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“USING TEACHER FEEDBACK TO FOSTER STUDENT MOTIVATION IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN THE ALBANIAN CONTEXT”

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ABSTRACT

The enhancement of student motivation is an issue of major concern to teachers and education researchers. In Albania, teachers are concerned about the low motivation level of high school students in learning a second language. This study explores the effectiveness of feedback focusing on a predominantly pedagogical issue – how teachers can use their feedback to foster student motivation in teaching English as a second language. The literature review on feedback gives the background to the importance of using feedback to foster student motivation. This study finds out the key components of feedback, such as dialogic feedback supplemented by written feedback, the use of rubrics and success criteria. An implication of this study is that much should be done to prepare teachers for making use of feedback to foster student motivation. This study will contribute to assessing teachers how to make use of motivational feedback, which is an important element of pedagogy in their everyday practices.

Keywords: Feedback, foster, motivation, student, teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The enhancement of student motivation is an issue of major concern to teachers and educational researchers. In Albania, teachers are concerned with a large number of students per class, lack of interest in learning, poor class discipline, which creates great difficulty for teachers to assess and deliver feedback. . This situation provides a good setting for our research because it would help teachers develop feedback that is more effective for the students and foster student motivation. As reviewed by Dörnyei (1994a, 1994b, 2001a, 2001b), there are motivation strategies teachers can adopt in a language classroom. One of the motivational teaching strategies is the provision of motivational feedback to students by their teachers. This study aims to investigate and answer the research questions:

- How is teacher feedback motivating?
- Which are the key features of quality feedback?
- How does this study contribute to help teachers in making feedback a motivating tool?

The literature also looks at the application of feedback as a motivating tool, followed by discussion of what constitutes 'good' feedback. A framework of effective feedback is generated at the end of this study as a conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is conceptualized as information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. They propose that: "A teacher or parent can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement, and a learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of a response. Feedback is a "consequence" of performance'. (p.81), the definition given above describes different possible kinds of feedback delivered by different parties, including teachers, peers and parents. This study focuses on teacher feedback. Black and Wiliam, (1998) claim that recognizing a desired goal is one of the three elements in feedback: 'When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: recognition of the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two' (Black and Wiliam, p.141). In order to close this gap, learners need to improve and receiving constructive feedback is the means to this end.

Cowie (2005) maintains that the formative shaping and improving of a student's competence is equivalent to closing a gap between their actual level of competence (present position) and a reference or desired level (desired goal). Similar definitions are put forward by Wiggins (2004) who proposes that feedback is information about how well we did in light of some goals. In addition, Miller (2002) suggests that teacher feedback is the consequence that follows a student action and shapes future behavior. Feedback is an important aspect of every school day and plays a critical role in the teaching and learning process. The primary purposes for providing feedback are to reinforce appropriate learner behavior, let students know how they are doing, and extend learning opportunities. The authors stress the importance of feedback to pave the way for student improvement in light of their current performance. To sum up, Hattie and Timperley (2007) propose that the main purpose of feedback is to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance and a goal. They maintain that effective feedback must answer three major questions: 'Where am I going? (What are the goals?) How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), and Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?). (p. 86). The above are definitions of feedback in relation to assessment, teaching and learning. In this study, it is argued that despite this understanding of feedback as a means to bridge the gap between desired performance and current position,

constructive teacher feedback should be contextualized. This paper explores teacher feedback-giving practice in the Albanian educational context; this is followed by a section, which discusses the corresponding constraints on effective feedback. As this study focuses on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and teacher feedback in the high school context in Albania, the following section firstly discusses the quality of the feedback following by different kinds of motivational feedback in acquiring the English language as a foreign language.

2.1 QUALITY FEEDBACK

What is ‘quality feedback’? To answer this question, Hattie and Timperley (2007) studied the effects of schooling on student achievement and then compared them with the evidence related to feedback. In this study, a different approach is adopted, studying how and to what extent students are motivated to learn by the teacher feedback delivered. The major issue of concern is student perceptions of the value and motivational potential of feedback. Feedback can be a tool to motivate students in the course of learning. The following discusses different kinds of feedback and their effectiveness. They include ‘traditional’ feedback, dialogic feedback and contextualized feedback. Teachers can deliver quality feedback to stimulate thinking, feed students forward and help students improve. They include feedback in question forms, descriptive feedback, constructive feedback – feedback with suggestions, corrective feedback and evaluative feedback.

