

# Giving and Receiving Critical Feedback in Higher Education

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## **Abstract**

*This research article deals with feedback practices given by the teachers and received by the students in English as a foreign language classroom. It also highlights the attitudes and feelings of teachers towards the oral feedback. This study gives some insights into the role of oral feedback in the EFL classroom and effective feedback strategies to EFL teachers, students, researchers and policy makers. It paves the way for effective classroom interactions between teachers and students. The teachers had different views on the issues related to the use of feedback strategies in EFL classrooms. Although the teachers have understood the importance of oral feedback and been familiar with some common strategies of using oral feedback contextually, some teachers are found to have neglected the use of giving oral feedback in language teaching. From this study, I found that teachers need to learn a variety of interactive activities for giving oral feedback in practice and students need some instruction for receiving it.*

## **Key Words**

Feedback, Affirmative/positive Feedback, Developmental feedback

## **Background of the Study**

Feedback consists of individual comments about the performance or behaviour of somebody. Feedback is not information about who somebody is, it is information about how somebody's behaviour and performance is perceived by others. It is the delivery of information based on direct observation that is meant to improve performance. With the advancement of new approaches, methods, and techniques, oral feedback has gained popularity in English language teaching in Nepal. Teachers should know specific and right amount; not too much, not too little to motivate the learners. Oral feedback not only lets learners know how they have performed but also increases motivation and builds positive environment in the classroom

**Objectives:** to highlight the importance of feedback for optimizing feedback exchange and overcoming barriers to receiving and giving critical feedback.

**Sources of Data:** Published books related to feedback receiving and giving, articles, Interview with Teachers and observations.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

Feedback is a process or signal that is used to control or modify the performance of the learners. Feedback is a common information that a learner gets on the success of the learning English language. Ellis (1999) states, "In language acquisition the term feedback refers to

information given to learners which they can use to revise their inter language” (p.702).It provides strengths and gaps of the teachers as well as students in a classroom activities.

London states that,

Feedback should be relevant to elements of performance that contribute to task success and that are under the recipient’s control. In addition, feedback should come from a credible source, one taken seriously and believed to be accurate. Recipients will have a difficult time denying or ignoring such information. Feedback should be accompanied by explanation so the recipient understands how it can be applied to improve task performance. The source of the feedback should not take it for granted that the recipient will know what to do with the feedback. Also, support mechanisms should be available to help the recipient profit from the feedback. These may include training or special job assignments that allow the recipient to practice and improve. (2003, p.16)

Behaviorists believe that feedback plays a vital role in the process of language learning. They claim that learning takes place only if there is a stimulus. If there is a stimulus, there is a response; if the response is properly reinforced, the learning becomes a habit. If it is not reinforced, the behavior will not occur again. Behaviorists view language as a general behavior of human being. When the learners imitate, they learn the structure of a language and they can master it. The learning of language becomes more effective when there is reinforcement (feedback) for the positive responses of the learners. The errors are expected to be corrected. When the learners involve in the regular practice to learn the language rules they learn them more effectively. Behaviorist like Pavlov, Thorndike and Skinner have said that language learning is the process of imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation. Environment is crucial for behaviorists.

On the other hand, Mentalists believe that feedback has no role in language learning. The term feedback refers to information about the output or product and realization for the further improvement. Mentalists argue that language is not a form of behavior. It is an integrated rule-based system and the large part of language acquisition is the learning of the system. There are finite numbers of grammatical rules in the system, but the process of learning language is facilitated with the knowledge of these rules, but language cannot be learnt by habit formation. According to mentalist, language leaning is totally the cognitive process and activation of LAD as Noam Chomsky calls Language Acquisition Device. Thus, the mentalists view the role of feedback in language learning is negative because it hinders the language learning process. They also suggest that language teachers should not correct the errors. Instead, they should encourage learners to internalize the rules.

## **Types of feedback**

Different scholars have categorized the types of feedback differently. Day et al. (1984, as cited in Ellis 1999) says, “A distinction is often made between ‘positive and negative’ feedback (sometimes referred to as negative evidence); positive feedback refers to information that indicates a hypothesis is incorrect” (p.702). Positive feedback which is also known as affirmative feedback

refers to the process of providing information positively though the result of the students' task is poor. Praising, thanking, logical commenting, motivating comment etc. are the example of positive feedback. A positive feedback always motivates the learners to learn more appropriately. It is normally entertaining for learners. The learners can be promoted through motivation and encouragement. In the absence of positive feedback, the targeted goal cannot be fulfilled. In the field of language teaching, the desired and appropriate responses are developed by providing appropriate positive feedback. Positive feedback can be shown as follows.

