

Feedback: a basic ingredient

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Abstract

The way we, teachers, talk to learners in general and, more specifically, the way we respond to what they have/ haven't said or done affects them both as personalities and as learners. Even if we could agree that all teacher feedback is meant well, we could equally well agree that it does not always have the expected effects: learners do not always change, they do not improve, they do not always learn. How can teacher feedback help towards this direction? How can we make teacher feedback more effective? What kind of feedback can positively affect learners and make them feel safe, help them improve themselves as learners and human beings and make them want to continue?

These are some of the questions we will try to answer in this article as we believe that feedback is an essential ingredient and a core part of learning (Ford, 1992), and that it must be motivational and not de-motivating for the learner.

Key words: teacher's feedback, motivation, emotions, student's development

Resumen

El modo en que las y los profesores hablamos al alumnado en general y, en concreto, cómo respondemos a lo que dicen o no y hacen les afecta tanto en su personalidad como en su aprendizaje. Incluso si consideramos que el feedback de los profesores es siempre el adecuado, igualmente estaremos de acuerdo en que no siempre tiene los resultados esperados: los alumnos no siempre cambian, ni mejoran ni aprenden. ¿De qué manera el feedback del profesorado puede ayudar positivamente? ¿Cómo podemos hacer más afectivo el feedback? ¿Qué clase de feedback puede afectar positivamente al alumnado y hacerles sentir bien, ayudarles a mejorar como alumnos y seres humanos y motivarles a continuar?

Estas son algunas de las cuestiones que tratamos de contestar en este artículo puesto que creemos que el feedback es un elemento esencial y una parte central del aprendizaje (Ford, 1992) y que debe ser motivador y no desmotivador para el alumnado.

Palabras clave: feedback del profesor, motivación, emociones, desarrollo del alumnado

1. How do you usually respond to learners' outcomes?

Let us start by considering the following exchange from a lesson, in which the learners were given the task to form a figure/body in this case named Zippo by listening to a message describing the different parts of the body:

Learner: *Miss, we can't make Zippo.*

Teacher: *You sound worried, let me see..., but you're almost half way through! Listen to the message once again. Listen for the colours. The colours will help you.*

Learner: *Thank you, Miss. Now I know what to do!*

We notice that the teacher first acknowledges the feelings of the learner, then describes what the learner has already achieved and guides her/him in a specific way.

The underlying message in the teacher's words could be "I understand how you feel, you've done half of the task by yourself and if you try this way you can finish it". As for the learner, s/he realizes that s/he is appreciated and trusted by the teacher and can interpret his/her message as "I can do it".

What would have happened if the teacher had responded in a negative way, for example as below?

Learner: *Miss, we can't make Zippo.*

Teacher: *Yes, you can! Just stop complaining and start working*

Learner: ...

What is the underlying message in the teacher's words? "You are wrong to feel the way you do. Listen to me instead. The problem is not your inability, but your behaviour". Even if the teacher means well, in this case s/he ignores the learners' feelings, does not even listen to the learners, disorientates them and does not offer them any help or motivation to achieve the task.

We realise, then, that as teachers we need to worry a little about what we say to our learners, as it reflects our feelings towards them and also affects their own feelings and therefore their motivation to learn. If we want to be able to teach, or rather help our learners learn, we need to respond to them in more caring ways, so that they are emotionally ready and equipped with the appropriate means to do so. That is why we consider feedback an essential ingredient of learning.

2. What is feedback?

It might be useful at this point to look at some interesting definitions. According to CUP dictionary, feedback is information that shows that something is successful or liked. In Wikipedia, feedback is referred to as a process of sharing observations, concerns and suggestions between persons with the intention of improving both personal and organizational performance. According to Wajnryb (1992:49), "feedback refers to the responses given by the teacher to what learners produce in the classroom. In its most narrow definition this refers to teacher response to error." Ramaprasad in Sadler (1989:120) stresses that feedback is information about the gap between the actual level of learner performance and the level that must be reached, which (information) is used to alter the gap in some way. Finally, according to Hattie and Jaeger (1998:113), feedback is the provision of information about how much and what kind of meaning the learners have constructed from the learning or taught input.

