

# Quality of feedback in TESOL: A learning-oriented assessment perspective

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## Abstract

Researchers have argued that feedback is a critical variable in student learning in general (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and particularly in developing language proficiency (Ferris, 2006). However, "what counts as good feedback is contested" (Brown, Harris, & Harnett, 2012, p. 986), and for this reason, researchers are investigating feedback quality and its role in student learning. Following an assessment *for* learning perspective, this chapter reviews the literature on feedback quality by taking into consideration types, content, time, and, sources, mode of feedback. The chapter focuses on both teacher and non-teacher feedback and on the support it provides for the learning process. Additionally, the chapter looks into the effectiveness of feedback within the TESOL context. Specific focus is given to written and oral feedback in both writing and speaking instruction. The final section of the chapter suggests guidelines and recommendations for TESOL practitioners.

Key words: Feedback quality, formative assessment, assessment for learning, written feedback, TESOL

## 1. Introduction

Feedback research has received considerable attention in the educational literature during the last 30 years, with specific focus on its role in day-to-day instruction (Lipnevich, Berg, & Smith, 2016). Attention to feedback in both research and instructional settings has also been enhanced by the assessment *for* learning movement which perceives feedback as a critical element in a learning context. Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 102) argue that feedback is "among the most critical influences on student learning." In language classes, feedback usually serves different purposes including raising awareness about specific language problems or weaknesses, informing students about their current level, and guiding their future plans. However, identifying the meaning of good feedback is contested (Shute, 2008) and there is little consensus on how feedback quality is defined. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of feedback qualities research in general and also to review the literature on the effectiveness of feedback in TESOL. In addition, the authors provide a set of guidelines for TESOL practitioners by addressing issues related to effective feedback strategies. The guidelines follow a model that focuses on how students make sense of and respond to feedback.

## 2. Main text

### 2.1 *Literature on feedback quality*

Extensive research has been conducted on the nature and impact of feedback (Lipnevich & Smith, 2018). The educational goal of feedback is to stimulate changes in learner behaviour and knowledge, which manifest themselves in improved outcomes (Shute, 2008). This requires that feedback is provided early enough and in an accessible form such that learners can use it to guide change (Scriven, 1967). Feedback achieves this goal by clarifying what it is students are meant to learn, identifying where they are relative to that goal, and making

clear what the students have to do next to close that gap (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Meta-analyses have demonstrated that feedback focused on task, processes, and self-regulation contribute substantially to improved performance, while feedback intended to either praise or blame the learner is counterproductive (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Shute (2008) also indicates useful feedback could be information that makes it easier for students to understand what they need to do (e.g., a worked example) and information that corrects errors of fact or understanding. Hence, quality feedback provides accurate and valid information to the learner so that the learner closes the gap in their capacity, performance, or knowledge.

But what quality feedback depends on a number of contextual factors (Lipnevich et al., 2016) including (a) the quality of students' actual performance (success is easier to communicate and receive than failure), (b) how quickly learners need feedback (sometimes delay helps learning), (c) the veracity of feedback (unwarranted praise is counterproductive), (d) the emotional tone of feedback (negativity reduces communication), (e) level of detail (clearly scores without commentary are less informative than comments), (f) comprehensibility (terse terms or symbols commonly used in text editing are efficient for the editor/reviewer, but may not communicate effectively to the author), and (g) congruency with expectations (being told they will get clarification, but receiving condemnation will not work). Additionally, it is clear that feedback in human systems is much more complicated than "*I told them what to do*".

While information is the beginning of feedback, instructors need to understand student factors that influence what happens with information. Humans have access to their own internal sources of information about their performance (e.g., cognitive, affective, and physical; Butler & Winne, 1995), which may contradict external information. Furthermore, student interaction with the feedback information varies according to a number of differences between individuals (e.g., ability, prior success, or openness to criticism; Lipnevich et al., 2016). Naturally, assuming feedback recipients get appropriately constructed feedback, they still differ in their emotionality and ability to understand the feedback, let alone know what to do with it (Lipnevich et al., 2016); "*I get what you mean, but I don't know how to do that*". While the onus for learning lies with the learner, instructors have the responsibility to do the best they can to create effective feedback information; Shute's (2008) guidelines are a good starting point.

