

Collecting student perceptions of feedback through interviews

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Abstract

Teachers and students make up the two major actors in the classroom environment. How these two interact will largely determine the amount of learning produced. Of the many forms of teacher-student interaction, such as instruction, social interaction, and discipline, the research indicates that feedback is one of the strongest predictors of positive learning outcomes (Hattie, 2009). While research indicates that in order for feedback to be effective, it needs to be timely, appropriate to the students' proficiency, and formative (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), teachers' awareness of that alone is not enough to ensure successful learning outcomes. In fact, regardless of the quality of feedback produced by one teacher, if students do not believe the feedback being delivered is beneficial to reaching their goals, its effectiveness will be greatly diminished. It is therefore necessary to overcome any form of cognitive dissonance between teacher and student about useful feedback before the learning process can begin. Determining what types of feedback students believe are important will allow teachers to address these beliefs and re-align them with what research has shown to be the most beneficial. This research aims at answering two questions: 1) What feedback do students deem relevant? 2) What forms of teacher feedback do they perceive in the classroom? After introducing the background for the research, the presentation will examine the data collected through interviews with students in their native language, the methodology used to gather such data and the results from this preliminary study. This research is based in the foreign language classroom setting of a private Japanese university. Given the limited number of classes available during one academic year, teachers and students who are in accordance in their beliefs will benefit from a powerful learning environment. Raising teacher and student awareness of classroom practices and beliefs will not only promote student motivation and learner autonomy, but also the creation of this positive learning environment.

Keywords

Feedback, student preferences, learning

Introduction

Feedback is an integral part of the learning experience (Black & William, 1998). Most teachers offer some type of feedback, but few are aware of its power in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions about the amount of feedback they provide and students' perceptions about how much feedback they receive seem to differ significantly (Carless, 2006). Offering a model for teachers to situate themselves and their students' learning can help create a more efficient learning outcome. This research constitutes a first step in bridging the gap between teacher and student conceptualization of the uses of feedback.

1 Research background

Research has already established the merits of feedback on learning (Hattie, 2009). While this concerns largely general education, results can reasonably be applied to the second language acquisition (SLA) context. Research in SLA has primarily concerned itself with certain forms of feedback, such as corrective feedback and written feedback (Anderson, 2010), which in and of themselves are key components specific to the language classroom.

However, research looking into students' beliefs about feedback is still lacking in comparison to the amount of research available on teacher perspectives on feedback (Rowe & Wood, 2008).

In a study relating to the general education context, Rowe and Wood (2008) conducted interviews to gather data on students' perceptions and preferences for feedback. They found that learners recognized the importance of feedback, but were confused about what to expect from their teachers exactly. A wide variety of responses showed that students preferences about what is beneficial to their learning does not align with what teachers are offering.

1.1 A model for feedback

The Hattie and Timperley (2007) model proposes four dimensions of feedback: (1) Feedback about the task, (2) Feedback about processing the task, (3) Feedback about self-regulation, (4) Feedback about the self. (See below for an outline of these different types of feedback). Each of these categories operates at a different level, in particular *Where am I? Where am I going?* and *How to get there?*

With this multi-dimensional model in mind, the teacher can offer a wide array of support to the student who might need help with their development in a certain direction. For instance, students who have established where they are at cognitively in the class can direct their attention to where they would like to be in the future, decide the amount of time within which they would like to be there, and how they will proceed to reach that goal.

1.1.1 Feedback about the task

Providing answers for a task completed or offering comments about the completion of the task would constitute feedback about the task. To help understand how each type of feedback works, a basic example about writing neatly has been provided. For instance, a teacher who says, "Write more neatly" is providing feedback about the task of writing.

This type of feedback clearly provides the student with the teacher's expectations. Providing answers to a problem or offering a "good", after the student answers a question would also fall under feedback about the task.

1.1.2 Feedback about processing the task

This type of feedback is about the strategies students can use to complete the task more efficiently. Using our previous example about writing, if the teacher offered, "Write neater so you can read better", it situates the act the student has completed within a continuum of learning rather than being the final point of the process. More specifically, it indicates how the student should complete the task.

1.1.3 Feedback about self-processing

If the teacher would like to move beyond simply indicating the most efficient way to study and offer students more autonomy, offering the aforementioned feedback as a strategy that the student is free to use of their own volition, then students are moving into self-processing. For instance, a teacher might say, "If you write more neatly, it would help you stay organized and then you can review your work more easily."

The nuances between the three previous

types of feedback are small ones that progressively demand more investment into their own study methods on the part of the student.

1.1.4 Feedback about the self

This last type of feedback does not fit along the continuum, but it is one of the most commonly used by teachers. Unfortunately, it is also one of the least effective to improve student learning. Feedback about the self includes any type of praise or criticism relating specifically to the student as a person. Continuing with our example about writing, the teacher in this case might say something along the lines of, "You have such neat writing!" (in this example, the intonation of the teacher will indicate the teacher's satisfaction).

Beyond a subjective assessment of the students self, this type of feedback doesn't offer anything the student can work with to improve learning.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research setting

The research was conducted with students enrolled in Economics at a private Japanese university in the south of Japan. English conversation classes once a week for 90 minutes with a native English lecturer over the course of 15 weeks are a mandatory part of the curriculum for all first and second year students. Due to the compulsory aspect, motivation is low and students' English skill can be set at around or below 300 on the TOEIC test.

2.2 Participants

Due to difficulties in connecting with students, teachers recommended a few students in their classes who might be willing to take part in interviews. Several volunteers agreed to participate in interviews in their native language about the feedback that occurs in the classroom. So as to avoiding influencing what the students might say, the term feedback was never mentioned unless students uttered it themselves. This methodology was based on the grounded theory approach, which dictates that terminology and themes need to emerge naturally from participants over the course of the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Several students participated in the study, however in the preliminary findings for this study three students' responses will be examined. Before the interview process began, students were asked to sign a consent form informing them of how their responses might be used in the future.

