

Providing students with feedback

Providing students with formative feedback during the learning process can enhance learning. However, as John Hattie and Gregory Yates (Hattie & Yates, 2014) point out, research shows that there is an empathy gap in feedback between students and teachers. Teachers are convinced that they regularly provide useful feedback, yet outside observers rate this as little and rarely given and students often consider that their teachers provide infrequent and low-level feedback, if at all!

In my workshops on feedback in the context of assessment for learning, Waldorf teachers attending frequently claim that they give regular and useful feedback, just as the research shows. They believe that they are doing a sound job and providing much feedback. The problem, as the research shows, is that feedback given at the group level (e.g. on handing back an assignment and addressing the class as a whole) is experienced as irrelevant by those who gave correct answers and is ignored by those who didn't. Students 'tune-out' when generic advice is given. Students, especially those in need of support, need personalized feedback, either verbally or in written form. Teachers confronted with this fact usually claim that they have no time to deal with more than a few individuals. This is no doubt true, though it depends on how one teaches. If there is a clear 'working part' to the lesson, the teacher can use this time to speak to individuals. I also avoid giving the whole class the same assignment in the same timeframe. That means I don't have to hand back so many assignments at once. This spreads the work over the week.

Also giving praise is considered by teachers as positive and valuable feedback. However, if this is done too much, it becomes counter-productive. "If you praise a good deal, students learn that you are a teacher that praises a good deal, and that is all" (Hattie & Yates, 2014, p. 47). Praise needs to be specific and perhaps proportional. Is it necessary to praise people for doing what they are supposed to do anyway? Isn't praise appropriate for exceptional achievements that go above and beyond the norm. It can be motivational with weak students, as long as their individual effort merits comment.

Of course, the effectiveness of feedback depends on many factors, which boil down to three questions: where is the student going (i.e. what are the aims)? How is the student doing right now? and what is the next step? This means there needs to be clearly articulated goals, since feedback needs a context. I have aims that I share with the students and those which I don't. Among those that I don't explicitly share are notions such as; the aim of my teaching is to create learning situations in which individuals are called upon to step up, take responsibility, and engage with the world in ways that enables to come into being as individuals- as subjects. I do tell the students that there are criteria that I don't assess because all learning involves biographical relevance that I have no access to (nor expect to know). I also tell them that I seek to learn from the whole process so that I can grow professionally. However, there are clear criteria that I can share and that reflect my personal conviction about what is important and not just external criteria that have to be fulfilled for exams. In language learning I am convinced that active participation in the learning community is the most important aspect that leads to learning. I tell them this and try to explain it to them (my arguments include the idea that natural language learning occurs in meaning practice and communicative relationships- hence participation as the first and most important criteria. The opposite is of course true; if you don't participate you can't expect to learn much. The worst a student can

do is hinder others from participating by excluding them or using verbal or behavioural violence against other members. Any one doing that is going to get very low grades from me, quite apart from my formative and ipsative assessment! The other criteria practically write themselves because they belong to the practice of my English teaching.

Here is an example taken from a recent English block:

Class 11 English morning lesson block: short stories
October 2018, (8.00 until 9.30, Monday to Friday over three weeks)
Teacher Dr. Martyn Rawson

Aims

In this block we will work with the short story genre of literature, understanding what makes a good short story, studying examples of good short stories and writing short stories. We will also practice skills required for the MSA exam. We will compile a book of short stories by the end of the block.

Specific criteria

- Active participation in the group work and class discussions.
- Speaking English as much as possible in the lessons.
- Understanding and commenting of texts
- Understanding the main characteristics of short stories (plot and structure, character, setting/location, narrative perspective, the theme and climax.
- Showing evidence of learning from mistakes.
- Keeping a portfolio of texts, short stories and notes.
- Writing and developing at least one short story.
- Level of English usage*

(*this can be demonstrated using standard European Qualifications Framework for Languages, if required. Usually I just assess language level across the range of skills.)

