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Cambridge Assessment
English



Feedback on tasks

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Feedback on tasks

Aim

This resource aims to:

- give teachers opportunities to critically review the techniques that they currently use to feedback on class activities
- provide input on techniques for feeding back on class activities
- offer alternative techniques that address the problematic aspects of some techniques for feeding back on class activities.

Time: 15 minutes

Suitable for: experienced teachers

Introduction

Recent research on factors that make a difference to learning shows that good feedback has more impact than any other factor (Hattie, 2009), and that outstanding teachers are 'excellent seekers and users of feedback information [...] skilled at monitoring the current status of learner understanding' (Hattie, 2012).

To be able to give learners useful feedback so that they can improve, teachers first need to listen and read their learners' work as often as possible during lessons so they can identify any problems with understanding, any errors that need correcting or areas that need further work or that the learner needs help with.

In view of the crucial importance of feedback, teachers might benefit from exploring their feedback practices and developing an awareness of what constitutes effective feedback.

Task: My feedback methods

The aim of this task is to give you an opportunity to critically examine the feedback methods that you use in your lessons.

1. Think about the lessons that you have taught during this week. List the different methods that you have used to get your learners' feedback on activities e.g. 'After completing an exercise from the course book, I check the answers with the class orally.'
2. Read your list. Consider the following questions:
 - Is there sufficient variety in your feedback methods?
 - Do they provide opportunities for your learners to
 - self-check their work?
 - give and receive peer feedback on their work?
 - listen to each other, agree or disagree with one another, explain or justify their answers?
 - improve the work done during the tasks set?

Typical problems

The following are some of the common practices that can limit the effectiveness of feedback.

'Teach, check, rubber-stamp, move on' (Adapted from Petty, 2006:86)

A frequent pattern in lessons consists of the following:

1. The teacher presents new input (for example, a new grammatical structure).
2. He/she briefly checks that the learners have understood the input by asking questions, getting learners to complete a short exercise, etc. usually with a focus on eliciting the right answer.
3. He/she quickly gives feedback to the learners on how well they have answered the questions or completed the task by making short evaluative comments such as 'Good!' or 'Well done!' or by correcting errors.
4. He/she then proceeds onto the next stage of the lesson.

This feedback practice has three main disadvantages: the teacher is more focused on the learners producing accurate responses than trying to understand how well the learners have understood and find out what further work is needed; by quickly correcting learners' answers with no further feedback (therefore, *rubber-stamping*), with the teacher putting an end to the discussion, hindering any potential exploration of alternative responses or reactions; it may give learners the impression that what really matters is to cover the course book/syllabus, get it right and finish quickly.

'Same old, same old'

While teachers usually plan how to set and monitor the different tasks carefully, and make sure these are sufficiently varied, they sometimes tend to give less thought as to how to manage the feedback effectively. In fact, some teachers rarely think about the feedback stages when planning their lessons. As a result, feedback is often an afterthought conducted more or less the same way every time.

It is important to plan the various feedback stages for the different parts of the lesson carefully to ensure that they are appropriate to the tasks set, they provide opportunities to get useful information on learners' progress and understanding and they offer learners variety and challenge.

Teaching tips/ideas

The following suggestions address some of the problematic aspects of the feedback practices described above. They maximise learner participation by getting them to engage in spoken and/or written dialogue with other learners frequently, allowing teachers to focus on what the learners say, write and do to obtain key feedback information. They can all be used after learners have worked on a task requiring a product or outcome, and are suitable for teachers who feel comfortable with noisy group work and confident handling learners moving about and changing groups.

1. Buzz groups (from Petty, 2006: 97, 174)

Materials: None

Time (for stage 2, the feedback stage): Depending on the task given to learners in stage 1, and the number of learners in the class, between 10 and 15 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Learners answer a question or work on a task in pairs or groups of no more than four learners, for example, the learners brainstorm the qualities that they think their ideal partner should have.
2. The teacher asks each pair or group to provide part of the answer, for example, each pair or group contributes one quality each, and explains why that quality is important to them. The teacher thanks each learner for their answer, but does not rubberstamp it – i.e. comment on it or evaluate it – until all the pairs or groups have contributed, discussed, justified and evaluated the different answers given.