- a) Acknowledgements (thanks for your input...)
- b) Positive comments (good job, we can see that you worked hard; well done, this is an excellent chart; your message is clear...)
- c) Mentioning the good points (I can read your letters easily; you have used the colours systematically; your presentation is structured...)

On the other hand, the feedback that de-motivates the learners to their mistakes and errors are referred to as negative feedback. It sounds unpleasant for the learners. Nowadays the term developmental feedback is used instead of negative feedback. Negative feedback is provided for unwanted and restless behavior. To control the mistake and errors, punishment, suspended, warning and critical comment is provided on the basis of learners' behavior. Ways of providing Developmental Feedback;

- a) Suggestions for improvement (if you will increase the size of your letters they will be much easier to read; use the available space; shift the whole to the center; change the volume of your voice; ask one question at a time...)
- b) Recommendations (the learners could give the answer in writing; group work would be an appropriate method; the information could be given on a handout...)
- c) During feedback two parties are involved: the receiver and the sender(s). While the sender is asked to make observations, the receiver is supposed to listen only. He/she asks questions if the message is not clearly understood.

## **Modes of Giving Feedback**

Feedback can be delivered in two modes. Written Feedback is given to the assignments (writing comments on students' written work); oral feedback (for example, observing and commenting on students' verbal works and some, to demonstrations (for example, helping a kindergarten student hold a pencil correctly). Spontaneous oral feedback can be very effective and practicable inside the classrooms. It can be useful for spot comments. The process of delivering feedback through written text or writing in alphabet for praising the performance or avoiding the weakness especially in written materials is known as written feedback. It is more applicable in professional writing.

## **Difference between Feedback and Evaluation**

Sometimes, people become confused between feedback and Evaluation. Feedback is

more formative whereas evaluation is summative. It focuses on description rather than judgement. According to Jug, Jiang and Bean, Feedback is frequently provided either during a learning opportunity or immediately following completion of the activity, and in doing so provides an opportunity for future improvement prior to a formal summative evaluation. When feedback is effective, evaluations are never a surprise.

Evaluation is a cumulative performance report. Unlike feedback, evaluation is a high-stakes assessment that judges past performances. It can be used as a final assessment, such as at the end of a clinical rotation. Evaluations are formal assessments that become part of the learner's official record. Evaluation allows for learners to be compared against a standard to ensure that the competencies are attained. Language used in evaluation is, by definition, judgmental and uses adjectives and adverbs as supporting evidence. (Jug, Jiang & Bean., 2018)

### **Techniques of Giving Effective Feedback**

Feedback is a dynamic process between source and recipient, and giving feedback affects the source as well as the recipient (Larson, 1984).

Three components; giver, receiver, environment, are the key elements of effective feedback. To provide effective feedback and to maximize learning, the receiver should be engaged at the beginning of the learning experience. Educators should assist the learners to ensure that learning goals are SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. Sometimes the intended feedback message is not received. Before the feedback session ends, verify that the message has been accurately received. Teacher should be ensured that the receiver have paraphrased the message, and should invite discussion and questions to clarify the feedback and to reach a shared understanding.

People often use negative terms when they observe and describe others, where as they use positive terms to describe themselves (Langer, 1992).For effective feedback giving, the feedback provider should be aware of the following guidelines.

- a) Be clear about what you want to say in advance
- b) Start with the positive (most people need encouragement)
- c) Be specific (avoid general comments)
- d) Refer to performance that can be changed (people can change their posture but not their height)
- e) Allow freedom to change or not to change
- f) Offer alternatives (negative feedback is ok, but only if suggestions are given)
- g) Be descriptive rather than evaluative (tell what you have seen, don't tell what was 'good' or 'bad')
- h) 'Own' the feedback (begin the feedback with "i" or "in my opinion")

- i) Give the feedback as soon as you can

Don't forget: Feedback is also telling about what the giver's values are!

## **Reactions to Critical feedback**

According to Hathaway (1998),

When it comes to criticism, most of us believe it is more blessed to give than to receive. Yet, valid critical feedback from others, when properly given, can make the difference between success and failure in our lives. It provides us with information on what's working and what's not.