2.2 ‘TRADITIONAL’ TEACHER FEEDBACK

In ‘traditional’ feedback-giving practice, teachers perceive providing feedback as a simple acquisition process. According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), feedback is conceptualized by many teachers as a transmission process where ‘they ‘transmit’ feedback messages to students about what is right or wrong in their academic work, about its strengths and weaknesses, and students use this information to make subsequent improvements’ (p.200). Because of such perceptions, feedback delivery is largely controlled and seen as the responsibility of teachers, so undermining the active engagement of learners. Regarding the content of ‘traditional’ feedback giving, teachers generally give a grade or mark to students.

2.3 SOME REVIEWS OF ‘TRADITIONAL’ FEEDBACK

The ‘traditional’ feedback-giving practice described above is considered inadequate by whom?. Some of the criticisms of feedback-giving practice will be followed by some constructive ways of feedback delivery. For example two-way feedback, frequency, means of delivering feedback, and content of feedback.

First of all, the frequency of and time spent on ‘traditional’ feedback giving have been judged as inadequate. It is advised that timely and prompt feedback can be of higher quality than delayed feedback. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) maintain that ‘the way forward is to ensure that feedback is provided in a timely manner (close to the act of learning production)’ (p.208). Although Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick provide a useful reference from the higher education, this serves a helpful model for Albanian teachers of EFL. It implies that in quality feedback, the

feedback is delivered following the task, if not during the task and it is important for teachers to deliver feedback in an on-going manner. It is also important for teachers to take care of all students and to monitor and evaluate their progress despite large class sizes.

Second, in ‘traditional’ feedback-giving practice, the process is generally one-way. This may be due to the teachers’ perceptions of feedback giving as a simple transmission process (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, many theorists argue that feedback giving should be a two-way process. Bateman and Roberts (1995) for example maintain that fast feedback can be done two-way, which implies that the students are taking a more prominent and active role. They maintain that two-way fast feedback can lead to greater improvement of teaching and learning via amendment of teaching delivery from feedback the students. It also ‘opens up a second channel of communication between the instructor (teachers) and students. ... Students read and value fast, reverse feedback. Through time, the frequency of teaching flaws is gradually but steadily reduced’ (p.168). This implies that two-way fast feedback would be most beneficial to both teachers and students. For students, they can receive the feedback promptly and make improvements accordingly.

Teachers, on the other hand, can identify the gaps in their teaching and make appropriate adjustments. This can be achieved if a platform for interactions between teachers and students is built, for example, in an informal gathering or a chat after an assessment is done. In short, ‘while teacher feedback can serve to specify and construct both attainment and improvement, it is through the mutual construction of achievement and improvement that a student can move from recipient to active participant in the process of formative assessment’ (Cowie, 2005, p.139).

Third, the traditional way of feedback giving has been criticized for its focus on marks and grades and little on emphasizing reflection/reflexivity and further thinking development. It also provides little information about how students can possibly improve. Wiggins (2004) argues that without better feedback in student assessment, there is little point to precise scores and value judgments and he observes that in terms of feedback, many teachers are mistaken that such general praise as ‘Good job!’ is feedback. Wiggins (2004) asserts that such praise cannot improve students’ performance, which is what feedback is supposed to do. Leahy (2005) also stresses the importance of thinking. They suggest that ‘to be effective, feedback needs to cause thinking. Grades do not do that. Scores do not do that. In addition, comments such as “Good job” do not do that either. What does cause thinking is a comment that addresses what the student needs to do to improve, linked to rubrics where appropriate’ (p.21).

