

Formative Feedback in a Malaysian Primary School ESL Context

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ABSTRACT

The idea of providing students with formative feedback is a crucial part of formative assessment. Teachers need to provide students with feedback that improves their learning. In other words, formative feedback should provide learners with information that help them bridge their learning gap. As formative assessment itself is a newly introduced product in an innovative transformation introduced by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, it would be particularly interesting to investigate how formative feedback which is the main component of formative assessment is being implemented. To answer this main question, classroom observations were conducted and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out with a group of primary school ESL teachers in Malaysia. The results indicated that using feedback systematically to support learning is rare and teachers are not aware of strategies to implement formative feedback to improve students' learning and use the information in their future instruction.

Keywords: *ESL, Formative assessment, Formative feedback, Qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

Feedback has been conceptualized in different ways. The concepts of feedback as a gift, feedback as Ping-Pong and feedback as dialogue or loop have been recognized by Askew and Lodge (2000). Behaviorists define feedback as a gift from teacher to student, even though this concept does not help learners develop autonomy.

As Askew and Lodge (2000) put it feedback as a gift "fosters dependence rather than independence or interdependence and encourages notions of failure/success, wrong/right" (p. 5). Whilst, constructivists believe that feedback should be descriptive rather than evaluative. According to Askew and Lodge (2000) feedback is given "to provide a narrative which can be added to, to offer insights for reflection" (p. 9). Although within this perspective learners are central knowledge constructors, it is still teacher who decides the agenda.

Sadler (2007) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) operated from constructivism and suggested that feedback information should be used to bridge students' learning gaps. Therefore, effective feedback gives students information about where they are, where to proceed next and how to move their learning forward (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Yet, the importance of personal domain cannot be neglected. As observed by Askew and Lodge (2000) "as soon as we ask for feedback, we open ourselves to the possibility of criticism" (p. 8).

In the sociocultural perspective the responsibility for learning is shared between teacher and students and feedback is viewed as loop or dialogue (Abbasnasab Sardareh & Saad, 2012). As mentioned by Askew and Lodge (2000) "the roles of learner and teacher are shared and expertise and experience of all participants are respected. All parties to such a dialogue have an expectation of learning" (p. 13).

For a long time, educators neglected to take into account learners' differences and assumed that there is no need to adapt instruction to learners' needs. They considered that failure in learning rely on learners themselves. However, Bloom and his students in the 1960s investigated the idea that the normal distribution of students' achievements was due to the failure of instruction in taking into account learner differences and the outcome was not natural. Thus, Bloom claimed that one-to-one tutoring is effective in student learning.

According to Guskey (2010), one-to-one tutoring is effective because the tutor identifies errors in students' work and then provides them with clarifications. This is what Bloom called 'feedback' and 'correctives'. However, this distinction has been counterproductive.

That is to say, information from students' work becomes feedback only if it is employed to bridge the learning gap (Black & William, 1998b; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989, 2007). Yet, Bloom separated the information about the learning gap from its instructional consequences (William, 2011). Moreover, feedback should affect students' future performance and help them improve their learning (e.g., Black & William, 1998a).

In the 1990s when researchers began to investigate learning from an integrative viewpoint, Graue (1993) illustrated an instructional assessment framework and suggested that "to meld teaching and assessment so that they are simultaneous and dialogic, both teacher and students become learners" (p. 285). The integration of assessment and instruction, particularly from a social constructivist viewpoint, was demonstrated as a part of educational process. Graue (1993) concluded that, "Assessment and instruction are often conceived as curiously separate in both time and purpose" (p.53).

Many researchers and educators support the use of assessment to guide learning and instruction. Sadler (1989) emphasized the cognitive and social functions of assessment and the important role of feedback in bridging the gap between students' current level of achievement and the desired learning intentions. Based on the new conceptions, assessment is a part of the teaching and learning process and provides students with opportunity to think and reflect on their learning and helps them to use feedback to improve their understanding. Therefore, the current study aims at investigating the ways Malaysian primary school ESL teachers give feedback to their students based on the new conception of feedback discussed above.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data, this qualitative study adopted Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) and classroom observations. The purpose of a FGI is to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' views and experiences, feelings, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards the successful implementation of formative feedback. This technique is quite popular in the market research to identify needs and interests of clientele. FGI was set in this study because it narrows to a set of priorities on a problem to get more in-depth information on the phenomena. Moreover, it is one of the approaches to get feedback and input quickly in a non-threatening environment with few meetings and more focused agendas (Morgan, 1993).

