

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

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Abstract: *Giving effective feedback to students has been identified as a key strategy in learning and teaching, but we know little about how effective feedback is comprehended by teachers. Using a range of data sources, this qualitative interpretive study examined how 10 teachers of English as a foreign language from seven lower secondary schools, teaching grades 7-9, with students aged 12-14 in the Czech Republic, perceived effective feedback to be in relation to student learning and how these feedback practices influenced these perceptions within the classroom. The findings showed that teachers perceived formative nature of feedback to be effective; however, most teachers' feedback practices were found to be archaic in nature. Additionally, the study hypothesizes that this ineffective practice of teachers' feedback was mostly influenced by contextual factors such as institutional, educational, cultural, and social norms. Furthermore, the findings showed some feedback types are overemphasised, while some are underutilized.*

Keywords: EFL teachers, classroom feedback, effective feedback perception, contextual factors

Introduction

Most research in the past focused on how to give effective feedback in order to promote learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). While giving of effective feedback is important, the importance of effective *feedback perception* cannot be ignored (Brown & Remesal, 2017). Hence, teachers' understanding of effective feedback is proved to be crucial as teacher's perceptions about the quality of the feedback matter as to how feedback is planned and implemented in the classroom (Brown, Harris, & Harnett, 2012). Furthermore, research indicated that teacher's perceptions are useful in understanding and explaining classroom issues (Diaz, Martinez, Roa, & Sanhueza, 2010).

Despite the importance of how feedback is perceived, relatively little research examining English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of effective feedback practices in relation to student learning and how these practices influence

their perceptions in the Czech Republic has been carried out. This study aims to address this gap. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do teachers perceive to be effective feedback?
2. What feedback practices influence this perception?

Theoretical Underpinning

A wide range of education research support the idea that by integrating feedback into teaching, we can produce greater learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2012; Gamlem & Munthe, 2013; Hattie, 2012; Voerman, Meijer, Korthagen, & Simons, 2012). In educational research, feedback is understood as information given by an agent such as teacher, peer, book, parent, self, and experience with regard to aspects of one's performance or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In this study, feedback is explained as effective information provided by the teacher to monitor and scaffold learning.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Sadler (1989) claimed that the main purpose of feedback is to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance and a goal. Positioning to this, Hattie and Timperley (2007) stressed the need for teachers to provide more evaluative information in their feedback as a means of providing specific helpful information. This idea was further extended by Shute (2008) whereby she explained specific feedback as one that provides information pertaining to the accuracy of specific responses or behaviours. These elements are important when it comes to giving effective feedback. Furthermore, Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified four types of feedback: feedback task, feedback process, feedback self-regulation, and feedback-self. It can be understood that feedback can be effective if the first three types are given regularly rather than the feedback-self. Following this reasoning, Clynes and Raftery (2008) suggested feedback should be constructive and not destructive in nature.

Research indicated the usefulness of feedback on student learning and the importance of teachers' understanding in delivering quality feedback. For example, Hattie (2012) pointed out the effects of feedback in his meta-analyses study on various strategies that have influenced student achievement. The effect sizes suggested that some types of feedback are more powerful than others. A central purpose of formative feedback is to bridge the gap between present performance and a desired goal when moving to the next step in learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1998). Hattie (2012) pointed that this bridging is possible only if it involves students receiving information about a task and how to do it more effectively, while lower effects were related to praise, rewards, and punishment.

Additionally, Schartel (2012) revealed that feedback should be delivered in an

appropriate setting, focusing on the task and not on the individual, and that it should be specific and non-judgmental. This structure is important because researchers point out that feedback leads to learning gains only when it includes guidance on how to improve, so that when students have opportunities to apply the feedback, they will understand how to use it and are willing to dedicate effort (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Furthermore, Hoy and Hoy (2003) posited that “with older students (late elementary through high school), written comments are most helpful when they are personalized and when they provide constructive criticism” (p. 268).

In another video-based analysis of lower secondary classroom study has shown that quality of teacher feedback is essential for students' learning (Gamlem & Munthe, 2013). Although the lessons analysed were characterized by positive classroom atmosphere, feedback was found to be more encouraging in nature than learning-oriented. To consider feedback merely in terms of encouraging is impractical. Feedback should rather embody the effects it can have on learning. For instance, in the case of praise, Dweck (2009b) asserted that praise (process praise) related to effort puts students in a growth mind-set, which results in excellent performance and improvement. On the other hand, praise related to intelligence puts them in a fixed mind-set, leading to poor performance because they have lost their confidence, resilience, and motivation. Subsequently, Gamlem and Smith (2013) claimed that the value of feedback varies in terms of giving, using, appreciating, and seeking.

