

# How Effective is Our Feedback? Feeding Forward and Self-Regulation

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## Abstract

Giving and receiving feedback is based on a number of stages, procedures, and factors that could determine whether the feedback is effective or not. The key stakeholders of feedback are the tutor and the student, who could work together towards building bridges, such as holding dialogues, giving and receiving constructive criticism. Ideally, feedback is not a one-way, top-down approach, where the tutor 'commands' the discourse, whilst the student is merely a passive recipient. In whatever form it is delivered, the feedback that is passed on to the student should be more than 'correcting' the work; it could involve a communicative approach whereby the tutor passes on salient information that the student may utilise to sharpen his or her work. Hence, the possession of feedback is not solely relegated to the tutor. Instead, there is a transference where the student claims ownership of the feedback, and thus becomes responsible for its implementation. The responsibility to do so should not be perceived by the student as though he or she were doing a favour to their tutor, but an action which is undertaken for their own personal benefit and gain. Rather than feeding 'back', it is transformed to feeding 'forward', as the tutor provides suggestions that help shape future writing or assigned work. This paper, which is the result of a doctoral study conducted by the author, aims to present some benefits and challenges of feedback. Whilst exploring various areas of feedback, it suggests that, by revisiting practices, perceptions, and conceptualisations, there can be a shift towards feed forward and eventually offer the possibility of harnessing students' autonomy and self-regulation.

**Keywords:** *feedback effectiveness, feed forward, self-regulation, autonomous learning.*

## Introduction: Feedback variables and effectiveness

The domain of feedback is multifaceted and, for a number of reasons, can be a source of contention for both educators and students. There are a number of variables at play, and these may impinge on the effectiveness of feedback, such as whether it

translates into better-quality writing. Research indicates that there are at least four variables that might affect effectiveness: the timing of feedback; the type of feedback (whether it is directive or facilitative); the media (this refers to the format, whether it is spoken, written or online); and the load of feedback 'correction' and comments (which refers to the amount of information) (Handley et al., 2011, p.544). Part of the research conducted in a post-16 Maltese context (Xerri Agius, 2017) focused on the four variables above, as well as the language of feedback, which has emerged as a *fifth* variable that might shape feedback implementation. For this research, which was part of a doctoral study completed in 2017, a grounded theory approach was adopted. The data, which was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews, was analysed inductively, without *a priori* assumptions. The methodological framework and data analysis led to emergent patterns and the creation of a themed codebook, which consequently shaped the findings and discussion.

### **Variable 1: Timing of feedback**

Discussing and reflecting on the type of feedback that students receive and what occurs after it is in their hands is crucial because feedback does not merely serve the purpose of correcting students' work and making them aware of their faults. Feedback may also be used as an integral tool in fostering the students' ability to be self-critical and self-sufficient.

The first two suggested feedback conditions that can influence a productive learning environment are timeliness and clarity of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). The former has emerged as essential in influencing its subsequent implementation. However, very often the teachers and students in the researched context felt that there were time delays between spoken and written feedback (Xerri Agius, 2017).

The time delay refers to the amount of time between writing the essay, discussing it in class, the essay being marked by the teacher at home or at the workplace, and the essay being returned with comments in the following session (so approximately two weeks go by before the student receives the feedback). Parkin et al. (2012) suggest that 'close proximity' between writing and feedback, such as through an online portal, would make the feedback 'more meaningful' (Parkin et al., 2012, p.966). Buckley (2012) concurs that retention is not affected if feedback is 'delayed by one, two or three days' (p.244), but there is less likelihood of retention if teachers provide feedback on students' essays *more than seven days* after the work has been written or handed in. A time lapse between spoken and written feedback can lead to the value of feedback being lost.

### ***Variable 2: Type of feedback***

The second variable focuses on the different types of feedback, which may be directive (also known as summative), or facilitative (also known as formative) (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The former entails correcting students' essays, and is almost always accompanied by the assigning of marks for assessment purposes. mark for assessment purposes. Conversely, facilitative feedback is meant to guide students to address their errors or issues for future writing. Engaging with formative feedback can promote self-assessment in that students become more responsible for their development. This is part of a constructivist perspective aimed at promoting formative rather than summative feedback. For example, comments would include an explanation rather than merely point out what is missing or 'wrong' (Sadler, 1989). Orsmond et al. (2013) corroborate this action by stating that 'if students are not engaging with the feedback provided then it is less likely that improvements can be made in the future' (p.242). For students to be more engaged with the feedback, they could be guided to understand the perimeters and definitions within which it operates. The language of feedback is related to this.

Another bifurcation of feedback is direct ('explicit written correction') vs. indirect (errors indicated through a code or underlining) (Srichanyachon, 2012, p.10), with the latter being more focused on fostering student autonomy and allowing them to plan for future writing. Indirect feedback is more meaningful because it enables students to reflect on improving writing with specific foci (Miceli, 2006).