In order to provide more comprehensive data, three sessions of each participating teacher's classroom were observed. Classroom observation is one of the important sources of information in qualitative study. According to Nunan (1992), classroom observations provide useful information that help the researcher understand social events in the classroom context. Data from FGIs and classroom observations were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis using Constant Comparative method of data analysis.

Participants

Three ESL teachers were purposively selected from several government primary schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as the participants of the current study. These participants had tenure of not less than ten years. They were directly involved in formative assessment, had attended workshops on formative assessment and were willing to take part in this research.

This study is focused on one subject area. The participating teachers were teaching English which is one of the core subjects in primary schools in Malaysia. To reach a point of data saturation, two rounds of

FGIs and three rounds of classroom observation were conducted with the participating teachers. It is important to mention that Pseudonyms were used to protect teachers' identity.

RESEARCH FINDING

The participating teachers acknowledged the importance of giving feedback to the students and asserted feedback given to the students is not really effective. So students do not know where they are going. They do not know what their level is and they do not feel happy about themselves. For instance, we human beings like compliments, we need to be praised, and that will keep us going. Some students take criticism positively. Some students will turn off. So it is best to pick your words wisely when you want to give feedback to your students (Izyan, Interview; August, 2014).

This assertion indicates that effective feedback should give information on students' level of achievement. Moreover, when they want to give feedback to their students, teachers need to give it in such a way that keeps students motivated to learn better. The participants recognized that feedback would help teachers ensure students' learning and encourage them to learn better. "When we give feedback to the students we can understand whether they are learning or not. Teachers and also students can find out their strengths and weaknesses and enhance their learning" (Devi, Interview; October, 2014).

The teachers shed light on the role of feedback in determining where the students stand relative to the learning targets. According to Irwan "Feedback is very important because students need to know where they stand. If you do not give feedback and if you do not tell them their weaknesses, how are they going to improve?" (Irwan, Interview; August, 2014).

The results showed that most of the time the teachers gave feedback to the students in the form of praise. They praised their students whenever they answered the questions correctly or completed a worksheet or activity successfully. If the students gave the wrong answers to the questions or activities, the teachers themselves provided the correct answer or asked other students to respond to the question. It was also observed that the teachers provided the students with one-to-one instruction when they were unable to complete worksheets or activities by themselves.

Based on the studies reviewed, Shute (2008) concluded that formative feedback should be supportive, timely and specific to the students' work and also non-evaluative. Information from formative feedback modifies the learners' behaviour or thinking and improves their learning. In other words, the purpose of giving feedback to the students is more than just a process of linear information transmission to correct students' mistakes; effective dialogic feedback is crucial to improve academic achievement.

As explained by Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Pryor and Crossouard (2008) in order for feedback to be effective, students' understanding of the quality of the work they are expected to accomplish should be challenged and improved. To this end, feedback should be given through a dialogic approach in which students' understandings are transformed.

Within a sociocultural perspective, feedback is conceptualized as loop or dialogue that plays an important role in informing learners' personal competence (Wenger, 1998). Social constructivists view competence as belonging within the community of practice and extending identity towards more central participants. Therefore, feedback on the task is personal as well because it informs and builds "personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5).

The findings of this research revealed that most of the time, feedback given by the teachers did not help the students to extend their identity towards more central participants. To illustrate, we will examine some classroom episodes. In these extracts, the teachers praised those students who gave correct answers to the questions. Yet, this type of feedback given to the students did not help them to develop autonomy.

In the following extract, one of the participants, Izyan, asked the students to spell the word 'bake'. She asked them to put up their hands and answer the question. Then the teacher gave feedback in the form of praise to S12 and S16 who answered the question.

Extract 1

T: How do you spell *bake*?

OC- Ss are spelling the word 'bake'

T: ▼ You put up your hand

Yes

S₁₂: b-a

T: Yes Adam?

S₁₂: k

T: 'k' good

Ayman 'e'

Very good

OC- The teacher was giving feedback to Ayman (S₁₆)