Although, effective feedback is critical in enhancing learning, both international (Gamlem & Munthe, 2013) and Czech-based research (Straková & Simonová, 2015; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013) called attention to a number of issues

with regard to teachers' feedback practices. For instance, feedback to date is found to be ineffective (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Kyaruzi, Strijbos, Ufer, & Brown 2018), and teachers rarely ask quality questions (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Seden & Svaricek, 2018; Smart & Marshall, 2013), neither do they actively promote feedback seeking (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017). Apparently, feedback is more general in nature than learning oriented; hence, teachers need more knowledge on quality aspects of formative feedback interactions to support learning (Gamlem & Munthe, 2013; Seden & Svaricek, 2018)

In the Czech Republic, effective feedback rarely occurs, even though students are tested by both externally-based examinations and ongoing formative assessments (OECD, 2013). Straková & Simonová (2015) indicated that in Czech schools, feedback given to students was not immediate, and the types of feedback were often in the form of marks or brief comments. For instance, marks are used as a means for communicating the status of students' learning but not as the basis for measuring their understanding or determining how much they have learned or how to render support for bringing improvement. In addition, little emphasis is placed on providing effective feedback to students (OECD, 2013; Seden & Svaricek, 2018; Straková & Simonová, 2015).

Recent studies indicated that although learning progress did not differ, feedback was perceived as more useful in the formative assessment condition, self-efficacy was greater, and interest tended to increase (Rakoczy et al., 2018). In another study, Skovholt (2018) examined the anatomy of teacher-student feedback in upper secondary school in Norway, and the finding showed that the teacher used questions to establish a basis to promote her own agenda and worked to optimise students' contributions by providing

positive feedback and minimising critiques and disagreement; while, the student approached the teacher's feedback with resistance. This finding indicated that both the teacher and students need to be taught how to give and receive feedback effectively and constructively as providing effective and explicit feedback is crucial in improving learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). What is more, Jónsson, Smith, and Geirsdóttir (2018) revealed that the stronger the culture around formative assessment, the stronger the dialogue between teachers and students.

To sum up, research concludes feedback as an integral part of the educational process. However, till date there is a substantial gap in the way feedback is provided, received and experienced by both the teacher and students (Jónsson et al., 2018). Therefore, if feedback is understood as information delivered to improve learning, then teachers' understanding of effective feedback practices in relation to student learning and how these practices influence these perceptions is essential for it to have desired effect on learning. Hence, the current study intends to contribute to existing knowledge on teachers' perception of effective feedback.

Research Method

The method adopted for the study is a qualitative interpretive approach as it allows the researcher to make sense of meanings others have about the world (Richardson, 1997). Data consisted of interviews together with lesson observations and document analysis of student work, which were used to develop the interview guide and to achieve a better understanding of teachers' perception of feedback practices in relation to student learning. The lesson observations were not recorded though notes were kept throughout. The observation was conducted prior to the interviews to learn more about EFL teachers' perception of effective

feedback practices and to seek explanations and clarification to classroom observation and student work during the interviews with the teachers. One of the aims of this study was to contribute to further understanding of teachers' effective feedback practices, and so the research design was developed with the purpose to investigate how effective feedback is perceived in relation to student learning.

Interviews were held in late fall 2017 and early spring 2018. An interview guide was used, and the interviews were semi-structured (Kvale, 2008) developed from existing theory on classroom feedback practices utilized in lower and elementary classes. The interviews were recorded and lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

Research Context, Participants, and Data Collection

The participants were 10 EFL teachers from Czech lower secondary schools. The participants taught EFL to students between the ages of 13 and 15. The feedback in the context of English as a foreign language was being explored as the majority of the feedback practices in EFL are mostly based on theories, research and textbooks, unlike in many other subjects. In addition, the abundance of international studies on feedback in connection to EFL provided us the avenue to compare findings from this study with those of the international studies.

The participants' teaching experiences ranged from 2 to 20 years. At the beginning, a purposeful sampling strategy was employed to elicit rich and in-depth information of an expert sample (Creswell, 2011). However, after the first few interviews, snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the study as it allowed the researcher to reach informants by way of contact information that was provided by other informants (Noy, 2008). Emails were sent to schools and in most

instances directly to the teachers requesting them to participate in the study.