2.4 THE PROCESS OF CONDUCTING DIALOGIC FEEDBACK

Criticisms of the ‘traditional’ way of feedback provided have given teachers insight into what makes teacher feedback more ‘constructive’ and helpful. There are three different ways to deliver dialogic feedback: verbal, written and non-verbal non-written:

2.4.1 VERBAL FEEDBACK

In the delivery of verbal feedback, an effective feedback strategy is ‘prompting an exchange of comments between teacher and student. In this process of comment exchanging, a two-way interaction between teacher and students is facilitated while at the same time helping the teacher to check to what extent students understand their learning objectives. It is further suggested that feedback should be delivered with ‘teacher-to-student’ and ‘student-to-student’, involving written or verbal dialogue. A ‘student-to-student’ dialogue implies the exercise of peer-assessment. According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), to conceptualize feedback as a dialogue rather than as information transmission can increase the effectiveness of feedback because students can play a more active role and use the feedback to regulate their performance. Freeman and Lewis (1998) assert that teachers should try to stimulate a response and a continuing dialogue. What matters is to generate a discussion between teachers and students so that students can develop an understanding of expectations and standards, to check out and correct misunderstandings, this approach provides an opportunity for an immediate response to difficulties.

2.4.2 WRITTEN FEEDBACK

In addition to verbal interaction with students in the form of verbal dialogue, teachers can also deliver feedback in written form. This can be provided in a structured manner with rubrics and success criteria; with open comments embedded with praise, criticism and suggestion; and in the form of journal that is more student-oriented. Written feedback is effective with the reference drawn to rubrics and descriptors. Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2003) argue that it is important for teachers to make the success criteria for evaluating any learning achievements transparent to students, so enabling them to develop a clear overview both of the aims of their work and of what it means to complete it successfully. It is suggested that since criteria are sometimes abstract, teachers can use concrete examples in a modeling exercise to develop students’ understanding of the descriptors. When investigating the role of written feedback, Hyland and Hyland (2001) found that feedback could function as praise, criticism and/or suggestion. They found in their study that while praise was often used to soften criticism and suggestion, hedges, interrogative forms and personal attributions mitigated criticism. Their study also shows that students vary considerably in what they want from teachers in the form of feedback, so that there is a need for teachers to alter their feedback in order to accommodate specific students and their needs and personalities. This gives rise to the issue of the need to deliver ‘individualized feedback’.

Konold, Miller and Konold (2004) suggest that teachers can use written feedback if they want to provide ‘individualized feedback’ to students. They maintain that for student-oriented feedback to be effective, it has to be specific and more informative than simply providing a letter grade on the paper. To facilitate a dialogic feedback-giving process when it is delivered in written form, Konold, Miller and Konold (2004) suggest the use of diaries or journals. They assert that teachers may consider using a journal that is exchanged with students on a regular basis. It is believed that this can encourage feedback and dialogue about class or homework assignment.

2.4.3 NON-VERBAL AND NON-WRITTEN FEEDBACK

A further form of feedback that is neither verbal nor written is the use of facial expression, gestures, and rewards and so on. Tunstall and Gipps (1996) have provided some examples. They suggest that there are four kinds of evaluative feedback - rewarding, punishing, approving and disapproving. Rewarding as a kind of evaluative feedback can be given in the form of treats (being allowed to go out to lunch first) and symbols (stickers, stars and badges). They suggest that rewards can sometimes be used as 'bribes' to motivate learners. Punishing is another kind of evaluative feedback. One example is the removal of social contact (Asking students to sit on their own). Approving is a positive kind of feedback, linked with the normative in relation to educational and social values. Non-verbal means of approving feedback includes physical touch such as holding students' arms and a tap on the shoulder, or facial expressions in the form of smiles and nodding. Disapproval, on the other hand, can be illustrated in using a firm tone and physical gesture such as pointing while speaking. The above-illustrated non-verbal and non-written feedback can be understood as different means of motivating (or demotivating) students intrinsically or extrinsically.

3. METHODOLOGY

The literature review has laid the theoretical framework for understanding teacher feedback as a motivational tool in TEL. This study makes use of a case study as a research design. There are three reasons for the use of the case study in this research. Firstly, as the nature of realities is complicated and contextually socially constructed, a naturalistic case study provides room for more value-bound inquiry. Secondly, case study allows a variety of means of data collection, both quantitative and qualitative; it is not confined to any one particular source. Thirdly, this study aims at providing a source of evidences to support existing theory, in particular motivation theory and the role of teacher feedback.

