

Formative Meaningful Feedback Strategies in English and Foreign Language Writing

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We have probably all experienced the anxiety of waiting for feedback on written work, and we have also likely experienced feedback of varying quality with different learning outcomes. It is well known that individuals tend to learn more from feedback on ongoing work, called formative feedback, than from a final assessment of completed work (Sadler, 1998). But does it matter what form the formative feedback takes?

In a 2015 blog post, the well-known researcher Simon Borg (2015) seemed surprised that no teacher he had spoken to had explained their approach to feedback by citing the extensive research on this topic. With Borg, I am convinced that

foreign language teachers can benefit from the abundant research on feedback types and modes, such as best practice recommendations (e.g. Ferris, 2014) and taxonomies of feedback strategies (e.g. Ellis, 2009; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In fact, I believe that using this research to analyse our feedback strategies can help us make feedback more meaningful to our pupils. This is a core issue in my doctoral thesis (Cabot, 2021) that examines combinations of written and oral feedback (Cabot & Kaldestad, 2019), feedback reception (Cabot, 2019) and feedback provision (Cabot, 2022) in English Teacher Education. The findings of these studies raise some interesting questions I want to discuss in the following.

Combining written and oral feedback

The first question I want to elaborate on concerns oral and written feedback. Many researchers (e.g. Lee, 2013) recommend the use of oral face-to-face feedback. Such feedback need not be time-consuming. For example, Bitchener et al.'s (2005) oral feedback sessions lasted only five minutes. Oral feedback sessions can also be provided digitally (e.g. on Zoom). Moreover, Microsoft Word makes it possible to combine written feedback with audio recorded feedback. However, face-to-face feedback has the advantage of facilitating dialogues. An example from a student interview, which I conducted in connection with my doctoral research, illustrates this point (Cabot, 2019):

Interviewer:

Is there something that you did not understand in the written feedback but that became much more understandable in the conversation you had with the instructor?

Grace:

Yes, for example, the feedback “incomplete sentence”. You see that the sentence is completely wrong when we talked together. And I get the opportunity to reformulate the sentences and to check my suggested corrections with the teacher. We talked a lot about incomplete sentences and missing verbals.

As the above excerpt shows, oral feedback can be an effective strategy to make written comments more meaningful to learners.

Feedback on global and local issues

The second aspect is feedback on global and local issues. Global issues refer to grammar corrections above sentence level. Examples are comments in the margin, such as “You change tense. You must stick to either the present or the past tense” or “Cohesion: You can’t write “her Catholic upbringing” when you want to describe Frank Mc Court in this paragraph”. Local feedback refers to grammar corrections below the sentence level, such as missing apostrophes: “the *sister behaviour” instead of “the sister’s behaviour” (Eng.), verbal concord errors: “je *saura” instead of “je saurai” (Fr.) and “ich *haben Hunger” instead of “ich habe Hunger” (Ger.) or noun/adjective concord errors: “una película *divertido” instead of “una película divertida” (Span.). It seems that many teachers provide extensive local feedback and limited global feedback (e.g. Cabot, 2021). Researchers appear

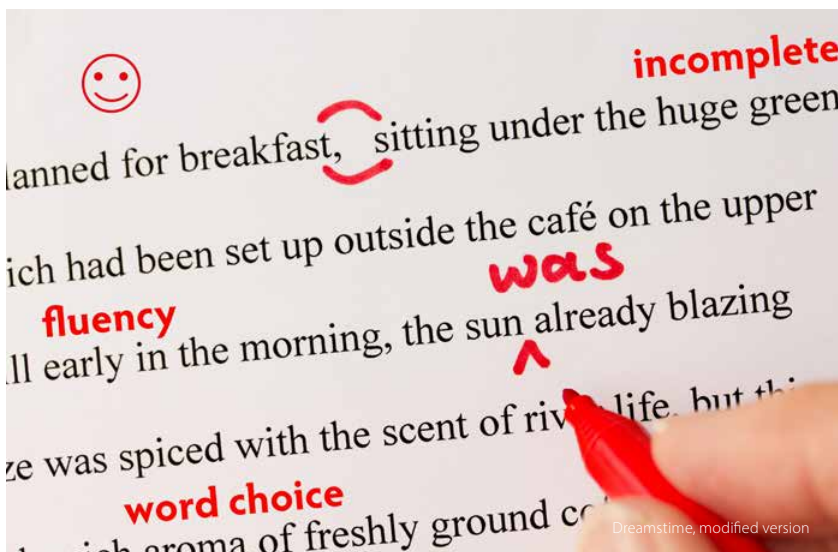
to agree on the benefits of global feedback. However, it must be kept in mind that more proficient language users seem to value global feedback more than less proficient users (e.g. Eckstein, 2013).