## *2.2 Effectiveness of feedback within the TESOL context*

Feedback has been of substantial interest in second language acquisition (SLA) research, especially within the concept of input. Gass (1997) argues that language learners are usually exposed to two types of input: positive and negative evidence. In the context of positive evidence, learners receive input about appropriate uses of the target language, while negative evidence alerts them to incorrect instances of language use and normally provides corrective feedback. SLA research has constantly focused on the effectiveness of both types of evidence and this section looks into how SLA theories have informed feedback research.

A number of SLA theories have substantially impacted this line of research. For example, Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis which indicates that language learners need comprehensible input which should be slightly higher than their current level of performance, or what Krashen calls it  $i + 1$ . In this context, teachers customize their feedback to help learners acquire a specific language feature or achieve a learning outcome. A relatively

similar perspective was provided by Vygotsky (1978) who envisioned feedback as an effective strategy for engaging with students' zone of proximal development (ZPD). Building on the input hypothesis, Long (1996) proposed the interaction hypothesis that perceives collaboration between language users (In the context of feedback, students could be collaborating with either teachers or peers) as an effective technique for maintaining learner's input at  $i + 1$ . In other words, this collaboration ensures that the input is not prohibitively difficult or too trivial. Following this perspective, Long perceived feedback as a useful strategy for developing a number of language features, including vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. While these different perspectives on input have substantially contributed to the current SLA literature, they have been criticized for being vague and difficult to implement in the classroom (Zafar, 2009).

Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1992, 2001) argues that conscious and corrective feedback can help learners in noticing different linguistic forms and the discrepancy between native-like L2 production and their own language use. Research has shown that this type of feedback is effective even though it is usually perceived as negative. Interactionalists (Gass, 1997; Long, 2007; Pica, 1988) believe that corrective feedback is useful in terms of helping learners identify the problems with their L2 production while also acknowledging the constructive role played by positive feedback. Student uptake of this corrective feedback leads to improved performance (Sheen, 2006). However, other researchers (e.g., Truscot, 2007), argue that corrective feedback is not effective and sometime hinders learning, which is consistent with the stance taken by Lipnevich et al. (2016).

Research on feedback in TESOL has looked into a wide range of issues in different instructional settings. One main area in this line of research has focused on implicit vs. explicit feedback. According to Hulstijn's (2005), feedback is explicit when rule explanation is provided, while it is implicit when no explanation is given to learners (i.e., correction without explanation). In a meta-analysis on corrective feedback research in oral language (Li, 2010) it was found that "explicit feedback worked better than implicit feedback on immediate and short-delayed posttests, but on long-delayed posttests, implicit feedback was slightly more effective than explicit feedback. Furthermore, the long-term effects of implicit feedback was larger than its short-term effect" (pp. 343-344). A related strand of research has indicated that focused feedback (where the emphasis is placed on specific error types) is more effective than unfocused, comprehensive feedback (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2006; Sheen, 2007). For example, Sheen (2007) reported positive effects of focused feedback on the use of both indefinite and definite articles. Another theme in this literature has classified feedback into either input-providing (recasts as an example) or output-prompting (e.g. repetition of error or elicitation). For example, Ammar and Spada (2006) investigated the difference between recasts and prompts on the acquisition of possessive pronouns among six graders in an intensive ESL program. The results showed that prompts were effective with students who scored less than 50 % on the pre-test while both recasts and prompts were similarly effective for students who scored more than 50 % on the same test. Research in this area has generally found feedback that prompts learners to self-correct are more beneficial than input-providing feedback, especially for learners with low language proficiency.