It becomes obvious from the above definitions that feedback is basically any kind of teacher response to learner output and shared information aiming at change, and improvement and eventually learning. As response and shared information it cannot but be a two-way process.

A two-way process

Because teaching and learning are interrelated, teachers and learners are both sources and receivers of feedback. Teachers provide feedback to learners about their learning and they receive feedback from learners about their teaching.

For example, after the implementation of the teacher's input, the learners may come to the teacher with information on what they gained, what and where the input helped them best, or about the difficulties they encountered. They can also inform the teacher about the quality of his/her input on what did not go well and on how the teacher's ideas can be improved in order to be more helpful, resourceful and effective in the future. The teacher can also inform the learners about the quality of their work, the level of their understanding, their strong and weak points and the appropriate learning strategies for improving their output.

Learners through teacher feedback need to establish "*what* they are working towards, *where* they stand in relation to the criteria of what is considered quality work and discover ways and ask questions aimed at clarifying *how* to get there". (Jones J. and Wiliam, D. 2008: 5). Similarly, teachers need to establish, through learner feedback, the same things in terms of teaching.

Feedback therefore, aims at helping learners set learning goals, become aware of their strong and weak points and of the appropriate learning strategies in order to achieve their goals. It also helps teachers match their teaching to the learners' needs, styles, goals and expectations.

In brief, feedback can refer to learner output and progress, to teacher input, to methods, as well as to opportunities for future improvement of all the above and it could guide and prompt both the learner and the teacher. Feedback is then a powerful tool for empowering the learners in their learning process as well as for supporting the teacher in the teaching process and it is an important instrument to be used for implementing the portfolio reflection which is at the core of the learner-centred methodology.

An on-going process

As teaching and learning is a continuous transaction so is feedback: a daily, on-going teacher-learner interaction. It is a regular part of any lesson, including all tasks and stages of a lesson or a course. It can be warm (immediate, spontaneous and unplanned), or cold (delayed and planned) The former is usually oral whereas the latter is written. Examples of forms for collecting warm learner feedback can be smiley faces or post-its with comments.

Depending on the purpose and the intentions of the person who gives it and also on the medium used, feedback can be verbal, non-verbal, motivational, reflective, diagnostic, formative, formal, informal, oral or written. However, if we want to make good and appropriate use of feedback, the sooner both learners and teachers have access to it the better. Teacher intervention and learner action can be planned having in mind where they started from in order to better establish further steps to be undertaken.

As an on-going process feedback is not restricted to the teacher to learner and learner to teacher modes. It can also be from a teacher to third party (another teacher, or an observer, for example), or third party to teacher.

At this point, we would like to emphasise the importance of class observations and the discussions that should follow each lesson observation as they offer opportunities for interesting ideas, suggestions, explanations which help teachers further develop and improve their material. It is of major importance for a holistic approach that teachers open up to professional development through observation, feedback and discussion.

What kind of feedback?

The *only* feedback that is effective, however, is feedback which is *used* (Jones J. and Wiliam, D. 2008: 13) This may seem obvious, but unfortunately teachers do not always use learner feedback and they may never ask for it. This is either because they are not trained in asking for or using feedback, or as they may be unaware of its benefits they think it is a waste of time. This may also occur when they think of themselves as authority or feel that their authority is threatened by learner feedback. Learners also do not use it when their feelings are ignored, or the feedback demeans them and especially when they feel hurt by feedback that always focuses on mistakes and weaknesses and offers them no way out.

The first and most important prerequisite, then, for feedback to be used is the establishment of a warm and safe environment, a brain-friendly atmosphere and a good teacher-learner and learner-learner relationship. This can only take place firstly when, teachers and learners open up to each other, care about and share each other's feelings and ideas; secondly, when they demonstrate mutual trust as in the case when

the teachers assign tasks to the learners. Thirdly, when they both have fun, in other words when they enjoy what they are doing.

