

An exploratory study of feedback practices for written and oral tasks in an online English course

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Abstract. This paper explores teachers' feedback practices in an online language teaching course. We examine several variables that could have an impact on providing effective and meaningful feedback essential to account for students' rate of completion of a one-semester course. Classroom size, amount of teacher-student and student-student interactions, and teachers' experience levels are considered when examining 43 upper-intermediate online English classrooms. These practices were checked against students' completion rates over the semester to identify the variables that may account for student progress. The data analysis helped assess the effect of a small teacher professional development intervention and indicates that student engagement is crucial in online language learning.

Keywords: online language learning, whole-class feedback, teacher and student engagement, teacher professional development.

1. Introduction

Technology enhanced language teaching in fully-online settings offers challenges and opportunities, including regarding teachers' feedback practices in asynchronous oral and written tasks (Dysthe, Lillejord, Wasson, & Vines, 2010). Teachers must provide feedback in the manner and amount that students can learn most effectively from whilst following up on its effects on their progress and engagement with the subject. Equally important in online settings where several instructors teach the same course is providing teachers with continuous professional development activities which foster standardised marking and feedback practices. This is particularly important for guiding novice teachers in effective feedback practices (Samburskiy & Quah, 2014) and when engaging more seasoned teachers in

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reflecting on their experiences. The aim of this research is to unveil the factors that determine successful teaching practices which have an impact on students' progress in computer-assisted language learning settings. Our hypothesis is that successful feedback practices contribute to a higher number of learners completing the course and have a positive impact on learners' proficiency development in the target language.

2. Methodology

We examine feedback and classroom interaction practices taking place in two asynchronous communication spaces in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which facilitate written and oral communication interactions between teachers and learners, and amongst peers themselves: written discussion forums and oral discussion spaces. Additionally, we identify which other variables can account for successful classroom feedback practices by combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods.

The participants in this study are 42 teachers (27 females, 15 males) teaching upper-intermediate (B2 level) English university courses online. Twenty-six (62%) are experienced online teachers who have been teaching the course for over three semesters, ten (23%) have been teaching for one or two terms, and six (14%) are teaching in this mode for the first time. All teachers are experienced English as a foreign language teachers who have completed basic intensive online language training in methodologies and pedagogies employed in the 43 classrooms of this course (task-based language teaching).

The data was collected by an online questionnaire to gather information on teachers' beliefs and behaviours regarding feedback practices adopted in the previous term and about the effectiveness of those practices (i.e. the teachers' accounts about their actual behaviour and the number of feedback posts and the spaces used). The two communicative spaces are the discussion forums and oral discussion spaces that host students' communicative practices based on task prompts provided by the teacher.

Data collection was conducted as part of a teacher professional development activity engaging the teachers in reflecting on their group-feedback practices using the different asynchronous communication spaces in the classroom with the aim of giving specific guidance to novice teachers and standardising group feedback practices. The questionnaire sent after the professional development activity was initiated with a forum discussion amongst all teachers and an explanation

of its purpose. Since the point was to collect responses about specific classroom practices, the questionnaire was not anonymous although the data was subsequently anonymised. The researchers double-checked some of the information gathered against the data obtained from the VLE.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were run after the dependent and independent variables were identified (see <http://bit.ly/CanalsRobbinsAnnex>). The dependent variable, classroom type, is a construct that helped determine what a successful classroom looked like defined both in terms of previous studies on teacher and student engagement (Samburskiy & Quah, 2014; Sockalingam, 2016) and according to the availability of the VLE data. This variable was informed by another independent variable: a higher than average completion rate, as in the proportion of students who completed the course, that is who submitted all the assignments regardless of whether they failed or passed the course. Finally, we established which classrooms showed higher than average percentages of completion rates. Of the 43 classrooms, 18 (42%) were deemed successful according to the previous calculations and 25 (58%) were considered average classrooms.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Successful versus average classrooms

The two classroom types showed similar classroom sizes and similar experience levels on the part of the teachers. The successful classroom group had a higher number of students on average (46.89 versus 45.52). Overall, the successful classroom group had slightly more experienced teachers than the average classroom group (1.72 versus 1.32 experience level on a scale of 0-3, where 0 is one semester, 1 is two semesters and 2 is over three semesters). There were no novice teachers in successful classrooms: all six were in average classrooms. However, there was a case which disturbed our data: one teacher teaching two classrooms turned out to have a successful classroom and an average one.

Successful classrooms showed a higher number of both students' and teachers' posts in the written communication space (953 and 73.5) than average classrooms (777 and 71.2) and a higher number of overall posts to the oral communication space (448) compared with the average classroom (352). The average classroom, however, showed a higher number of teachers' posts to the oral communication space (<http://bit.ly/CanalsRobbinsAnnex>, part 1).

Out of the differences reported above and after running a one-way ANOVA, only two of the variables showed significant differences between the two types of classrooms. The overall number of messages in the written communication space and the overall number of comments in the oral communication space showed a main effect $F(1,41)=7,664$, $p=.008$ and $F(1,41)=18,075$, $p=.001$ on classroom success (<http://bit.ly/CanalsRobbinsAnnex>, part 2). Although failing to reach a significance level, teachers' experience levels seem to play a role not as determinant as the other two factors: number of messages in the written communication space and overall number of comments in the oral communication space. The number of teachers' comments on the oral and written spaces and classroom size do not indicate a significant effect on classroom success.

3.2. Teachers' feedback practices

Besides self-reporting the number of messages in each space, the questionnaire also asked about teachers' beliefs regarding whole-class feedback and revealed how these beliefs changed during and after the teacher development activity. Teachers appreciated these reflective activities and indicated that they helped them engage learners more effectively and led to improving the learning process, also observed by [Sockalingam \(2016\)](#).

Teachers in successful classrooms indicated that they changed the way they gave feedback to provide more meaningful group feedback for learners by creating specific folders in the forum, using consistently the same space to give feedback, or providing shorter and more focused feedback messages.

On the other hand, teachers in average classrooms recognised they should have given more feedback and adjusted the tone of messages to foster learners' engagement with the learning process, although some indicated that time constraints limit this.

4. Conclusions

The study allows us to draw tentative conclusions regarding the main findings, the validity of our instruments and the effect of a teacher development intervention which will serve as the basis of a wider study. We will specifically look into whole-class feedback practices to determine which prove most successful in fostering student engagement with the learning process and teacher engagement in their professional development, which are key determiners of group cohesion and online course success ([Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005](#)).

First, student participation in both communication spaces tends to confirm that successful teachers foster learners' engagement in group interaction and communicative activities which results in higher numbers of students completing the course and fewer students dropping out, consistent with previous findings (Robbins, Malicka, Canals, & Appel, 2015).

Teachers can learn to be more successful; experience partly accounts for determining successful learning experiences. The findings confirm the need for continuous teacher development activities which contribute to raising teachers' awareness of the effects of their teaching practices and improving their online teaching skills.

Regarding the limitations of the study, the questionnaire proved to be suitable for tapping into teachers' beliefs and behaviours regarding group feedback practices only to a certain extent, therefore we will need to refine the questions asked in future investigations. An additional finding whereby the same teacher had both an average and a successful classroom indicates that there are other variables (group dynamics, students' major and English proficiency) that were left out given the limited scope of this study which could play a role in determining success in online language courses.

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