Electronic Feedback (e-feedback) has recently received significant attention in the literature, prompted by the attractive features technology offers. Examples of these features include the interactive nature of synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) and

the convenience of immediate online feedback from both teachers and peers. The results of e-feedback has yielded contradictory results. For example, Sauro (2009) reported general improvement in linguistic features based on online chats, while Schultz (2000) concluded that CMC feedback was less efficient than face-to-face peer review. Some improvements have also been reported in asynchronous e-feedback (e.g. discussion boards and emails); however, Vinagre and Muñoz (2015) found that e-feedback tends to be more about form than discourse. In addition, other researchers have criticized e-feedback for not promoting interaction or deep revisions (Ho & Savignon, 2007; Martin-Beltran & Chen, 2013). Sheen (2006) offers an explanation why CMC feedback has not yielded the expected results by referring to students' online orientation strategies. Usually students are oriented towards meaning not linguistic features in online communication, especially when there is no monitoring of their conversations. Sheen also refers to other variables related to online learning environments, such as learners' familiarity with technology and on-screen concentration.

While a considerable body of literature has focused on teacher feedback, a strand of research has looked into the effectiveness of self- and peer feedback. For example, Mawlawi Diab (2010) found that peer feedback prompted students to focus on correction of rule-based errors. Building on this work, Mawlawi Diab (2011) concluded that peer feedback promoted better revisions of ideas and organization; however, self-feedback resulted in more draft revisions. Another line in this research has looked into the effect of providing training on quality of peer feedback and overall quality of peer-revised writing. Results of studies in this area reported that training in peer feedback (a) led students to focus on global aspects of writing ( e.g. content and organization (Rahimi, 2013), (b) helped in effectively incorporating peer comments in students' revisions (Min, 2006), and (c) resulted in more meaningful revisions and in improving the overall quality of writing (Berg, 1999). However, some research reports that peer comments on content tend to be not useful and vague (Hu, 2005) and quality of peer feedback is undermined by low proficiency of students (Wang, 2013). Additionally, in the peer feedback literature there has been interest in how students respond to peer feedback in different instructional settings. For instance, Zhu (2001) used mixed ability peer feedback groups (native and nonnative speakers) and found that non-native English speakers did not actively participate in the discussion. Consequently, this group might not receive the same benefits compared to their native counterparts.

A final thread in the literature has focused on students' perception of the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Schulz (2001) indicated that the majority of students from whom data were collected found feedback to be useful. In addition, many of them preferred teacher feedback over peer feedback. In terms of feedback focus, Cohen (1987) found that students believed that teachers should pay more attention to local issues (e.g grammar and vocabulary rather than global ones (such as organization and content). However, Leki (2006) found that students were not satisfied with the quality and amount of feedback on global issues and most found comments on local issues adequate. A related line in this research has compared perceptions of both students and teachers. The study of Montgomery and Baker (2007) found that teachers usually underestimated the amount of feedback given to students while students were satisfied with the amount and quality of feedback.

In conclusion, the results of feedback research are not conclusive and sometimes contradictory. Caution is warranted when interpreting results of different studies since a number of intervening variables are present in this context. Examples of these variables

include instructional context from which data were collected, proficiency level of language learners, feedback mode of delivery, length of treatment, cultural effects, and age of learners.

### 2.3. Guidelines and recommendations for TESOL practitioners

This section provides a set of guidelines based on the model suggested by Lipnevich et al. (2016). This model actually goes beyond whether formative feedback works and attempts to investigate when, where, and how feedback works. The model also focuses on what happens between the time feedback is received and the time when students take action. In other words, the model helps us understand why students are actively engaged in with feedback messages or not. This model is consistent with assessment *for* learning strategies because it focuses on ensuring that feedback contributes to learning.

The first issue that we need to consider is the context in which feedback is given to students. Students need to appreciate the value of feedback and feel that they are involved in a worthwhile activity. As Lipnevich et al. (2016) argue, the feedback setting is very critical for the effectiveness of the learning process. Teachers need to ask themselves the following questions: “Is this feedback coming from a teacher whom the student trusts and likes, or is it impersonal, or coming from a source that the student views as untrustworthy, or even antagonistic toward the student’s best interests? Contexts differ and they matter.” (Lipnevich et al., 2016, p. 176). In the context of a speaking activity, oral feedback is unlikely to be successful if the student feels threatened or shamed in front of classmates.