A total of 15 classroom observations were made, depending on the availability of the teachers. Five teachers were observed twice while another 5 were observed once owing to their busy schedule. The researcher kept notes on all 15 observed lessons. About 33 documents, including gap filling tasks, essays, portfolios, and other test materials were analysed.

Data Analysis

Data analyses followed a thematic approach where interview transcripts and notes from the researcher's classroom observation and document analysis were written and coding categories from teachers' interviews were developed (Creswell, 2007; Kvale, 2008). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were coded manually. Data were categorized based on collective patterns that emerged through repetitive reading and during coding. Further data on the themes were supplemented by studying the documents of the students. The reliability of the data was validated by triangulation of the sources; for instance, what was found to be interesting or unclear during the classroom observation was recorded in the notes and was pursued for more clarification and explanation during the interview. The coding and analysis of findings were confirmed by an expert. Consequently, two themes emerged on EFL teachers' perceptions of feedback: (a) effective feedback beliefs; and (b) feedback practices and their influence on teacher perceptions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are discussed based two themes that emerged during the analysis: (a) feedback beliefs; and (b) feedback practices and their influence on teacher perceptions.

Feedback Beliefs

A wide range of feedback practices were prevalent including verbal, non-verbal, written feedback, grades, symbols, positive, negative, praise, and gestures, and all of these can be characterized by the following features: general, written, descriptive, specific, and timely. However, the empirical data revealed that EFL teachers focused strongly on verbal feedback and grading. In addition, some teachers also made use of symbols such as stickers, tweets, smileys, and pictures with comments along with negative and positive feedback in the form of black dots, plusses and some negative words but in a constructive manner. Teachers also gave general comments and praise related to the learner and tasks as feedback.

Teachers provided these opinions during a variety of activities related to grammar and vocabulary lessons students carried out. The activities included writing, reading, speaking, and listening exercises from the workbook, textbook, magazines, audio records, text-embedded tasks, and teacher-designed tests. The writing activities included mostly essays, tests, gap filling exercises projects and portfolios, and were provided individually. The reading exercises were mostly based on text and articles and were discussed either in the group or with the whole class. The speaking activities included sharing their responses on the tasks or tests and sharing their views on the articles. The dialogue activities were also initiated amongst pairs and groups. Students were also encouraged to speak with their teacher and peers to enhance their speaking competency. The listening activities involved mostly gap filling tasks, question and answer sessions based on the short stories or dialogue from recorded audio selections.

For teaching and learning to be effective teachers must find ways to communicate how students learn and one such technique

of communicating student learning is through teacher feedback. As pointed out by Hattie and Timperley (2007), teacher feedback does seem to vary in its power. Some feedback was found to be more influential in its effect on improving learning. In general, the EFL teachers were quite aware of this and, as seen from observed lessons and from teacher interviews, the teachers generally and mostly offered feedback in a ‘whole class situation.’ They perceived this type of feedback as an effective method to address common mistakes made by the students. They also provided individual feedback mostly to address specific mistakes made by the individual students. The following comments illustrate this:

I have learnt that if their performance is good, I can praise them in front of the whole class and if it is bad, it’s better to say so on a one-on-one basis. (Taylor)

Mostly, I survive on a kind of one-on-one based conversation, asking them what they understand, what they don’t understand and if I think they know the answer or anything of that sort. (Debbie)

In addition, grading is practiced extensively by teachers as they understand that the use of grade scales as feedback is central, as the scales have their own purposes. One of the teachers used marks to connect learning with hard work and practice. The teacher added that the purpose of the scales was to cater to these learning differences. For instance, if they work hard they will get better marks, and if they don’t they get lower marks. Hence, marks were used for this purpose and which in turn validates preceding research (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Straková & Simonová, 2015). Their exploration showed that informed marks were used as a means for communicating the status of a student’s learning, but not as the basis for understanding and determining how much a student has learned nor how to render

support for bringing improvement. Additionally, Pla-Champas, Arumi-Prat, Senye-Mir, and Ramirez (2018) claimed that students who have been assessed using formative feedback practices achieve higher marks than those who had not been assessed in this way. Furthermore, the teachers stressed that grading learners' performance was a dominant means to substantiate the accountability of students, teachers, and schools but not necessarily for improving teaching and learning.