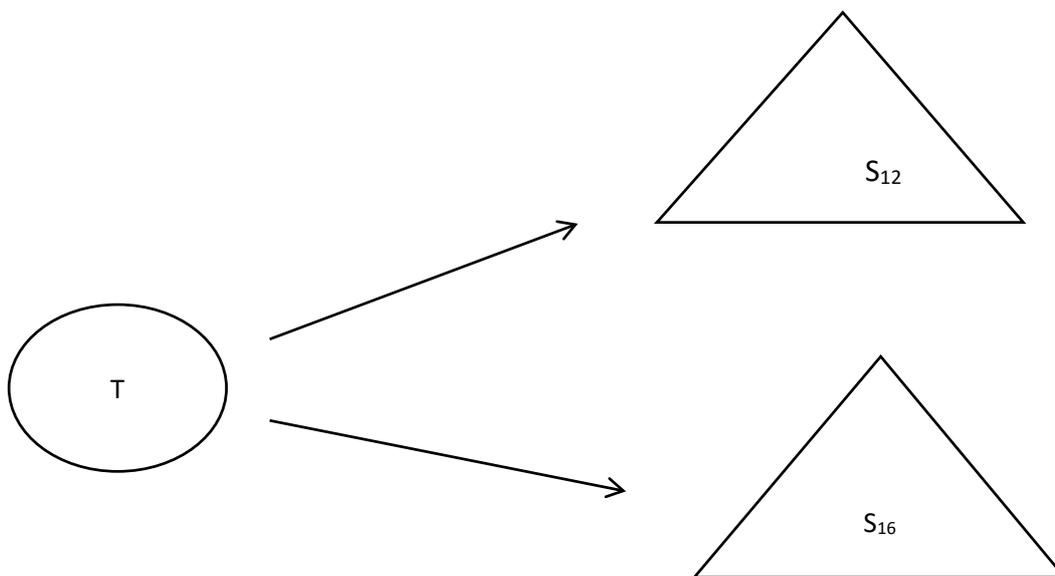


Figure 1: Feedback 1

This figure indicates that teacher praise for student effort was a one way feedback. It is worth mentioning that this type of feedback did not lead to the students' increased engagement, enhanced self-reflections as well as improved understanding. And throughout the observation period S₁₂ and S₁₆ remained peripheral participants.

Devi and Irwan also gave the same type of feedback to their students. For instance, Extract 2 shows that the first three students to accomplish the activity were rewarded by Devi.

Extract 2

T: O.K. Class finished?

Ss: No ↑

T: O.K, this is Norree's work. Because she is the first person who finished, I give a sticker to Norree as present.

O.K. Norree collect your sticker.

OC- *The chatter decreased when the teacher praised S₁₀.*

T: O.K, Angel. This one is Angel's work. O.K, Angel also gets sticker.

OC- *the teacher gave a sticker to S₈*

T: Only for first, second and third

S_x: Siapa nak jadi ketiga? [Who wants to be the third?]

S₁₅: Saya [me]

T: So who is the third one? O.K. Faster

O.K faster. Who wants the third sticker?

Color it nicely

O.K. Umar gets the last sticker

Ss: Alaa

OC- *(disappointed)*

T: O.K, the last sticker is for Umar

When the teacher praised S₁₀, S₈ who actively participated in classroom activities was persuaded to finish the work faster to receive a sticker from the teacher. Finally S₈ accomplished the task successfully and received a reward sticker. However, it was observed that when the teacher gave reward to the third student, other students felt frustrated to complete the task. That is to say, they did not try to extend their identity towards more central participants as they found out that they would not be rewarded by the teacher.

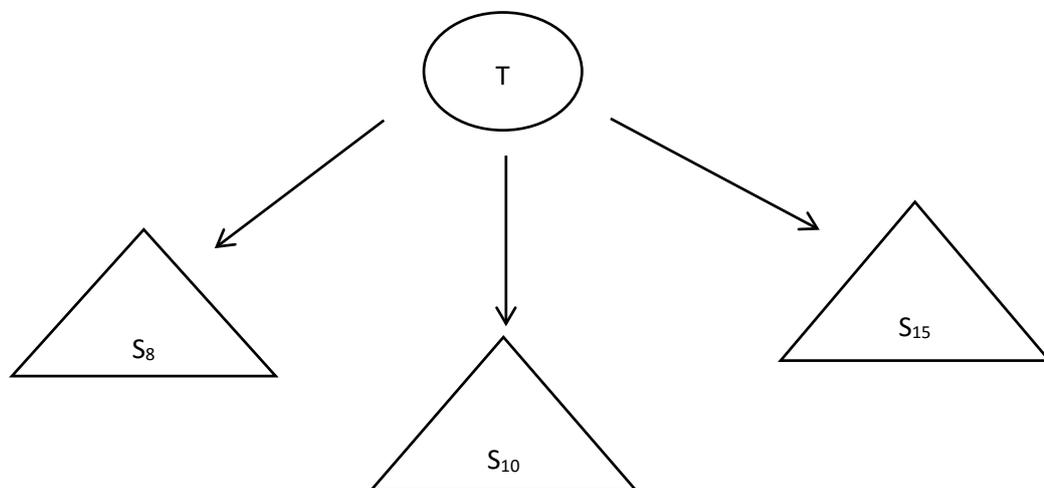


Figure 2: Feedback 2

The same thing happened in Irwan's class. In extract 3, he announced that he would praise the winners. Irwan rewarded the first three winners of the bingo game by letting them leave the class five minutes earlier than other students. As is evident in this Figure, one way transmission of feedback to some specific students was not converted into increased participation.