The central issue in this model is the nature of feedback itself, which includes a number of aspects. The first aspect focuses on how feedback communicates the degree of success in achieving learning outcomes. It is not recommended that evaluative information is emphasized over guidance on how to improve. For example, when providing feedback on a writing assignment, teachers should emphasize feedback that makes clear what students need to improve. The second aspect has to do with the timeliness of feedback. Teachers should give feedback at an optimal time. There are certain times where delayed feedback is beneficial for students and in other instances immediate feedback is critical for improving student performance. For example, research on oral corrective feedback has found that delayed corrective feedback has positive impact on both fluency and accuracy (e.g. Rahimi & Dastjerdi, 2012). A third characteristic of feedback is accuracy. Teachers need to make sure that feedback provided to students is accurate and adequately describes problematic areas. The next aspect has to do with the feedback tone. Teachers need to consider how students emotionally react to feedback. The same idea could be phrased in a number of ways and positively worded comments tend to have more motivating effects on student performance. Awareness of student capabilities is also required when devising feedback, specifically three areas: the current ability of the students, students’ prior success, and their receptivity to feedback. Feedback provided to students at different proficiency levels should be customized to suit their needs and preferences. Other areas suggested in the model include the focus of feedback, level of detail, feedback comprehensibility and its congruency with expectations. These issues ensure the effectiveness of feedback and its positive impact on student learning.

The second group of factors in the feedback model revolves around the *student*. More specifically, the focus is on *personal characteristics* of students, their *initial response* to feedback, and *action taken* based on this feedback. Research has shown that different conceptions of feedback contribute differently to learning outcomes (Brown, Peterson, &

Yao, 2016). In addition to cognitions about feedback, students tend to have complex emotional responses contingent upon feedback characteristics. Emotional responses might include joy, anger, sadness, anxiety, agreement, or disbelief (Lipnevich et al., 2016). Such emotions have been found to affect student performance and learning outcomes in general (Peterson, Brown, & Jun, 2015). As for the cognitive aspect, teachers should check whether students make sense of feedback and understand how this information could be useful in different target language use situations. Following initial response to feedback, students need to work on the suggested action, which is usually referred to as ‘uptake’. Taking the variables described here into consideration will improve feedback quality and by implication student learning. These expectations are challenging given the time and labour demands of providing feedback about many aspects of language learning to many students. Thus, an important area of pre-service and in-service teacher development is learning how to manage teachers’ emotional labor by “making sure they respond appropriately to these demanding, frustrating, and exhausting work conditions” (Brown, Gebril, Michaelides, & Ana Remesal, 2018, p. 201).

### 3. Conclusions

This chapter offers an overview of the concept of feedback quality in TESOL, an area that has received considerable attention in the literature recently within the assessment *for* learning framework. However, we know very little about what is meant by quality in the context of feedback. The results of research in this area are not conclusive and sometime contradictory. This is simply because of the existing variability in instructional contexts, type of data collection tools used, reliability of data collected, and inherent problems with research designs in these studies. Future research needs to focus more on how students make sense of feedback, how they react to it, and also how feedback contributes to learning. While these issues have already been investigated by many researchers, we still do not know much about how these processes are carried out. Lack of clarity and consistency in feedback research is the norm (Brown & Harris, 2018). Classroom discourse analysis could be a good strategy for looking into such issues. The chapter provides some guidelines for TESOL practitioners that ought to make feedback more accessible to language learners.

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1. Proposals for quality improvement (at least 4)

- Tone of feedback is critical for successful responses to feedback
- Teacher should make sure that feedback is clear and accurate
- Teachers should have an understanding of how feedback leads to improvement
- Teachers should understand how students make sense of feedback

2. Questions for reflection and discussion (at least 4)

What feedback has helped you as a language learner?

What feedback has been discouraging to you or your students?

What feedback is essential for beginner, intermediate, or advanced language learners?

What feedback strategies work best with your own students?