

Significance of Feedback in the Teaching/Learning Process

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Introduction

This article focuses on the significance of feedback as a tool to enhance improvement in the performance of the students. The evaluation of a student at school starts the moment a performance in any form (both oral and written) is made. This evaluation comes through small classroom unit tests, quarterlies and half yearly- (different forms of formative assessments) or final examinations – (summative assessments). Let us look at some of the issues as to why all students fail to excel in their performances and how feedback from teachers can help them to move towards a more desirable performance.

Understanding the Learning Process – A Real Challenge

The age old difficult concept of the proper understanding of the learning process continues to remain a mystery to teachers and educators. There often lies two problems with teaching, one is that we plan, observe and control the teaching but cannot do the same with learning. This is partly because learning is not in our hands, it is not even perceptible. We as teachers do not know when it is happening. It applies specially to any language teaching because here skills are being developed. However,

although we cannot see learning as it happens, we can see the result of learning. We cannot see the process but we can see the product. If someone tries to do something today and fails, and often after six attempts, the learner succeeds, it is safe enough to say that the learner has learnt to do it. What the learner was unable to do yesterday, is able to do now. The issue is not how much has been learnt, but what should matter most is that things are being learnt. In India, we refuse to accept that a learner actually learns making a slow progress.

A regular classroom is mostly occupied with a group of learners, and one teacher teaching a group, and a particular lesson. All learners do not learn at the same time, they don't learn a thing at the same pace. Some learners learn faster, some learners learn slower. It is uneven. Teaching is uniform but learning is not uniform.

Reflecting on Assessments

It can therefore be justified that we have to wait for the product to evaluate the performance. Here, by product we refer to assessments.

According to Sally Brown (2005):

“Assessment is probably the most important thing we can do to help our students learn. We may not like it, but

students can and do ignore our teaching; however, if they want to get a qualification, they have to participate in the assessment processes we design and implement.”

Therefore, it is important to see what the assessment process will do to help rather than impede learning. The two types of assessments in academics are the *formative* and the *summative* types.

A *Summative Assessment* plays a critical role in the data or information gathering process. It is the instrument that provides us with the information of the final progress of the learner at the end of a semester or an academic year. Summative assessments are the high-stakes tests that decide whether the learner can be considered adequate to move to the next level of learning. Yes, the after effects are problematic because after the completion of the assessment and evaluation process, some students are rewarded with an 'A' or 'B' grade whereas others are reminded over and over again that they are 'D' or 'E' grade students. Categorizing individuals is to persuade some that they are good and desirable from the view point of the system and others that they are bad, and therefore unwanted.

Summative assessment is the final decoration and there is not much option to improve on. However it has been observed that teachers spend more time on designing summative tests. Students can learn without grades but cannot learn without formative assessment and the feedback that comes from it. A formative assessment hence, maybe considered as checkpoints along the way.

Formative Assessments

It is a well-accepted fact that in the field of teaching and learning, feedback is integral to the learning process and is one of the main benefits that students get from assessments – more so formative assessments. Formative assessments help to identify the gaps in learning. Formative feedback can move on to address and help reduce these gaps in learners even if it is not possible to close them completely.

Unfortunately, research carried out by Paul Black and Dylan William (1998) shows that high-quality formative assessment is relatively rare in classrooms, and that most teachers do not know well how to engage in such assessment. Their study further revealed that most classroom testing encourages rote and superficial learning. Teachers, it turns out, generally replicate standardized tests without checking their suitability in their own assessment practices and therefore lack sufficient information about their students. The response of teachers on students' work is what we commonly term as 'feedback', 'correction' and at times 'grading'.

Defining Feedback and its Necessity in the Teaching and Learning Process

Feedback can be defined as the information to students on their performance and is the key factor that enhances their performance. Ferris (1999) said, “there is mounting research evidence” that students benefit from well done grammar correction. Literature on feedback was full of confident assertions and assumptions that grammar correction was the most common

norm. Hattie and Timperley (2007) note that most improvement in student learning takes place when students get “information feedback about a task and how to do it more effectively” and is clearly related to the learning goals. Its role in the learning process is to inform the student of where and how their learning and performance can be improved. As Sue Swaffield (2008) suggests, the idea of future performance being affected by information about earlier performance is central to learning. Planned learning is a prerequisite for any teaching model. Feedback should therefore be seen as a professional activity and should be done unfailingly by teachers for the purpose of determining the alignment of learning results with their teaching methods. Teachers know as part of their profession that they not only need to teach students but also test them on what has been taught and provide feedback on their performance.

