

## **Giving effective written feedback to motivate students in ESL Classes at Quang Binh University**

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### **Abstract**

Feedback is an important component of the formative assessment process. Formative assessment gives information to teachers and students about how students are doing related to classroom learning goals. Giving good feedback is one of the skills teachers need to master as part of good formative assessment. This paper aims to describe what is meant by feedback and will explain how teachers can use effective written feedback to motivate students in learning English.

**Keywords:** Written feedback, effective, guiding principles

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## 1. Introduction

It is the fact that knowing English increases your opportunities of getting a good job in a multinational company within your home country or for finding work abroad. It's also the language of international communication, the media and the internet, so learning English is important for socialising and entertainment as well as work.

It is undeniable that motivation plays a key role in second or foreign language learning. Extensive research confirms that motivation becomes one of the determining factors of second or foreign language learning success (Bradford, [3] ; Dörnyei [8] ; Engin [10]). However, motivation in learning a second or foreign language is not as simple as we think since motivation is complex and has a 'multifaceted nature' (Dörnyei, [8]). Furthermore, motivation is dynamic, which means that there are ups and downs during the process of language learning, as Dörnyei [9] conceptualized in the three phases of his process-oriented motivational model. Teachers play a vital role in increasing students' learning through motivational support (Schuitema, Peetsma, & Oort [17]; Theobald [21]). Teachers can increase students' motivation to learn by support of students' autonomy, relevance, relatedness, competence, teachers' interests in the subject, and self-efficacy (Ferlazzo [11]). Though motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic, it is important for teacher to create an environment that motivates students' learning. Thus, college and university teachers have to alter their teaching notion and teaching methods, establish new teaching ideology, play their own role and fulfill their own task. Through powerful teaching reform, we should focus on educating and improve teaching quality and effect. Giving feedback is one of the effective ways to motivate students in learning English. Students need to know how well they are doing as they learn. This is because the knowledge that they are doing well gives students a sense of achievement which motivates them to learn more. Similarly, it is also significant to let students know when they have made a mistake so that they will learn from it and take corrective measures. Hence, it is absolutely essential for teachers to monitor students' learning and give them feedback.

Feedback says to a student, "Somebody cared enough about my work to read it and think about it!" Feedback matches specific descriptions and suggestions with a particular student's work. It is just-in-time, just-for-me information delivered when and where it can do the most good.

## 2. Objectives

The main objectives of this research paper are:

1. To clarify the importance of giving feedback in ESL classes.
2. To suggest ways to give effective written feedback to motivate students in ESL classes.

## 3. Literature Review

In term of giving feedback to students during learning process, Susan [20] has a book named How to give effective feedback to your students. In her book, she mentioned types of feedback and how to give effective feedbacks to students in general. In the paper of Giving feedback language learners, a part of Cambridge papers in ELT series (March, 2020), they confirmed the importance of giving feedback in motivating students. In addition, types of feedbacks and ways to give effective feedback to language students were mentioned. Despite the fact that there have been a number of research papers and books on this topic, there is no research done at Quang Binh university. In this paper, the

author focuses on the results after applying all the rule of giving feedback to the students in ESL classes at Quang Binh university.

## 4. Conceptual Framework

### 1. Definition of Feedback

The word feedback is found in many contexts and is not only limited to the educational definition. Askew [1] defines feedback as ‘a judgment about the performance of another with the intentions to close a gap in knowledge and skills’. This general definition of feedback can also be applied within an educational context, but the most common name for feedback within a classroom context is called corrective feedback.

According to Lyster et al. [14], corrective feedback is defined as ‘responses to learner utterances containing an error’. Furthermore, Russell and Spada [16] explain that ‘the term corrective feedback refers to any feedback provided to a learner, from any source, that contains evidence for learner error of language form’.

Nightingale et al. [10] define feedback as the ‘information given to students on their progress in their course/ unit’. The information can be in the form of marks, grades, comments, model answers, suggestions for reading, etc. Marks and grades can be regarded as a form of feedback. However, Gibbs and Simpson [12] claim that feedback based solely on grades or marks is not helpful for improving learning. Evaluation alone might not be beneficial to students, because little information is conveyed through the mark or grade, as it does not give direction on what students should do.

### 2. Types of feedback

Feedback can be given verbally, in writing, or both. It can be cognitive or ego focused. Chu, Jamieson-Noel, and Winne [6] classify feedback into three main types: outcome, process and corrective. Outcome feedback refers to the information given to the students about the quality of their final work. Process feedback is given when the work is proceeding. Corrective feedback is given when teachers provide feedback that is aimed at helping the students see errors and fix them. Teachers can assess the accuracy of the content as well as look into the tactics: motivational, evaluative and learning, as presented and discussed below.