Extract 3

T: Let's see who is the winner of this bingo game.

The first three winners

I will select three winners you can go back five minutes early today.

Ss: Yeay

OC- The students were excited

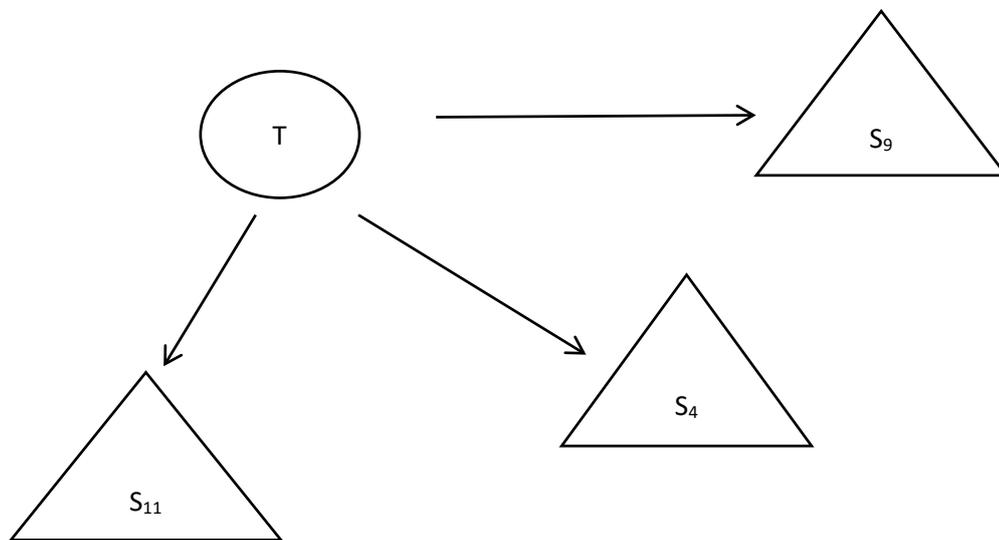


Figure 3: Feedback 3

DISCUSSION

According to social constructivists such as Wenger (1998), in an AfL classroom feedback is assumed more than dialogue between teacher and student about the task and involves all formal and informal ways of giving information to students about their competence within a community of practice. By helping learners to develop identity within their community of practice, feedback is considered as a practice rather than just a strategy to be practiced and moves focus from the letter to the spirit of AfL. In other words, for feedback to be dialogic and improve students' understanding, students should actively participate in the feedback process.

When they get involved in an activity, students should be given an opportunity to comment on each other's work, move around the classroom, look at other students' work and learn from each other. Therefore, they receive feedback from their teacher and peers, reflect on their work and become autonomous learners. Through the process of feedback students need to be stimulated to develop their sense of responsibility and agency. To achieve this, teachers need to provide the students with a safe and supportive learning environment such that they can get engaged in the feedback process.

The results showed that the students were not actively engaged in the feedback and their voice was not given credence due to the nature of the tasks as well as teacher authority in the classroom. It was observed that feedback was not integrated into the patterns of participation of the class to become part of the shared repertoire. This finding does not support the results of the studies conducted by Fluckiger et al. (2010), Handley et al. (2011), and Havnes et al. (2012) that highlighted the importance of students' involvement in the feedback process. The participating teachers lacked effective understanding of feedback (Weeden & Winter, 1999) and feedback given to the students was not based on the principles of AfL (Irving et al., 2011; Newby & Winterbottom, 2011; Tan, 2011)

They were not provided with a collaborative learning environment and only a few specific students dominated the discussions. To illustrate, during classroom questioning and discussion some specific students

responded to the questions and received one way feedback in the form of praise from their teacher when they gave the correct answers. When a student gave the wrong answer, the teachers themselves answered the question or directed the question to another student.

Moreover, the students had to complete the worksheets individually and if the teachers noticed that a student could not manage to accomplish the task, they provided that particular student with one-on-one instruction. The same thing happened in language arts classes. During language arts, the students were not divided into groups and more often they competed with each other to finish the task sooner than others to receive a reward from their teacher. Therefore, the students did not have the opportunity to think and reason together. Dialogic feedback is more than hierarchical relationship between teacher and students and it involves relationships in which students reflect on the task, reason together and become more central participants.

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