3.1 SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

THE SETTING

This study was undertaken in a single setting in a public high school in Durres, Albania. It is a school with over 1200 students. There were four Albanian English teachers in the school at the time of this study.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND

The school used Albanian as the medium of instruction. Although teachers needed to use English in English lessons, for the lower level classes, teachers compromised by using English with Albanian translation when needed. Sometimes teachers needed to adjust their language choice according to the situation of different classes. When they observed students were unable to follow English instructions, they switched to using Albanian. All the participants, including the teachers and the students, were clearly informed of the purpose, nature and means of data

collection of the research. They were always welcome to make enquiries and they were free to withdraw at anytime if they did not feel comfortable continuing. The participants were informed that all the data gathered were strictly confidential. , The students were ensured that such data would not be exposed to the teachers concerned, so they felt comfortable to share their ideas freely during the interviews and when answering the questionnaires. The use of pseudonyms ensured anonymity and all the data were labeled carefully to keep everything secure.

3.3 INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Instruments for data collection include interviews, questionnaires, teacher reflections and feedback-giving episodes.

Interviews were one of the major sources of data in this study When preparing for the data collection, an interview guide was prepared which made the interviewing process a little more structured, at the same time making the interview as rich as possible. With an interview guide, the topics and issues were identified and the guide helped ‘to assure comprehensiveness in the data gathered and also makes collection somewhat systematic’ (Sowell, 2001, p.346). There are two objectives in the conduct of these interviews. First, the overall findings gathered were shared. Then, some clips of the feedback episodes were shown to teachers to demonstrate some good practice, while in the meantime initiating a discussion between teachers to make suggestions about what makes teacher feedback motivating to students as well as ways to improve their feedback-giving techniques.

The questionnaire was based on the theories of psychological approach of motivation and the components of motivation proposed by Assessment Reform Group (2002a). The questionnaire was adopted because ‘it offers considerable advantages in administration – it presents an even stimulus, potentially to large numbers of people simultaneously, and provides the investigator with an easy (relatively easy) accumulation of data’ (Wellington, 2000, p.102). In the first part, questions were set in order to gather some background information from the respondents. Questions are about the feedback-giving practice of teachers such as the frequency, audience involved in the feedback giving, the kind of feedback given as well as how students perceived teachers’ attitudes when receiving the feedback. The findings provide useful information in understanding students’ perceptions of teacher feedback.

The teachers took turns to be the observer and then commented on the peer teacher’s feedback-giving practice in several areas. They included the language of feedback, the strengths of the feedback-giving practice, as well as areas for improvement. To offer more opportunities for teachers and students to give and receive feedback, and provide more room for improvement in teachers’ feedback-giving practice, there were two cycles of observations of students’ performance and feedback giving.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The first stage of data analysis was conducted to explore students' perceptions of motivational feedback. The findings helped identify factors that influence students' perceptions, addressing the first research question this study rose – How is teacher feedback motivating? Data was also extracted from the students' interviews and the feedback-giving episodes to examine how students perceived feedback in the learning process. In the second stage, drawing referencing from Halliday's framework (1967, 1974, 1975), the feedback-giving episodes conducted were analyzed in terms of the three contextual variables of context of situation – field, tenor and mode. Data was also extracted from the teachers' reflections and teacher interviews. This stage of analysis captured some linguistic data and evidence drawn from the feedback-giving episodes that help identify factors attributing to motivational feedback. The third key stage of data analysis focused on the suggestions given by students to teachers regarding what they should do to make feedback more motivating, addressing the third research question posed in this study.

3.5 FINDINGS

The different sources of data collection helped substantially in triangulating the interpretations of findings. The first stage of data analysis focused on the identification of motivational feedback that drives students to learn. This stage of data analysis also focuses on how students perceived motivational feedback in the learning process. The findings address the first and second research questions, what is motivational feedback? In addition, which are the key features of quality feedback?

The second key stage of data analysis was conducted focusing on the feedback-giving episodes, drawing on quality feedback. This stage of data analysis drew on the concept of systemic functional linguistics and other genre and register theories, which were found useful in informing the analysis of feedback in this study. This stage of analysis provided valuable linguistic data and evidence to address the research questions. In the third key stage, the data collected from the students' interviews were gathered. It includes suggestions given by students about what they thought teachers and students could do to make feedback motivating. They gave suggestions in areas including the content of feedback, the feedback-giving techniques and the use of language by teachers. It helps address the third research question, what do students think teachers should do to make feedback more motivating? Following these three key stages in the analysis of data, the three research questions are to be addressed.