Although the EFL teachers ascertained that written feedback was crucial, most of the students' documents and researcher's notes from classroom observation showed that teachers' written feedback comments were rather vague, often representing spelling corrections, error corrections, ticking, crossing out, verifying responses, and no suggestions for furthering learning were made by the teachers. In the class as well as in written work, teachers' comments were mostly encouraging and general in nature, such as *well done, good, good job, excellent, work hard, great, you are getting there, interesting view, not bad, try harder, you guys are on fire today*, etc. This general feedback goes against findings by Harris, Irving, and Peterson (2008), which maintains that written, specific feedback is important as it lets students know what they need to work on in order to improve. Hence, written feedback should address information about the processes underpinning the task and strategies students should use to improve their own work as suggested by (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) in their study.

To give general feedback and to consider feedback merely in terms of encouraging is futile, and studies revealed that feedback should suggest the effects it can have on learning (Gamlem & Munthe, 2013). The following statement is an example of such nonspecific feedback given by one teacher:

When I check their exercise book and I tell them, yes, this is very nice, use

colours which is nice, makes it neat and everything, but if a pupil's handwriting is not neat, I tell them to do it more neatly the next time. (Martha)

Nonetheless, the teachers perceived such feedback as effective in motivating students to work harder.

A few teachers considered giving effective written feedback to be vital as they noted this kind of feedback is useful in honing the learning process. Therefore, they specifically wrote small notes that reflect students' weaknesses (what went wrong), strengths (what they did right), and solutions (what needs to be done) as observed in students' work. This finding was in agreement with other research supporting the notion that feedback leads to learning gains only when it includes guidance on how to improve (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black et al., 2004; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

There were some teachers who perceived praising after small successes to support learning was important. For instance, the teacher observed that when a student performs a task correctly, the teacher believed that praise like *well done, you guys are on fire, you got the preposition, right*, etc., motivated the learner to do better. Hence, they regarded it to be useful especially if the praises were related to the task and not to the person. This praise was also apparent in most observed classes and observation notes; whereby, students reacted actively and quickly in the class discussion when teachers made those small praises. This reaction is consistent with Dweck (2009a), whose research found that praise related to the person impedes learning, while praise related to the task and effort might raise motivation, effort, and consequently, performance. Dweck (2009b), however, also affirmed that the praise should not be universal, nor should it praise intelligence, but rather it should boost the learner's effort. In some way, though, the finding of our study contradicts

this notion, as the praises offered in this study seem to be mostly nonspecific; however, the teachers still need to improve their strategies of giving constructive and suggestive feedback that would enhance learning rather than giving general praises as feedback. This, of course, is also necessary, but a more effective learning-oriented pointer should also be supported.

Influence of Feedback Practices on Teacher Perception

Most participants indicated that their beliefs do not influence their assessment practices, but rather are influenced to a large degree by educational, institutional, social, and cultural factors. The findings showed some of their assessment practices do seem to influence these perceptions. Hence, the contextual factors are found to be critical when teachers interpret influence of feedback. Fulmer, Lee, and Tan (2015) and Goldstein (2017) claimed that teachers' thinking about assessment (feedback) tended to reflect the social, historical, and cultural priorities established in each jurisdiction in which they were employed and so interpreting assessment requires paying attention to contextual factors operating in the given jurisdiction with particular reference to both social norms and educational and institutional policies (Remesal, 2007). For instance, giving grades alone is generally accepted by teachers as not effective because it does not contribute to further learning. They informed the researcher that they use grades and verbal feedback as they are mandated in the institutional and educational policies.

Furthermore, considering the cultural and social factors, more emphasis is placed on grading, as students', teachers', and schools' performances are determined by the grades students obtain. Moreover, there is a strong culture amongst teachers, students, and parents to judge their child's performance based on grades. This finding agreed to the findings of Black et al. (2004)

that indicated that parents assume grades are the only forum through which they can find out how their children are faring at school.

Although written feedback is considered useful, the overall findings revealed a lesser use of this medium, and this result was attributed to factors including institutional policy, heavy workload, student numbers, and time constraints. Some teachers stated that non-verbal feedback, including change in tone, hand gestures and facial expressions are useful because it acts as a tool for them to alert students to their mistakes as the following statement illustrates:

I let them think about their mistakes or the sentence once more. For example, saying is it really like that or are you sure or I repeat some sentence with different intonation to make them think about the sentence once more and I think it's enough because they notice it by themselves. (Halep)

As indicated by the teacher, the observation data and classroom notes revealed the teacher implementing such practices in her class. Furthermore, the data also revealed students engaging and reacting to such practices to improve their learning.