2.3 Interview process

Students were recorded using audio

devices such as iPads or voice recorders. The files were then transferred into mp3 format and coded in qualitative analysis software (ATLAS ti).^β

Interviews were set to take place in a location that would be non-threatening to the students, that is vacant classrooms or the library. Student lounges and outdoors on campus were impossible due to the risk of noise interference during the data collection.

2.4 Interview questions

Prior to the interviews, semi-structured questions were developed to guide the discussion (see Appendix A).

Appendix A. Interview questions for student perceptions about teacher feedback in the classroom A.

TASK

- 1) Did you do a Vocabulary Book (VB)? Please tell me about that.
- 2) What did the teacher do when a few students didn't understand? The whole class didn't understand? One student didn't understand?
- 3) Did you like that approach? Why or why not?
- 4) How does the teacher know that the class doesn't understand?
- 5) Is there anything else you feel you would like from the teacher?

PROCESS-LEVEL

- 1) Does the teacher check to make sure that the work is done properly?
- 2) How does the teacher check?
- 3) What does the teacher say to you in that case? (Done properly case/done badly case)
- 4) What does the teacher do when the whole class hasn't done it properly?
- 5) What does the teacher do when only one student hasn't done it properly?
- 6) What do you think about that?

SELF-REGULATION

- 1) Talk about why you think you are doing the VB.
- 2) Do you think the VB is important? Why or why not?
- 3) Where did you come up with that idea?
- 4) Why do you think the teacher is making you do the VB?
- 5) Take a moment to think about what the teacher has told you about the VB. What do you think about that?

- 6) Do you like what the teacher has explained to you?
- 7) Is there anything else you would like to understand?

SELF

- 1) Do you think the teacher likes you?
- 2) Has the teacher ever praised you? How about other students?
- 3) How do you feel about that?
- 4) Has the teacher ever criticized you? How about other students?
- 5) How do you feel about that?

The interview questions were designed to follow the Hattie and Timperley (2007) model for teacher feedback. Obtaining details on specific instances of feedback proved to be challenging. Therefore, students were asked to refer to the VB they were asked to work on in class. Many teachers at the University are using this tool to support vocabulary acquisition, therefore, it was an easy reference for the students to recall specific instances where they might have received feedback. Naturally, any deviation from the questions were welcome as long as they lead to further discussion on the topic of feedback

3 Preliminary Findings

The following are interim findings. For clarity, they will be organized by type, as outlined in the model for feedback.

3.1 Feedback about the task

Students indicated that teachers provided feedback about the task. Namely, teachers had checked homework to see if it was done. When asked what type of feedback students would be interested in getting from the teacher, there was an overwhelming tendency for student to want to have the teacher tell them if the task had been completed adequately. Students mentioned the teachers often only made comments about the task if the work had not been completed properly. However, it was not clear whether students wished to receive more verbal feedback about the completion of their work.

3.2 Feedback about processing the task

Students' comments revealed that while the teacher was checking the homework, students who didn't understand the homework were given individual explanations about how to complete it properly. A common theme seemed to be that students were provided with one on one feedback about how to complete the task quite often at the start of the semester. As students became more and more

familiar with the process of the task, the teacher checked the work more superficially. Students expressed their dislike for this tactic and an inclination to not want to complete their work properly anymore. This suggests that there is a disconnect between teacher and student expectations of how the homework is to be used. Often times, students also expressed they didn't not know why they had to complete the task in a certain way.

3.3 Feedback about self-regulation

This type of feedback was noticeably less common. It is not clear yet whether this is because teachers provide self-regulation feedback less often or because students don't perceive this as feedback.

3.4 Feedback about the self

Students expressed that some teachers use personal comments about them. The students seemed to appreciate that the teacher had noticed something about the student's personal appearance. They interpreted it as the teacher taking an interest in them or wanting to be their friend.

3.5 Limitations

Several points about these interim findings need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, inter-rater reliability needs to be established through coding and group discussions about the interpretation of these codes. Secondly, triangulation with video footage and interviews will also help validate the results of this study. Lastly, having students participate in stimulated recall after the initial interview may help to gather more details about the types of feedback students perceive in the classroom. Extracting specific examples proved to be a challenge since the students were not made aware explicitly of what the research was about in order to avoid influencing the responses they might give by focusing too much on one aspect of the class.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Delving into student feedback

The preliminary review of the results indicates that there is a lack of consensus between teacher and student expectations, not only about why tasks are to be completed a certain way, but also about how the task should be completed. Although the processing of the task is usually resolved by the teachers over the semester, students indicated they were not sure why they were completing the tasks in a certain way, and few mentioned how these tasks could help them regulate their learning in the future.

Notable for its absence is feedback on self

regulation. Considering this type of feedback has proved to be one of the most effective to regulate student learning in the long run, there needs to be sustained deeper investigation into students' beliefs about their self-regulation and the supportive role feedback in the classroom can fill towards reaching that goal.

4.2 Future direction

Simply looking at the students' perspective is certainly helpful to understand part of the equation that takes place during classroom interactions. However, it is also necessary to have an understanding of what teachers are doing in the classroom and what their perceptions are for the feedback they provide. Indeed, Rowe and Wood (2008) call for a comparison between student and teacher beliefs about feedback.

Another factor to bear in mind is the cultural variation that may exist between students' learning preferences. Purdie, Hattie and Douglas (1996) reported that students' learning strategies may vary depending on whether they are surface learners or deep learners.

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