### ***Variable 3: Media of feedback***

The next variable is the media of feedback, on which there are divergent views, with those who believe spoken is more effective than written feedback, and vice versa. Ideally, formats of feedback are varied and balanced between spoken and written, whilst also including feedback provided in a digital format and through online portals. In more innovative settings or where long-distance learning is involved, feedback can be transmitted as audio feedback, such as a podcast or audio feedback (Gould and Day, 2013). Yet, the research conducted in the post-16 context mentioned earlier (Xerri Agius, 2017) indicated that most teachers and students prefer one-to-one and face-to-face interaction. This is corroborated by Guichon et al.'s (2012) analysis of Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis, which promotes the idea of 'understanding why conversational interaction can help develop learner language competence' (p.182).

Irrespective of the form within which feedback is presented, recommendations are 'to be clear how assessment relates to learning objectives' (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.274). What is more, students themselves 'need to be clear, too' of such objectives

(Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.274). By integrating different modes of feedback into one's practices, one can gauge what works best with students, depending on the situation, task, and students' aptitude.

#### ***Variable 4: Load of feedback***

The penultimate variable refers to the load or amount of feedback. More is not necessarily better. In the research conducted locally (Xerri Agius, 2017), students considered that facing an essay replete with comments and error correction can be daunting and disheartening to follow up on for future work. Similarly, Court (2014) expressed concern with the quantity-over-quality debate, suggesting that conciseness of feedback could prove more helpful than copious amounts of comments. Feedback could be presented as 'detailed, explanatory comments' but there is a contradiction, because this too often leads to 'sheer quantity... [which is] largely viewed as unhelpful' (Court, 2014, p.331). Research (Xerri Agius, 2017) suggests that the ideal and more realistic number of comments is *three*, because students would not be overwhelmed by the amount, the comments would be more easily remembered, and the foci for improvement would be more manageable.

#### ***Variable 5: Language of feedback***

The last variable is the language of feedback, which includes elements such as the actual wording within which feedback is couched, the tone of voice, and the body language used by the tutor when communicating the feedback. The language used in the comments is crucial in preparing the students' reaction to feedback. It is suggested that students' development 'is likely to be enhanced if they receive some clear constructive feedback' (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.274). Ideally, comments do not 'focus [solely] on the negative', are not 'too general or vague', and most importantly, are not 'unrelated to assessment criteria' (Weaver, 2006, p.379).

When the language of feedback is couched in straightforward language, is delivered clearly and with goal-oriented foci, and is communicated in a friendly, supportive environment, it may have a seminal role in helping 'students to achieve goals to a greater extent than they would without peers or tutors' (Merry and Orsmond, 2008, p.11).

#### ***Feedback aims and effectiveness***

If not addressed consciously and mindfully, the above variables may disrupt the implementation of feedback insofar as effectiveness is concerned. However, despite

the above variables that may impact such effectiveness, one should not negate the transformative role that feedback can play in shaping students' autonomy. Rather, by understanding the types, foci, and modus operandi of feedback, the way to refine the methodology and enhancing the benefits can be paved. By commencing with the aims, and honing the intended targets of feedback, one can shape the methods and bolster the delivery of feedback.

The aims of feedback can be short-term or long-term; for example, improving spelling or superficial errors falls in the first category, whereas mastering higher-order skills, such as cohesion and logical argumentation, are long-term outcomes. Overall, seminal aims of feedback are: to mentor students so that they improve or sharpen the quality of their work, and so that they are on task; to demonstrate that learning has taken place; to fulfil the learning outcomes; to help students become autonomous and, eventually, to guide them towards self-regulation. Below are the principles of good feedback (Table 1; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p.7).

Good feedback:
• helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
• facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
• delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
• encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
• encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
• provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
• provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

**Table 1 Principles of Good Feedback**

### **Research on the effects of marks vs. feedback**

The power of feedback means that it can be more than just words scribbled on the side of a student's piece of writing. Feedback could have more bearing on a student's progress than marks, despite the fact that the latter are what determine whether a student has passed or failed an assignment, test, or formal examination. Research suggests that although marks do 'inform students about their individual performance', they do not provide support or guidance because they 'barely exhibit any of the characteristics of feedback described as beneficial' (Harks et al., 2014, p.272). Instead, it is contended that 'planned' and 'specific' feedback 'is more likely to influence student performance' than marks alone, or feedback which is 'general or haphazard' (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.120). Process-oriented feedback has 'a more positive [and] indirect effect on students' interest and achievement change', when compared to grade-oriented feedback (Harks et al., 2014, p.284).