The Feedback Scenario in India

Feedback methods certainly need to be improved upon in India. Feedback is most of the time ineffective because it only highlights the errors but fails to provide explanations following it. Mostly, teachers sought to give evaluative (judgmental) feedback without a descriptive (explanatory) feedback on most formative assessments or written assignments of students. It may be considered alright when teachers sought the 'flick and tick' method in the primary and secondary classes where the teacher can correct a wrong spelling or a single grammatical error in a sentence. But as

students move to higher classes their volume of writing too increases. Most of the assessments evaluate the writing skill of students. McNamara (2000) recalls “an image of an examination room, a test paper with questions, desperate scribbling against the clock”. He has also shown how testing has come a long way from just waiting to penalize the learner for what he is not able to do. It chooses to encourage for what he/she has been able to do.

Unfortunately, in India it still continues to be a pitiful state wherein learners are severely punished for minor errors or failing to turn up in class without the homework. Newspapers in recent past have been thronging with information on how young learners in primary and secondary classes have been physically abused by teachers for not submitting a desirable performance in a task. In some cases, the punishment has been so severe that it led to loss of sight or hearing in case of some students. It is true that most of these reports of physical abuse is largely from schools located in rural areas.

With all this data at hand it therefore becomes important to consider how to engage students with formative assessments and feedback and the need to reflect how feedback can be enhanced to move students to a higher level of learning.

Seventy-five percentage of all language assessments and examinations in India test writing, it is important to provide feedback on writing. Feedback on writing is therefore crucial in relation to the teaching and learning of writing. Feedback in second

language writing focuses on almost all aspects of language elements and skills related to writing such as grammar, vocabulary, content, coherence and cohesion of ideas. Writing is an important skill and is a means of developing ideas particularly for engineering graduates because tertiary education in India is in English and therefore students whatever be their educational background are expected to submit assignments and write assessments in English. The quantity of feedback on students' writing can be placed on a continuum ranging from language errors to more serious aspects of writing such as relevance of points discussed and coherence. It is not just grammar errors that teachers need to check but also look at the content of writing. Although grammatical errors can be a stumbling block to understanding students' writing, but very often language teachers are content only correcting the grammar and offering feedback on the same without looking at the other aspects of writing which can enable them to write texts rather than a bunch of grammatically correct sentences.

This method of correction maybe considered negative because a student is obviously put off when he/she finds his/her paper bleeding. Feedback in which a student does not only receive 'flicks and ticks' for grammatical errors may be more constructive. 'Written feedback', has in the past especially at the school level in India been mostly of the 'flick and tick' type- flicking through the students' books to check that they have done the work, with occasional ticks as acknowledgment and to provide evidence to the management, peer teachers, parents and the students that

the teacher has 'marked' the books. Both 'flick and tick' and 'cover everything in red' marking were often accompanied by a numerical mark or grade and a comment at the end of the work (Swaffield, 2008). It is a very common practice that can be found in the assignments and assessment sheets of students in India.

Conclusion

The sole search then depends on what can be done to make feedback effective. It is practically not possible to craft lengthy comments on each students' performance owing to large class sizes. Any attempt to make it effective then would primarily depend on the results of a diagnostic test that would help to understand the gaps and address them accordingly.

The remark provided by the teacher to a student can have a long impact on the latter's psyche. Nothing could be more damaging and life threatening in the life of a student as negative or solely judgmental feedback. In the twenty first century, as teachers it is therefore important to understand that each student in a class is different from the other in many ways and needs different kind of feedback. It is therefore highly important for the teacher to realize how the role of feedback can ensure humanistic and ethical teaching. The teacher with a more humane approach giving feedback to students on their performances in both classroom assignments and assessments can help create an encouraging atmosphere in the classroom. This initiative by teachers will also ensure that the students learn from the feedback given to them in both formative activities and assessments.

The teacher needs to adhere to prompt feedback on a particular task. However, the quantity of feedback certainly lies at the discretion of the teacher. Feedback guru, Susan Brookhart (2008) is of opinion that there is no single 'right' way of providing feedback. It is necessary for teachers to develop a 'tool kit'. Good quality feedback is always more encouraging. As teachers we should focus to provide feedback on the performance and not the person.

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