by the student. In this feedback at the end of the process, the teacher can further recognize and therefore reinforce any gains made by the student by offering supportive critical comments on how the student is developing as a writer.

Failure to make this feedback consistent with all the previous feedback given during the course may create negative backwash and leave the student feeling that the teacher's prior expressions of interest were shallow or misleading. Such a student may in this way learn not to trust the next teacher's or any future feedback in the present course. Such a cycle of distrust eventuates from a teacher's failure to be consistent in the ways he or she gives feedback to each student.

Done effectively, systemic feedback may be an invaluable tool for eliciting responses from the student which are meaningful forms of communication. When the communication process is exploited by the teacher through effective feedback a cycle of trust between each student and the teacher may develop. While the main topic in such communication may be the meta-learning activities of the student who develops a dialogue with the teacher about the effectiveness of his/her language production, there seems to be an additional level to the communication in the feedback cycle: when integrated

holistically and organically, feedback gives the teacher and the students the opportunity to discuss in a face-to-face situation not only the learning issues but the personal, more affective factors that usually impact the students' writing efforts. On yet another level, such feedback may provide the teacher with feedback from the student on the teacher's way of teaching or any other matters that may arise in the classroom environment.

The checklist (in part 3 below) traces the feedback cycle from the initial writing of a student in a journal entry or in a writing task onto the follow-up stages. In these later stages, the teacher's feedback needs to be consistent. In other words, the teacher's comments inside the student's text should be supported and even expanded in the comments that the teacher makes at the end of the piece of writing being evaluated. A follow-up interview gives the student a chance to clarify or reinforce any impressions he or she may have of the teacher's evaluation. In this regard, the feedback process should be understood as a part of the wider communication cycle which is a two-way, not a one-way process.

It is important that the teacher follows up on the feedback given in one piece of work when giving feedback to other pieces of work. This helps the student understand how to put the various pieces of the learning experience together. For this reason, the feedback process should be understood as never-ending.

The most important signal that effective integrated feedback sends to a student is that the teacher cares about the student and responds to the student's writing as a reader should respond to any other written text with genuine communicative intent. When a student sees that his or her readers approach the written language in the classroom as real language and not as boring exercises in futility, the student may learn an invaluable lesson about the importance of understanding any future readers of his or her writing as a part of the overall communication process. In gaining this perspective, the student may also find new and better ways of communicating with him or herself, ways that lead to the student's more developed self-knowledge which should be an integral part of any writing process.

One feature of this process is that the student has input into the shaping of the feedback received from the teacher. By giving the sensitive teacher feedback on the teacher's feedback, the student may fine tune what he or she feels they may need in order to clarify the writing and the feedback process. Such negotiations of meaningful communication make all the language use in the feedback system meaningful, measurable, actionable and attainable.

Using and extending the checklist

The checklist is designed in four stages. In stage 1, the student writes a journal entry or essay draft. The teacher then writes inside the student's text in stage 2 and at the end of or outside the text in stage 3. The student and teacher then discuss the text and the feedback in stage 4. The next stage could be referred to as stage 5 as the student then uses the feedback to return to the journal or essay draft with a clearer understanding of the reader and the issues to be considered in writing the next piece of work. This is the point at which the recycling of feedback begins as the student responds to the feedback with new work. The last two questions on the list are meant to be used to review the overall effectiveness of the feedback at the end of the course. They can be used by the teachers, students or administrators.

The list of questions has been designed to elicit "yes" or "no" responses from the teacher. It reflects the process of an expansive feedback cycle that gains strength through its redundancy which in turn is meant to be a part of the cyclical movement between each stage of a text's development. Such a cycle reinforces the degree of trust that will hopefully support a nascent or budding writer seeking confidence to reach out to an audience.

As a rule of thumb, the more times each of the questions asked in the check-list are answered "Yes", the more effective the feedback will likely be. While it may be that a larger number of "no" responses in any particular part of the check-list occurs, such an increase should help the teacher identify those parts of the feedback process which are in need of more work. The way to develop those weak parts of the cyclical process is to make more consistent the patterns of communication already established elsewhere in the cycle. That way, the teacher may have the solutions to problems within the sphere of his or her own practices in other places where feedback is given to a student.

The checklist may be modified by the teacher so that each student has a chance to respond to the list. By checking the students' responses, the teacher may more clearly understand how closely he is to the expectations and judgments of the students in relation to the communication cycle of feedback. The list may also be a useful tool in preparing new teachers to be more aware of the complexities and the possibilities offered by feedback when that feedback is understood in ecological terms. Groups of teachers who wish to have a consistent and equitable feedback system in order to ensure the quality of the courses they teach together may also use the list.

The systemic use of the checklist may make a series of courses more meaningful by enabling each teacher to build on what previous teachers have achieved in establishing, maintaining and developing a communication network between themselves and their students. When the feedback system used in a program is consistent and focused, the program itself will gain cohesion and coherence by making clear to the students and the teachers the systemic qualities of the program's ecology and the ways these qualities are reflected or embodied in the organic communication process itself. In this way, a view of language, learning, writing and communication may be fostered in the students and their teachers. Such understanding may lead to a better understanding between the teachers and the students as inter-dependent influences on the ways language is practiced and shared in the learning system.