#### *Motivational feedback*

Cowie’s study [7] showed that students felt happy about receiving positive comments and therefore carried on doing what they had done to obtain the same good feeling once again. Comments to the students can be as simple as “Excellent” and “Well-done” or those with some personal touch such as “Well-done; you’ve really mastered this skill!” Some comments demonstrate effort acknowledgement, for example “Hard work shown”.

Burnett [4] says that speaking in a positive way or acknowledging effort may indirectly help students’ learning. Burnett’s study found that students who frequently got this sort of feedback tended to have more satisfaction with the classroom environment and have a more positive relationship with the teacher.

#### *Evaluative feedback*

Evaluative feedback is a summary for the learner of how well he or she has performed on a particular work. This feedback is often in the form of letter grades, numbers, check marks, symbols and/or general comments such as ‘good’, ‘excellent’, or ‘needs help’.

This type of feedback is represented by giving a grade or mark to indicate the different performance of students’ work so that they know where they stand in relation to other students. Feedback can be counter-productive when students compare their marks or

grades. Assessment for learning is founded in part on the idea that students should be encouraged to view their current level of work by how it compares to their previous levels of work, to emphasize the progress and improvement shown in their current efforts. As with the motivational level, the evaluative level is considered unhelpful for improving the learning process, as there is not enough information provided to students on what they need to work on (Smith and Gorard [19]). For the low achievers, the effect could even be detrimental. Giving a bad grade without explaining the reason(s) to students might harm the self-esteem of the low achievers and might bring the students into a cycle of failure (Black et al.[2]). This does not help the high achievers either, because they would not know which particular part(s) of their work is good. When more information is provided, students will be able to develop further from where they are or at least maintain similar standards in their next piece of work.

#### *Learning feedback*

Feedback can be in a form that provides the students with information on how to improve their learning. This type of feedback focuses on students' achievements relative to the defined learning targets. It explains to students why certain work is good and provides suggestions on how they can improve (Chappuis and Stiggins [5]). Not only can this type of feedback provide guidance, but it can also encourage learning by involving students in thinking and making their own decisions using the suggestions given (Cowie [7], Black et al. [2]). To make this type of feedback useful to students, it has to be presented in a positive way (Hyatt [8]). Feedback that assists students with their learning should be informative.

## **5. Research Methodology**

This research is designed to meet the objectives of the study. In order to achieve this purpose, a number of previous research papers and materials have been collected and examined differently in various times.

An observation was also applied, by which the author could gather knowledge of the researched students through making observations of the students' reaction after being given feedback.

Since the main point of this study is to find out the ways of giving effective written feedback to motivate students in ESL classes, descriptive method is chosen as the main method. The descriptive method describes the rule of giving effective written feedback to motivate students.

## **6. Results of the research paper**

After collecting the information from different materials together with the experiences of the author in teaching English to students at Quang Binh university, the results are concluded as follow:

### **1. Guiding principles for giving quality feedback**

Effective feedback should help students reduce the discrepancies between their desired and actual levels of performance. It helps students make appropriate planning to achieve the desired performance, if they have not yet achieved it. There are some guiding principles for giving quality feedback:

#### *Adequate detail*

Feedback needs to be sufficient with adequate and specific details. Feedback is more useful if it gives students directions on how they can improve their work. The wording of feedback should be easy to understand.

#### *Appropriate timing*

Feedback should be given on a regular basis and as soon after the learning activity as possible. In normal circumstances, delayed feedback has less effect on improving students' learning because students may have already moved on to a new topic.

*Focus on learning*

Feedback directed to the personal characteristics of students could be damaging to students' self-efficacy, which might negatively affect effort and persistence with tasks (Schunk [18]). Self-efficacy also relates to academic achievement (Thomas et al. [22]). Therefore, feedback should focus on the task and actions that students have undertaken that are deemed controllable by students, so that their self-efficacy would not be harmed.

*Match assessment objectives with criteria*

It is important for students to know the assessment criteria. When the criteria are explained to students, feedback can help them to work more in order to succeed in doing the task. The importance of knowing the criteria and offering feedback according to the criteria is that it is how students discover gaps and find strategies for closing them. Without the criteria, students' efforts to improve would be haphazard.

*Require students' act on feedback*

Make sure that students act on the feedback given. Convey the message to the students that they are the ones who play a vital role in their own learning and that they are the ultimate decision-makers of their own learning.