The second prerequisite is that feedback must be ‘task-involving’ (Jones J. and Wiliam, D. 2008:13); it must focus not on the person, but on the strengths and weaknesses of the particular learner output, or on the learning objectives and strategies, emphasising what needs to be done to improve, and ideally how to go about it, in other words engage the learner in some kind of reflection. Otherwise, if it is what psychologists call ‘ego-involving’, that is feedback which focuses on learners as good or bad achievers, by giving them only marks and ranking them, it discourages the low achievers and may make high achievers see tasks as a way to high marks only and not as an opportunity to learn, because what matters is the mark, not the learning.

Many teachers realize that marks have not really any impact on learning and they try to compromise and combine this school practice of giving marks with comments. However, as research by Buler (1987) and Dweck (2000) has shown giving both marks and comments has the same effect as giving just marks: the high achievers do not need to read the comments and the low achievers do not want to.

In terms of a holistic approach not only does feedback best function in a safe environment, but also contributes to it and to learning and teaching as well. Therefore, both the teacher and the learner need to be trained in giving and receiving feedback, but also in interpreting and using it.

How can this be achieved?

As feelings interfere with feedback and therefore with learning, the most important thing in our holistic approach is for the whole teacher and learner to train themselves to deal with feelings.

To do so, the first step is to learn to acknowledge and describe each others feelings. This can be done with a sound or a word (“Oh” “Mmm”, “Uh”, “I see”), or even non-verbally. It is important to note here that for us non-verbal feedback plays an equal role to the verbal one. Eye-contact, facial expression, gestures, body position and distance can convey a lot of messages and depending on culture they may create a friendly, safe learning environment or a hostile, unsafe one and a relationship of concern between the teacher and the learner.

For example, facial expression and especially eye-contact are important in showing that you are listening to the learners. A single gesture, instead of lecturing or long explanations, encourages them to think about a problem and figure out what needs to be done. A nod or “grunt” of understanding can free the learners of their distress and help them to focus on their problem and possibly solve it themselves. One idea would be to spend 5 minutes each day to reflect feelings back to each other: “So you seem to feel..., I sense you are..., It sounds like you feel...”

The second step is to avoid hurting each other’s feelings through criticism, accusations, sarcasm, or name calling. This can be achieved by describing the problem, the situation or your feelings. Compare the two following dialogues:

Dialogue 1

Teacher: *Who’s the genius who forgot to put his name on the test?*

Learner:

Dialogue 2

Teacher: *I have a test paper without a name.*

Learner: *Oh, that’s mine.*

(Source: Faber, A. & Mazlish, E.: 2003)

General responses in the form of exclamations, such as *Super! Wonderful!* are evaluative praise and have their place as instant feedback, especially in oral tasks, but often are not believed by learners and they are not as helpful as descriptive feedback. Compare the two following dialogues:

Dialogue 1

Learner: *I'm all done!*

Teacher: *Good boy!*

Learner: *Not that good. I kicked Joey under the table*

Dialogue 2

Learner: *I'm all done!*

Teacher: *You concentrated on your work and didn't stop until you were finished.*

Learner: *I am a good worker.*

(Source: Faber, A. & Mazlish, E.: 2003)

The third step would be, instead of describing what has not been achieved, to describe first what has been achieved and what and how it needs to be done. To sum up, feedback and the approach to feedback is an indicator of the teacher-learner feelings and relationship, of the warmth of the environment, of the atmosphere in the language learning class. Its role in learning is very essential; it can create a safe or unsafe learning environment, it can make learners aware of learning styles and strategies, it can lead to learner motivation and autonomy, it can guide both the learner and the teacher, and it can also influence the content and process of a learning course.

3. Involving learners

We have mentioned that good language teaching and learning are closely linked to effective feedback and that a warm environment, good relationships and involvement of learners in tasks are vital for feedback to be useful and effective. However, we need to involve as many learners as possible in giving feedback and helping them use it.