Some EFL teachers maintained that feedback should be formative in nature so it can serve the purpose of learning and so they modify their instruction according to the needs of the students to further their learning. Hence, the observation as well as the interview data showed the teacher carrying out three rounds of assessment to meet the desired learning goals. The teacher practiced self-, peer, and teacher assessment which, according to the teacher, meant students went through three levels of reworking their activities before the final versions were submitted to the teacher. Black and Wiliam (1998) and Hill (2011) asserted that such activities allowed students to think, discuss, and reflect on their own learning as well as on the learning

of their peers and to articulate their reflections and to provide feedback to each other. What is more, such methods increased interest and willingness to learn, enhanced reasoning skills, refined meta-cognitive skills, and improved results (Clark, 2012; Romero-Martin, Fraile-Aranda, Lopez-Pastor, & Castejon-Oliva, 2014).

A few teachers expressed the importance of taking learning forward and thus, in one school, the three EFL teachers created assessment rubrics to assess and guide the students' written tasks. Following the rubrics, teachers provided detailed written feedback to the students indicating what, where, and how they could improve in their writing. This feedback aligned with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) second and third types of feedback that explained the feedback process and feedback self-regulation. They also involved the students in this assessment process; whereby, students were made to do self- and peer-assessment of their work following these rubrics. This process agreed with findings by Parr and Hawe (2017) that pointed to peer feedback as useful in confirming and validating what they had been thinking, as cueing or surfacing existing knowledge, or as prompting reflection. Tierney (2014) saw making assessment rubrics transparent and involving students in the assessment process as a multifaceted quality of classroom assessment fairness. Turning to the assessment rubrics, students also needed to justify why they gave that choice for themselves. Gamlem and Smith (2013) claimed that giving quality academic feedback might be challenging if students were not trained for this type of feedback, or if assessment criteria were not understood. When teachers were asked whether the students could use the rubric in self- and peer-assessment, the teachers insisted that the learners must be showed how to use them; otherwise, the rubrics may not serve their purpose. However, the teachers mentioned that sometimes

students' feedback was rather harsh and forceful; wherein, the teacher needed to intervene. Hence, Gamlem and Smith (2013) suggested that teachers should deliberately teach their students feedback giving skills, structure the classes to share this expertise, set criteria, and make specific feedback interventions to ensure all students can benefit from these peer interactions. One teacher stated,

And, if they are doing a writing assignment or if they are doing a test, then I use marking schemes or rubrics and I make notes about what they have done correctly, what they have done incorrectly, where they need improvement, how they can be helped. For major assignments, I actually type up detailed notes about each criterion that they are being assessed on and hand them out to them, so they can see it and work on it for further improvement. (Paul)

Voerman, Meijer, Korthagen, and Simons (2014) claimed that feedback may elicit positive and negative, activating and deactivating emotions. These emotions will influence learning in anticipated ways. In general, positive feedback evokes positive emotions and negative feedback negative ones. Some EFL teachers rewarded students with pluses or positive comments in order to support learning as opposed to negative comments, as it can demotivate the learner from doing better. The following statements expressed by the teachers affirmed this concept:

For example, I use only plus points not minus. I don't like it when somebody says you have these many mistakes. It's better to say you have been good at something because it's the best motivation for students, but then, I must pay attention to their mistakes as well. (Jen)

Yes, for example, what usually does not work is just negative assessment. So, even if the assessment has to be negative, because the person really did

not perform well, I try to find something positive. (Tom)

The current study's findings were also similar to that of Kluger and DeNisi (1996) that found both positive and negative feedback can enhance learning if given constructively.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore EFL teachers' perception of effective feedback practices in relation to student learning. This practice was discussed from the perspective of EFL teachers by discussing two themes: (a) the effective feedback beliefs, and (b) the influence of feedback practices on this perception. The findings revealed many interesting perceptions regarding effective feedback in relation to student learning. The study also revealed overemphasis of some feedback types and

under emphasis of other feedback types. Although, there were few teachers who perceived formative nature of feedback as important and effective, most teachers' perceptions of effective feedback are outdated, and those perceptions significantly differed from the literature.

Based on these findings, we conclude by emphasizing that if the purpose of feedback is to enhance learning, then, teachers' perceptions on effective feedback has to be formative in nature. Hence, we propose a need to introduce programmes that orient teachers on the ways of giving effective feedback. Nevertheless, as the limitation our study was in terms of focus and design in exploring EFL teachers' self-expressed perceptions, a comprehensive future study is recommended which can explore different typographies regarding teachers' perceptions on effective feedback.

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