*Establish students' self and peer feedback ability*

Teachers are the usual people to give students feedback. However, helping students become effective assessors is as important. Teachers should help students to develop the ability to give themselves and their peers feedback.

## **2. How to Give Effective Written Feedback in ESL classes**

Written feedback is a genre all its own; word choice matters; tone matters. It is about choosing words and phrases that show that the teacher values the student as a person who learns. It is about choosing words and phrases to support students in seeing themselves with a scholar's identity (self-efficacy for learning) and as active and strategic in managing that learning (self-regulation). And it is about giving feedback that, when possible, helps students decide for themselves what to do next. According to Susan [20], there are three main principles a teacher should know when giving feedback:

*Clarity*

Clarity is important; students need to understand the feedback information as the teacher intends it. Students have different vocabularies and different backgrounds and experiences. The criterion for clarity is whether the writing or speech would be clear to the individual student. Good feedback clarity should use the following guidelines:

- use simple vocabulary and sentence structures
- write or speak at the student's developmental level
- check that the student understands the feedback

*Specificity*

Teachers must decide how specific to make their feedback: not too narrow, not too broad, but just right. It means using specific vocabulary in written or oral feedback. The student should know what the teacher thought was great and also why he or she thought so. This information will help the student draw conclusions about the writing choices made in constructing that introduction and encourage the student to use them again.

The following are some good choices about feedback specificity:

- Using a lot of nouns and descriptive adjectives
- Describing concepts or criteria

- Describing learning strategies that may be useful

### *Tone*

Tone refers to the expressive quality of the feedback message, and it affects how the message will be "heard." The tone of a message is conveyed by word choice and style; these are much more than just linguistic niceties. They communicate underlying assumptions about students. Tone can inspire or discourage. It's important to choose words that imply that students are agents and active learners—the captains of their own ship of learning, as it were.

The following are some good choices of tone and word choice:

- Using words and phrases that assume the student is an active learner
- Asking questions
- Sharing what you are wondering about

An important point to keep in mind is that it's not kind to always be positive when some criticism is warranted or to take a coddling tone. However, it is always appropriate to be positive in the sense of "lighting the way forward." This tone suggests, first off, that there is a way forward and that the student is capable of taking it. If you tell a student something is wrong, make suggestions as to what to do about it.

When you give students information that they can use to improve, and they see and understand that they can do it, students will experience feelings of control over their learning that are so positive they'll prefer constructive criticism to head patting and comments like "Good job!" This feeling of control over learning is true self-efficacy. It is the foundation of motivation for learning.

Word choice should be respectful of students as persons and position them as active agents of their own learning. The words you choose as you talk with students will affect their identities. Monitor your tone and word choice, practicing until it comes naturally to phrase things in a way that communicates confidence in your students as learners

## **7. Conclusion and Discussion**

In conclusion, feedback can be very powerful if done well. The power of formative feedback lies in its double-barreled approach, addressing both cognitive and motivational factors at the same time. Good feedback gives students information they need so they can understand where they are in their learning and what to do next - the cognitive factor. Once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have controlled over their own learning - the motivational factor.

Good feedback contains information that a student can use, which means that the student has to be able to hear and understand it. Students can't hear something that's beyond their comprehension, nor can they hear something if they are not listening or are feeling like it would be useless to listen. Because students' feelings of control and self-efficacy are involved, even well-intentioned feedback can be very destructive.

Good feedback should be part of a classroom assessment environment in which students see constructive criticism as a good thing and understand that learning cannot occur without practice. If part of the classroom culture is to always "get things right," then if something needs improvement, it's "wrong." If, instead, the classroom culture values finding and using suggestions for improvement, students will be able to use feedback to plan and execute steps for improvement. It is not fair to students to present them with feedback and no opportunities to use it. It is not fair to students to present them with what



seems like constructive criticism and then use it against them in a grade or final evaluation.

Writing good feedback requires an understanding that language does more than describe our world; it helps us construct our world. Consider the worldview implicit in this comment: "What did you think about when you chose that topic? What were you trying to accomplish?" It implies the student is someone who thinks and that the choice the student made had purpose. It invites the student to discuss the choice and presumably go on to discuss whether the paper can accomplish what was intended. It positions the student as the chooser and as someone who can have a conversation with the teacher.

## 8. Suggestions

In order to reinforce the reality of the proposed suggestions to give effective written feedback in ELT in this paper, a research on a large scale is, therefore, needed. All of the rules mentioned need to be experimented in other institutions and university outside Quang Binh university. Teachers should adjust feedback for different types of students to get the best effects.

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