Most classroom interactions are of the familiar initiation-response-feedback (*IRF*) format developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), according to which the teacher is the initiator by usually asking a question, which is followed by the learner's answer (response), to be followed by teacher feedback. Consider the example:

Teacher: *What is this?*

Learner: *It's a hand.*

Teacher: *No, It's a head.*

It is important for the teacher to move beyond this limiting form of feedback. One way of doing this is to involve more learners by adding questions such as the following to his/her feedback, "*Do you agree?*" or "*Can someone improve X's answer?*" Even better, if the teacher uses the 'all learner response systems' (J. Jones and D. Wiliam 2008: 11), in which every learner is expected to respond simultaneously to the teacher's question "*Is this correct?*" with a 'thumbs up' if the answer is correct and a 'thumbs down' if it is wrong. In this way the teacher can have warm, non-verbal, diagnostic feedback on the level of understanding in all the class and either carry on or offer help. In case half thumbs are up and half down, the teacher can always

address some learners with *'Why do you think it is (in) correct?'*, thus engaging the learners in a thought requiring discourse.

An example of immediate, non-verbal feedback from all learners to the teacher would be to use either red or green flashcards in order to check learner understanding at various stages of the lesson. Clearly, green means "I understand", whereas red means "I don't understand".

Some more ways of involving the majority of learners in giving feedback are the following:

1. The brick wall: learners write their comments, draw their feelings graffiti-style across the 'bricks' in a 'wall' drawn on a page and put up on a wall.
2. The Japanese temple tree: The teacher sticks a branch of a tree in a pot. Learners write their thoughts on long slips of paper fold the papers and twist them round the branches of the tree, just like temple prayers. They can write their thoughts in terms of wishes. (Source: Woodward, T. (1991).
3. As an alternative to the above, the teacher can have slips of paper on his/ her desk and the learners can, at any time during, or after the lesson, pick one, write their comment on it and put it in the feedback box on the teacher's desk.

It is vital, however, that the teacher always collects the papers and after reading them him/herself comes back to the class, reads them aloud, without mentioning names, and comments on and discusses with the learners their feedback. In this way a constructive dialogue can develop and the teacher is made accountable for using learner feedback.

Involving all learners in giving feedback is important. However, it is more important to make them accountable for using the feedback they receive to improve, to move forward to the next steps in learning. The following are some ways to making learners engage with feedback:

Instead of simply focusing on what needs to be done, the teacher comments should also initiate thinking and discussion of thoughts with the teacher or peers. For example, instead of "Nice description, but you should write more" we could have "Your friend sounds interesting. I'd like to learn more about him/ her. What more *information could you give about your friend?*"

The teacher feedback should also encourage reflection. For example, "If you were to write this description again changing the subject to a female, what changes would you have to make?" We notice that while the first comment simply gives the learner a new task, the second asks her/him to start reflecting on her/his original work and pushes him/ her to deal with the issue of gender.

The teacher feedback should also direct learners where to go for help and what to do to improve. For example, comments, such as "*Well done! You have used all parts of the body in your description. Now use the textbook, page 11 to check your spelling*" or "*Good description of your friend. Next time try to use another word (eg. an adjective) instead of 'beautiful' in order to make your text more interesting*" constitute constructive feedback. They help learners focus on how to improve their work and how to take their learning forward.

Another way of involving many learners in feedback is peer feedback. It helps learners with taking responsibility of own learning and supporting each other. Studies have shown that those who give help benefit most because the demands of explaining to someone else forces one to think deeply. A technique for learners to provide feedback to each other is to use post-it notes. However, it should be explained to them

that they need to make two positive feedback comments and one possible idea for improvement. (*The two stars and a wish principle* in: Jones J. and Wiliam, D. 2008). For example. “*You can say what your friend looks like and what his hobby is, but how old is he?*”

4. Conclusion

Feedback is a powerful way for engaging actively in the learning and teaching process, both for teachers and for learners. It can take place in different forms and at different times and it is an ongoing process which contributes to the development of a safe learning environment. It therefore constitutes an important communicative event. As such it is inherently fragile and perhaps the most difficult part of a teacher’s job but at the same time the part that may dramatically contribute to the development of the child both as a person and as a learner. Feedback procedures may require some training on the side of teachers and also of the learners as feedback deals with emotional processes which contribute to the development of self-esteem and sense of responsibility. It can communicate trust and encouragement, promote a positive self-concept and self-confidence and finally prompt the learner to reflect constructively on areas that need improvement (Ford, 1992) Useful, constructive feedback empowers the learner and provides him/her with the tools for becoming autonomous.

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