There may be latent psychological effects in assigning marks to work produced by students, for both the latter and tutors. Marsh (1992) argues that when a teacher assesses a student's writing by giving a mark, the former might feel 'regretful and embarrassed' upon realizing that the mark could 'undermine the trust that was developing with the student' (p.45). Despite such misgivings, students expect a mark and when it comes to feedback, they presume it to be the scrutiny of mechanical errors and language use; very few students expect the teacher to emphasise other central issues apart from those at sentence level (Campbell, 1998). However, the research data (Xerri Agius, 2017) revealed that students welcomed constructive criticism and feedback comments that went beyond mechanical errors. The majority of participating students expressed themselves positively when talking about their teacher's feedback; they mostly indicated that they try their best to utilise the feedback, although it is not always possible when the comments are too task-specific and have no bearing on the next task. It was suggested that feedback could be couched in terms that make it less specific and more universally applicable to different tasks. However, overall, the students felt that feedback offered them more of a safety net to fall back on than marks when preparing for the next task. Nonetheless, this did not always allay students' concern with marks over feedback, mostly in relation to the lack of time they had to apply the feedback (there are usually no opportunities of revising any work already handed in). As noted from the data, feedback was often described in terms of marks received (apart from the comments), which might underline the pre-existing culture of a concern with grades in Malta (Xerri Agius, 2017).

Conversely, feedback on its own can still make an impact, and there have been studies (e.g. action research) where the mark is delayed until after the student has tweaked the work based on the feedback. This system requires students to re-edit or improve their work following the tutor's suggestions, and only when this has been registered and the work re-submitted would the tutor release the mark. This is known as an 'adaptive release of grades', which is a process where students are given feedback to reflect and act upon before receiving their grade (Parkin et al., 2012). Although in theory this is a laudable system and may work with a handful of students, it can be met with some resistance because it inevitably leads to more marking and more writing for the tutor and students respectively. However, an online-based system may be set up so that the re-writing, re-submitting, and re-marking are more efficient and less time-consuming.

### **Research on feed forward and self-regulation**

One seminal aspect of the term 'feedback' involves reflecting on the terminology; the emphasis seems to lie on '-back'. If one looks back on what the student has

done or produced, then it is retroactive feedback (Merry and Orsmond, 2008). Even if it underscores the strengths, it is mostly limited to underlining the student's weaknesses. If the feedback is restricted to marking errors or shortcomings in writing, it will be confined as it were on paper, boxed in the student's file, and whatever benefits emerge from it or are intended cease to develop. Instead, feedback can be proactive (Merry and Orsmond, 2008), or focused on what can be done to improve future writing. This is meant to propel the student to act on the feedback suggestions, transforming the 'back' to 'forward'. Looking ahead and believing in one's ability to out-perform oneself in the next task is empowering and encouraging to the student, who could be on the way to self-regulation.

Feedback may be used to locate and explain issues in writing that have emerged, or in order to point out areas for future development. One central aim of the concept of 'feed forward' (Walker, 2009; Price et al., 2011, p.880) is for 'learning from feedback to inform future assignments', in a way that the teacher's suggestions and recommendations 'can be utilised by the student to inform their efforts in future assessments' (Orsmond et al., 2013, p.242). This notion is arguably underestimated or neglected in discussions on feedback.

A suggested link between feedback and learning is in the form of a 'continuum' where the two become 'intertwined' (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.82). For this, three steps in the form of questions are suggested: 'how am I going?', 'where am I going?', and 'what to do next?' (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.102). These questions lead to self-regulation as they shift the responsibility onto students, who become critics of their own work. Feedback given along a continuum may 'serve different purposes'. This does not only include the 'correction of errors, but is also 'concerned with developing new ways of knowing' (Price et al., 2011, p.880). In order to enhance such development, feedback needs to be usable.

### **'Usable' feedback**

For the student to come closer to self-regulation, it is essential that any feedback is 'usable' (Walker, 2009). This means that the student can understand, interpret, and adopt feedback comments in future assignments. Such comments would enable students to work on improving their writing by also improving their self-perceptions (Walker, 2009). In the light of the principle of usability, one of the aims of the doctoral research was to shed light on the type of comments that are considered useful in shaping future writing. The area of 'usability' is relatively untapped, as Walker (2009) observes that not enough analysis has been conducted on which comments are 'usable', and subsequently feed forward enough to boost self-regulation. In particular, Walker (2009) emphasizes the 'nature' and the 'quality' of feedback as two elements that have not been researched enough.

## Conclusion

Despite the lack of ample evidence of its full washback effect on learning and writing, there are opportunities for further research and implementation of feedback, whilst promoting feed forward and self-regulation practices. Feedback is and needs to be recognized as ‘a key element of the scaffolding provided by the teacher to build learner confidence and the literacy resources to participate in target communities’ (Hyland and Hyland, 2001, p.83). It has been noted that feedback has a pronounced effect on student cognition and motivation (Brown, 2001; Dweck, 2000; Murtagh, 2014). Cognitively, it provides students with information so they can understand their progress in learning and where to head next. On a motivational level, most students develop or gain a sense of control over their own learning and feel more confident. In this way, feedback is not only an indicator of performance but a tool to boost students’ motivation and make them feel more supported within the classroom or school environment (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). To this end, teacher feedback can serve as a powerful resource to retool students with necessary skills in the writing and self-regulation processes.

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## Bio-note

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