Comment:

The task completion stage in pairs or small groups provides a further opportunity for the teacher to gather feedback information even before whole-class feedback.

2. Snowballing (also known as 'Pyramiding')

Materials: None

Time: Depending on the number of learners in the class, between 5 and 15 minutes.

Procedure:

1. One pair provides feedback to another pair.
2. These four join with another four and pool results.
3. Then they join with another eight and share findings.
4. The whole class has a final discussion to comment on differences, interesting points, reactions, etc.

3. Art gallery feedback

Materials: A3 sheets or flipchart paper, adhesives or drawing pins, sticky notes.

Time: Approximately 15 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Each pair or group records the outcome of their work on A3 sheets/flipchart paper.
2. The pieces of paper are stuck on the wall, and each learner or pair is given sticky notes.
3. Learners move round, read the work stuck on the wall, write a comment or a question for the authors on a sticky note, and stick it near the part of the text that triggered the comment or question.
4. Each pair or group finds their original piece of paper and reads the notes left by other learners.
5. As a whole class, learners reply to the notes verbally, addressing the comments or questions on the sticky notes, suggesting improvements and providing follow-up comments.

4. Café feedback (A variation on Art gallery feedback)

Materials: Large pieces of paper, flip chart markers or felt-tip pens.

Time: Approximately 15 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Groups sit at tables arranged around the classroom (like a café), with a large piece of paper on each table.
2. Each group records the outcome of their work on their piece of paper.
3. They then pass round their poster for groups to add further responses.
4. The class look at the results together and discuss.

5. Cross grouping

Materials: (optional – different colour counters)

Time: Between 5 and 10 minutes.

Suitable for: Experienced teachers.

Procedure:

1. As an example, imagine there are five groups of four. For each group, label the members 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Depending on the size of your class, you can change these numbers accordingly.
2. Ask all the 1s to sit together, all the 2s, 3s, and all the 4s, to discuss the findings from each group.

Alternatively, you can hand out counters of different colours to the members of each group, and then get all the learners who have the same colour counter to sit together.

Think about/discuss with your colleagues

A great way to explore the effectiveness of your feedback techniques is to video record a lesson or part of a lesson taught by you. This is because sometimes there may be differences between what we think we do in class, and what we actually do, and the only way to find out if there is a gap between the ideal and the reality is to be brave enough to watch ourselves teaching!

When you play the recording with a view to learning more about how you conduct feedback, you might benefit from focusing on two key stages:

While learners are working on the tasks you set, notice what you are doing:

- Are you actually listening to the learners as they work in pairs or small groups, and focusing on what they are saying, and how they are saying it?
- Are you looking at their written work, reading what they are writing, and noticing what the difficulties are?
- As they work, do you give them information about how they can improve?
- Are you busy doing other things, e.g. preparing the materials you will need for the next stage, taking the register, marking homework, tidying the room, etc?

Also, notice what you are doing during the feedback stages:

- Do you wait sufficient time for learners to be able to produce considered responses, or extended turns if they want to?
- Do you give them opportunities to interact with each other? How soon do you comment on the learners' responses? Who controls the speaking turns?
- Who tends to initiate?
- Who asks, and who answers questions?
- Do learners respond, react, ask questions, comment, etc., after you've given them feedback on their responses?

After watching the video, consider whether your practices create the conditions for the kind of feedback that has more impact on learning than any other factor. If you feel there are aspects that you want to improve, which specific aspects would you like to work on? And what would you like to achieve?

Further reading

Hattie, J (2009) *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, Oxon: Routledge.

Hattie, J (2012) *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*, Oxon: Routledge.

Petty, G (2006) *Evidence-Based Teaching*, Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.

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