In the case of this teaching block, students wrote analyses of short stories I gave them and they wrote drafts of their own short stories. These were corrected in the lesson with each student (whilst the others were working on their tasks) and formative and ipsative feedback about this specific assignment was given verbally and more general issues could be discussed individually (specific weaknesses, work habits etc.). This assumes a lesson plan that enables the teacher time in the lesson to work with individuals. At the end of the block I gave them a feedback sheet that was both formative and summative (usually within a week of the end of the block). This looks like this:

Feedback sheet (to the short-story block described above)

Short story block October 2018	Name:
Criteria	- +
Active participation	
Speaking English	
Understanding short story structures	
Evidence of re-working texts	
Portfolio complete	
Own short story	
Grade at MSA level	

Comment:

The assessment is indicated by a cross along the continuum between – and +. This indicates a general tendency and has no upper limit. The only exception is the grade in the last line that has to be given as a state requirement. This grade in effect translates the criteria above. I give a personal comment below, which generally praises excellent work or describes specific steps the student can take to improve her level of attainment.

This is a very simple form of giving documented feedback that also provides me with a record of achievement that flows into the overall assessment and the annual report. Behind it stands my own record keeping, which records written work handed in, and notes made each week about student behaviour in group work and in the lessons (i.e. speaking English in informal situations and group work).

Process-orientated feedback is valued more than final grades (Hattie and Yates, 2014). Progress is measured less against abstract and general goals as in terms of the student’s own achievements over time (more, less, getting more skilled, making fewer mistakes etc.).

As all the literature on feedback notes, a feedback culture depends on students feeling able to make mistakes, meaning that it is OK to make mistakes because we can learn from them. In fact, especially in foreign language learning, it is practically impossible not to make mistakes, though it is possible *not* to learn from them, but rather to go on repeating them.

What is very important is that the tasks are scaffolded to involve a stepped sequence of mastery of the skills in question, by offering three levels;

- a) initial knowledge acquisition in a new area,
- b) applying knowledge and skills previously learned and
- c) exhibiting strong levels of mastery or expertise.

At the first level, students need feedback that relates to what they need to know, including basic skills and vocabulary. They need assurance and corrective feedback so they can gain confidence. The second level requires students to apply what they have learned to a wider range of tasks, finding connections and seeing relationships. This enables them to elaborate on what they know and can do in a context that makes sense to them. Positive suggestions can help here (“strong use of adjectives and adverbs gives the story new dimensions”, “character is well-described, now what about plot?”, “what else do you think is important?”). Feedback directs attention to connections.

At the third level of feedback, the teacher takes time to appreciate the virtues of the work. One needs to elaborate on the achievement, reflecting back on the relationships between process and outcome. Self-assessment is also important at this stage because self-correcting shows and requires high levels of learning. What students produce should be valued to enhance the experience of expansive learning (i.e. their learning is self-motivated and is not merely a response to external requirements). At this level students do not require feedback as frequently or as quickly as novices because they are largely self-regulating.

Feedback is effective when (paraphrasing Hattie and Yates, 2014):

- The process “resides in what is received and interpreted by the student, rather than what a teacher gives or believes has taken place”.
- Feedback works best when the learner knows the criteria in advance.
- Feedback cues attention to the task or aim (rather than to the person).
- Feedback engages the learner just above the level they are at.
- Feedback appeals to expansive (i.e. self-motivated) learning.
- Feedback is most effective in a classroom climate in which mistakes are accepted and learning from them assumed.
- Feedback works best when teachers acknowledge their own need to learn and modify their teaching.

Nyquist (2001) distinguishes between:

- Weak feedback: students are given their grades.
- Feedback alone: students are given grades plus information about the possible correct answers.
- Weak formative assessment: students are given the correct results plus some information.
- Moderate formative assessment: students are given information about correct results, some explanations and some specific suggestions for improvement.
- Strong formative assessment: students are given information about correct results, some explanation, specific activities to undertake in order to improve. (quoted in (Wiliam 2011) p. 7)

This is a helpful overview that can be applied to a range of learning situations. It makes the point that grades are next to useless in terms of feedback.

References

- Hattie, J. A. C., & Yates, G. C. R. (2014). Using Feedback to Promote Learning. In V. A. Benassi, C. E. Overson, & C. M. Hakain (Eds.), *Applying Science in Education: Infusing Psychological Science into the Curriculum* (pp. 45-58): College of Liberal Arts at University of New Hampshire Scholar's Repository.
- Wiliam, D. (2011). What is assessment for learning? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 37, 3-14.