*Receiving feedback can be a difficult task, depending on the message. Givers should adjust the quantity of feedback delivered. Too much feedback can confuse the receiver. Prioritize feedback based on importance and omit feedback of lesser priority as needed. It is difficult to know how much feedback to deliver. Feedback giver should decide about the 'right' amount. Sometimes little is needed sometimes more. The actual situation will tell what the appropriate and meaningful amount of feedback should be. This determination of the amount of providing feedback is contextual.*

## **Stages of Response to Critical Feedback**

*When critical feedback is received, it is good to realize that one has to be more control than the critic, once the feedback has been delivered. We experience three stages when coping with critical feedback.*

*Stage one: Awareness*

*In this stage, we take notice that we are being criticized and our natural instincts take over. We may react by counterattacking and becoming defensive. Or we may become a silent victim and automatically accept the critical feedback at face value. But being silence or passive reaction, is no more helpful.*

*Stage two: Assessment*

*In Stage 2, one assess how the critical feedback was delivered, the intention of the critic, and how valid you believe the feedback to be. It is important to seek opportunities to receive critical feedback. Be specific about what you would like your critic to assess and how you would like to receive the feedback. You can take control over the feedback so that it is more likely to be useful in achieving an improvement in your performance.*

*Stage three: Action*

*In the final stage, feedback receivers decide what action, if any, they want to take with the feedback.*

*The feedback receiver should consider the followings.*

- listen to the feedback rather than immediately rejecting or arguing with it
- make sure that you understood the feedback
- don't rely on one source (an individual opinion is not always shared by everybody)
- ask for feedback that you want but don't receive
- decide what you will do as a result of the feedback

### **Teachers' Perception and Culture of Using Feedback**

Feedback is personalized information based on direct observation crafted and delivered so receivers can use the information to achieve their best potential. Some teachers were asked what the contribution of oral feedback is to make Learning successful. All the respondents said that feedback is effective to make EFL classroom successful. According to the participants, the instant oral feedback in the classroom helps students come to know their errors so that they can correct them immediately and it will help them engage more and more in interactions. One of the participants said that feedback has great advantage in EFL classroom, that he could immediately notice the problems and their solutions. The teacher could provide sufficient exposure to the students so that it would encourage the students in learning. Some others replied that the classroom is very often non-communicative in case oral feedback is not provided. Oral feedback helps teachers to make their classes communicative. Some participants said that the teacher could find out mistakes of the students immediately and students promptly can make corrections. It also motivates them to be engaged in learning activities. It develops communicative performance.

Teachers were asked the reasons for giving feedback. Majority of them replied the following reasons.

- a) To improve a team's performance
- b) To correct an individual's poor performance
- c) To motivate
- d) To learn from past failures and mistakes

From the responses given by the teachers it can be concluded that teachers have positive attitude towards using feedback. They think feedback plays important roles to make EFL classroom more interesting, interacting and motivating. However at the time of observation in the classroom, the use of feedback is very weak.

### **The Benefits of Feedback**

Feedback influences future performance goals, essentially creating objectives for achieving higher levels of performance in the future. Employees know what they can do well, and how much better than can do if they try harder .Positive feedback itself is reinforcing. Even if it does not lead to some material outcome, such as more money, people appreciate knowing when they have done well. Such feedback heightens their sense of achievement and internal motivation.

Feedback increases learners' abilities to detect errors on their own. They know what performance elements are important and what levels of performance are expected. As such, feedback sets standards of performance, and employees learn to evaluate themselves against these standards. In addition, feedback enhances individual learning. Employees realize what they need to know and what they must do to improve. Seeking self-knowledge is a prerequisite for and motivator of growth and improvement. (London, 2003)

Feedback is useful for both students and teachers for clarifying the beliefs about the effects of their behaviour. They learn the extent to which their good behavior contributes to rewards and their poor behavior contributes to their being deprived of these rewards or being punished in some way. They also learn what aspects of the situation beyond their control influences these outcomes. Feedback increases the salience of the information and the importance of the feedback process.

## Findings

Feedback is crucial to learning and optimizing for feedback exchange between learners and teachers. It is useful for creating co-operative environment because of which the students develop self-esteem. It means feedback creates communicative environment in the classroom. It is necessary for the students and the teachers for communicative language teaching and learning activities. Positive feedback motivates students to learn whereas negative feedback may discourage them. Therefore, teachers need to focus on providing positive feedback strategies for effective teaching learning in classrooms. Feedback creates interactional as well as communicative environment in the classroom.

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