How much feedback should we provide?

The third question relates to the number of errors on which teachers want to comment. We talk about focused/intensive and unfocused/extensive feedback. According to best practice recommendations, focused (one to two error categories) or mid-focused (three to five error categories) feedback is preferable (e.g. Ferris, 2014). However, the teachers I interviewed repeatedly emphasised that unfocused/extensive feedback (i.e. on more than five error categories) may be legitimate for didactic reasons for students with few feedback-receiving opportunities (Cabot, 2021).

Should we tell pupils the right form?

The fourth question relates to whether language teachers should provide the correct form (i.e. direct feedback). Indirect feedback includes cases where the teacher only underlines the error. Many researchers recommend this strategy because it pushes pupils to find the right form by themselves. However, my research (Cabot, 2019, 2020) suggests that such written feedback may be overused, with pupils struggling as a result. In an oral feedback situation, it would be unnatural to say “We do not say mouses in English” if the pupil explicitly asks for the right answer. Providing the



correct forms might also be preferable when students have few opportunities to receive feedback and do not look up grammar issues. In line with Eckstein's (2013) study, less proficient students may need more direct feedback, whilst indirect feedback might be more beneficial for highly proficient language users.

How much metalanguage should we use?

Feedback can contain metalinguistic terms, such as “*nice* is an adjective and *nicely* is an adverb” (En), “*Influence* est un nom. *Influençable* est un adjective (Fr), “*Wirkung* ist ein Substantiv. *Wirkungsvoll* ist ein Adjektiv” (Ger) or “*Influencia* es un sustantivo. *Influyente* es un adjetivo”. One question that remains unanswered is how much and what kind of metalinguistic feedback should be used. In the following interview extract from my data, an EFL instructor uses at least seven metalinguistic terms to explain the term “run-on sentence” (Cabot & Kaldestad, 2019, p. 11):

Run-on sentences must be avoided. This sentence here can stand on its own. It is a fully acceptable main sentence with a subject and a finite verb. You have to use a full stop after the sentence, and you cannot ‘run on’ like in oral speech. You cannot use a comma here. Or you opt for a conjunction, such as ‘because’.

Whilst metalinguistic feedback such as this may increase concreteness, the pupils must know what the terms mean for such feedback to be meaningful. In fact, the

teacher’s recurrent explanations of terms may be beneficial to pupils’ learning because they can raise their metalinguistic awareness and provide an efficient tool for correcting their own writing.

Why not ask a question or allow pupils to “fill in the blanks”?

My research (Cabot, 2019) revealed that elicitations in written and oral feedback were generally rare, although students appreciated this feedback type. The most frequent elicitations were “reformulation requests”, such as “Can you say this another way?”. These comments can be less meaningful because students are asked to “rephrase” or “rewrite” without knowing exactly what is grammatically wrong in the sentence. However, students welcomed questions such as “How do we form the present continuous in English?” because these questions pushed them cognitively. Interestingly, in oral feedback situations, students even had opportunities to “fill in the blanks”. For example, the word “adjective” could be elicited from the incomplete sentence “No, ‘well’ is not an adverb here. It is an ...?”.

Conclusions

The recommendations (e.g. Ferris, 2014) and classifications of different feedback strategies (e.g. Ellis, 2009; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) presented in my research and this article may help teachers “design” meaningful feedback practices. We should always keep in mind that one strategy might work perfectly for one class or pupil but not for another. There is no one-size-fits-all formula (Ammar & Spada, 2006).

Meaningful feedback may mean fine-tuned feedback, “a process whereby the provider of corrective feedback tunes in to the true causal factors of an error and successfully brings the learner’s attention to the learning problem” (Han, 2001, 584). For example, we may mention in our feedback that “incomplete sentences” are more common in speech than in writing or that Norwegian uses the same ending in the present for all persons (“jeg snakker, du snakker, han snakker”), whilst other languages are more inflectional, such as French (“je parle, tu parles, il parle”), German (“ich spreche, du sprichst, er spricht”) or Spanish (“yo hablo, tú hablas, él habla”). There is no guarantee that our pupils use such feedback so that it becomes meaningful. In other words, pupils’ feedback use and reception is somehow beyond our control. What we can control, however, is our provision of feedback. Indeed, teachers must be aware of what feedback strategies work for different student needs and error types. Feedback only becomes meaningful when it is used, not only by pupils but also by teachers (e.g. Sadler, 1998).

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