3.5.1 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF MOTIVATIONAL FEEDBACK

These data provide the views of students to understand what circumstances they would feel motivated when and after hearing teachers' feedback. These data help identify factors that drive students to learn and factors that influence students' perceptions of motivational feedback. It also identifies the roles students themselves play in making feedback motivating. The findings revealed that students agreed most to the following three statements,:

- Teacher feedback encourages me to keep trying.

- Teacher feedback makes me feel that I am directed by others.
- Teacher feedback helps me value myself as a learner.

The questionnaire result also revealed that students agreed least to the following:

- Teacher feedback makes me feel that I am a failure.
- Teacher feedback makes me feel proud of myself.
- Teacher feedback makes me feel that I am in control of learning.
- Teacher feedback makes me feel capable of evaluating my own work.

3.5.2 WHAT TEACHERS PLANNED TO DO IN THE FEEDBACK-GIVING PRACTICE?

To achieve the above goals, teachers in this study carefully investigated how they were going to deliver feedback. When giving feedback, teachers followed the four categories suggested in the research plan of their action research. They aimed at making their feedback more effective. These four categories were questioning, describing, advising and evaluating.

Questioning refers to asking the students questions. In this study, the analysis focused on the number of questions asked, what words were in the questions and the choice of open questions and/or closed questions. When a question was asked, students' responses were also analyzed in terms of the completeness of their responses and the number of contributions the students made. Describing refers to teachers describing the students' performance. The content of teacher description differed, so might include areas such as the content, interactive skills, postures and gestures students had in their speech and discussion. They might also include details about students' appearance, manner, facial expressions and body language. Their grammatical competence and speaking skills were also areas of interest. Advising is another function teachers included in their feedback. It refers to how students can possibly improve. In this aspect, the use of modal verbs and the suggestions given by the teachers were analyzed. Teachers might also make use of conditionals to phrase their advice.

Evaluating denotes where students are in comparison with their previous performance. Teachers might try to refer to some of students' previous oral practices. Sometimes, marks were given to indicate whether they had improved or not. Teachers might also refer to success criteria to evaluate students' performance.

3.5.3 WHAT TEACHERS DID IN THE FEEDBACK-GIVING PRACTICE?

The findings focus on the content of the feedback. When presenting the data in this regard, the section also explores the difference between what the teachers planned to do, what they actually did, what teachers thought they had done, and what students perceived the teachers had done.

3.5.3.1 THE KINDS OF TEACHER FEEDBACK

The findings revealed that teachers often gave students comments only. Their usual practice was to give comments before or after giving a grade or mark. Teachers seldom gave students only grade or mark. Students were also asked whether teachers gave them written or verbal feedback or both.

From the questionnaire, students also showed a low level of agreement with viewing teacher feedback as a means to help them evaluate their own work (Teacher feedback makes me feel capable of evaluating my own work.) This reflects their perceptions of teacher feedback as a tool to help them self-regulate. This may sound contradicting to what was suggested earlier as students agreed substantially that teacher feedback helped them value themselves as a learner, because a successful learner should be able to evaluate his own progress of learning.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The important relationship between teacher feedback and student motivation, in particular the impact of teacher influence on student motivation is captured in the reconfiguration of the relationship between feedback and motivation. Teachers are a very significant party in the students' learning process; this study provided evidence supporting the use of teacher feedback to motivate students to learn. It also suggested ways in which teachers can utilize this motivating tool. An implication of this study is that much can be done to prepare teachers for making use of feedback as a motivating tool. One of the ways is to integrate feedback delivery skills as a crucial element in pedagogy in teachers' professional development activities. As for pedagogy, this study has revealed how teachers can deliver teacher feedback that motivates students to learn.

Findings in this study have revealed that technical and interpersonal aspects of feedback delivery are equally important. For technical aspects, this implies that teachers need to acquire some feedback delivery skills to motivate learners. Interpersonally, the relationship between teachers and students, and how students perceive their teachers, can also determine how students interpret the corresponding feedback. Findings from this study therefore support what is proposed in the literature reviews – two- way dialogic feedback is more effective than 'traditional' way of feedback delivery. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) conceptualized feedback as a dialogue rather than as information transmission; Freeman and Lewis (1998) found that teachers should try to stimulate a response and a continuing dialogue; found that an effective feedback strategy is prompting an exchange of comments between teacher and student.

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