

Comparing approaches to feedback in the context of English language teaching in higher education

Ramla AlZadjali
University of Exeter

I have been a university language lecturer teaching students English as a foreign language (EFL) or second language (ESL) in Oman for three years. My students are Arabs who learnt English at school but are not well-prepared for the demands of academic writing in English at university level. This situation is widespread in my country – students at higher education institutions often enrol on compulsory English language classes in their first year at university before they progress into their specialisation. The duration of the English language learning programme is generally between one and five terms, depending on how successful the learner is in learning the language. Hence, the issue of how best to support students to develop English language writing skills is an important one in my higher education (HE) teaching context. Furthermore, what in my case relates to challenging choices about the best ways to use feedback to improve *language* has broader application to teachers in other contexts where judicious management of feedback is likely to have positive results.

There is ample evidence from the literature on formative assessment that feedback on such assessments can enhance students' work and engagement with their course (Shepard, 2019). The feedback process can be vital in raising learners' awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in their writing. This, in turn, can make a positive difference to their performance on their summative assessments and their eventual outcome on their programme. Through the process of 'feedforward' (Carless, 2006), students use the assessor's comments to shape work they will do in the future.

I have struggled with dilemmas regarding, firstly, the optimal amount and most effective focus of feedback when I provide it on written assignments and, secondly, how best to relate feedback to learners' needs and expectations. In my experience (on the basis both of working with students and of their formal and informal comments), there may be some learners who assume that their instructor is responsible for correcting every single error in an assignment. Others may have so-called 'fossilized' errors, ones that are repeated many times and are therefore likely to be very hard to unlearn and change. In both cases, students may prefer, expect or rely upon 'unfocused' or 'comprehensive' error correction (Ellis *et al.*, 2008). This may be because they are familiar with this approach from their previous years of schooling (i.e., their teacher corrected all errors and did not distinguish between different error types).

In contrast, with 'focused' error correction, the educator may target specific categories of errors in turn. For example, the focus may initially be on grammatical errors relating to tenses and later, on lexical errors relating to word choice or collocation. In this approach, the teacher discusses the focus explicitly with students and so, in addition to the feedback, their development in that aspect of language is fully supported. With focused feedback, learners can process one or two ideas in depth at a given time and have already had the target areas

Opinion Pieces

identified and discussed with them. Focused feedback is therefore, arguably, more manageable for learners, more likely to bring about active engagement in learning and more likely to be acted upon in the future. Moreover, by selecting specific types of errors to correct from learners' assignments, educators can boost learners' confidence and avoid the problem of students' feeling overwhelmed by the amount and range of weaknesses identified in their work. Ellis *et al.* (2008) support this, finding that learners are more likely to attend to corrections that are directed at a single error type (or a limited number of them) and more likely to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of the error and the correction needed.

With a more focused and in-depth approach to the feedback process, in the context of language learning in HE, students are supported to develop metalinguistic skills that will promote the development of autonomy and self-regulation. The narrower focus increases the likelihood of developing the target skills or knowledge, rather than making that task feel unmanageable. So, not only do students learn how to look up the correct spelling or meaning of the word or make use of grammar websites; they are also encouraged to practise their skills in the chosen feedback area as much as possible, both in their formal assessments and also by writing personal blogs and journals or posting their opinions, stories or thoughts on a social media platform. This provides opportunities to develop a dialogic approach to feedback (Carless, 2007) in which students begin to engage in inner dialogue and self-monitoring when tackling a task.

However, educators need to communicate these benefits clearly to students, who, as noted above, may express a preference for comprehensive error correction (Leki, 1991). The comprehensive approach may be attractive to students because it is familiar, but for it to be effective, students need to use quite complex self-correction strategies, as they need first to identify what types of errors have been made and then to use a variety of resources to obtain the lexical and grammatical information that they need. As they may find this overwhelming, the disadvantages of this approach may possibly outweigh the benefits. For instance, unfocused error correction may result in a more passive role in the learning process. Because of the range and number of corrections, students may engage with the process more superficially, making it less likely that they will be able to transfer the target language into the long-term memory. Learners may then keep repeating the same errors and receiving the same feedback. In addition, too much correction might put words into student writers' mouths which they did not intend in the first place; moreover, it might make learners feel that they are not good enough as writers by decreasing their motivation and confidence level.

An important question is: 'To what extent do these ideas have implications for the feedback process in the context of other academic disciplines?' I would argue that, whatever the teaching context, we need a dialogue with students, the better to understand what they expect from feedback. We also need to consider what our aims are in providing feedback. Finally, we need to consider the implications of our feedback approach for students' engagement, subsequent learning and development as independent learners. All these issues are relevant to evaluating feedback processes more generally and across disciplines.

Opinion Pieces

To conclude, based on my experience in supporting second language learning in my teaching context, my view is that a focused approach to feedback has greater potential for supporting learning than a comprehensive one. In addition, whatever feedback strategy is adopted, it is essential to discuss the rationale with students, firstly to align expectations with the approach taken and secondly to develop students' feedback literacy and build their understanding of how to use the feedback effectively.

Reference list

Carless, D. (2006) 'Differing perceptions in the feedback process.' *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 219-233. Available at: <http://taylorandfrancis.metapress.com.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/link.asp?target=contribution&id=K3H781R855176150> (Accessed: 20, January, 2020)

Carless, D. (2007) 'Learning-oriented assessment: Conceptual bases and practical implications.' *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44(1), 57-66. Available at: (http://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/display.do?tabs=detailsTab&gathStatTab=true&ct=display&fn=search&doc=ETOCRN202984070&indx=1&recIds=ETOCRN202984070) (Accessed: 30, January 2020)

Ellis, R., Sheen, Y., Murakami, M. and Takashima, H. (2008) 'The effects of focused and unfocused written corrective feedback in an English as a foreign language context.' *System*, 36(3), 353-371. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0346251X08000390?via%3Dihub> (Accessed: 4, March, 2015)

Leki, I. (1991) 'The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes.' *Foreign Language Annals*, 24(3), 203-218. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1991.tb00464.x> (Accessed: 27, October, 2015)

Opinion Pieces

Shepard, L. (2019) 'Classroom assessment to support teaching and learning.' *The Annals of the American Academy*, 183-200. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002716219843818> (Accessed: 9, December, 2020)

Truscott, J. (1999) 'The case for "the case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes": a response to Ferris.' *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 111-122. Available at: <https://www-sciencedirect-com.uoelibrary.idm.oclc.org/science/article/pii/S1060374399801246?via%3Dihub> (Accessed: 21, September, 2015)