To return to a statement made in the opening of part 1 above: Hopefully, improved understanding for all those involved in the process will mean that information is better organized. This improved organization should be the goal of all learning-teaching, language use and communication practice.

3. Feedback Checklist

Stage 1: Feedback written in the student's text

1. Did the feedback clarify the student's intended meaning?
2. Did the feedback identify and/or fix recurrent grammatical errors which impede the expression of the student's intended meaning?
3. Was the feedback responding to statements, observations or opinions made by the student?
4. Was the feedback focused on the accuracy or the fluency of the entry?
5. Did the teacher appear to make a concerted effort to provide written feedback in the text?

Stage 2: Feedback comments at the end of the journal entry or homework

1. Was the feedback related to the feedback made in the student's text in order to explain it or reinforce it by discussing what the student did well or needs to improve?

2. Did the feedback attempt to further clarify, expand or reinforce the student's intended meaning?
3. Did the feedback mention specific recurrent grammatical errors made by the student?
4. Was the feedback responding to statements, observations or opinions made by the student in the journal or homework?
5. Was the feedback focused on the accuracy or the fluency of the student's journal entry or homework?
6. Did the feedback address the issue of the adequacy of the student's response?
7. Was the content of the entry discussed?
8. Did the feedback positively reinforce the student's effort in order to encourage the student to continue writing the way he/she did in the entry?
9. Did the feedback refer to what the student had written in previous entries or homework?
10. Did the teacher appear to make a concerted effort to provide written feedback in the comments at the end of the text?
11. Did the teacher's written comments explicitly refer to comments made in the body of the student's text?
12. Did the teacher's written comments relate the student's performance to other areas or aspects of the overall course?
13. Were the teacher's comments focused on encouraging the student's fluency/ production of more writing or on the accuracy of the student's grammar?
14. Did the teacher's comments reinforce the personal relationship between the teacher/ reader and the student/ writer?

Stage 3: Feedback made orally in an interview

1. Was there a student-initiated discussion of the written comments in the journal?
2. If there was a student initiated discussion, what was its specific focus on meaning or lexicogrammar?
3. Was the feedback related to the feedback made in the student's text and/ or in the teacher's written comments in order to explain it or reinforce it by further discussing what the student did well or needs to improve?
4. Did the feedback attempt to further clarify, expand or reinforce the student's intended meaning?

5. Did the feedback identify specific recurrent grammatical errors made by the student?
6. Was the feedback responding to statements, observations or opinions made by the student in the journal entry in an oral feedback session etc?
7. Was the feedback clarifying, expanding or reinforcing comments made by the teacher at the end of the student's journal entry?
8. Was the feedback focused on the accuracy or the fluency of the student's journal entry?
9. Did the feedback address the issue of the adequacy of the student's response?
10. Was the content of the entry discussed?
11. Did the feedback positively reinforce the student's effort in order to encourage the student to continue writing the way he/she did in the entry?
12. Did the feedback refer to what the student had written in previous entries or assignments?
13. Did the teacher appear to make a concerted effort to provide oral feedback in the comments at the end of the text?
14. Did the oral feedback comments relate the student's performance to other areas or aspects of the overall course?
15. Were the oral feedback comments focused on encouraging the student's fluency/ production of more writing or on the accuracy of the student's grammar?
16. Did the oral feedback comments reinforce the personal relationship between the teacher/ reader and the student/ writer?

Stage 4: Feedback on the student's subsequent work including the student's examination

1. Was the feedback related to the feedback made in the student's journal in order to explain it or reinforce it by further discussing what the student did well or needs to improve?
2. Did the feedback attempt to further clarify, expand or reinforce the student's intended meaning?
3. Did the feedback identify specific recurrent grammatical errors made by the student?
4. If recurrent grammatical errors were identified, were these systematically related to the errors identified in the feedback to the student's journal?

5. Was the feedback responding to statements, observations or opinions made by the student in the examination response?
6. Was the feedback clarifying, expanding or reinforcing comments made by the teacher at the end of the student's examination response?
7. Was the feedback focused on the accuracy or the fluency of the student's examination response?
8. Did the feedback address the issue of the adequacy of the student's examination response?
9. Was the content of the examination response discussed?
10. Did the feedback positively reinforce the student's effort in order to encourage the student to continue writing the way he/she did in the examination?
11. Did the feedback refer to what the student had written in his/her journal?
12. Did the teacher provide written feedback at the end of the text?
13. Did the teacher's comments relate the student's performance to other areas or aspects of the overall course?
14. Were the comments focused on encouraging the student's fluency/ production of more writing or on the accuracy of the student's grammar?
15. Did the feedback evaluation of the student's examination response reinforce the personal relationship between the teacher/ reader and the student/ writer?

Evaluation of Overall Feedback Effectiveness of Evaluation

1. Was the feedback consistent and focused for each individual student at each stage of the feedback process?
2. Was the feedback systematic in the way the feedback was given to the group of students as a whole in terms of stressing fluency, stressing accuracy, making suggestions about content, and building a relationship between the teacher and the students based on a better mutual understanding between the parties involved in the process?

References

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