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Moving to more than editing: A checklist for effective feedback

A B S T R A C T Providing feedback on student writing is a much debated topic about which one group of researchers argues that it is ineffective, while another group remains convinced that it is, while at ground level teachers and lecturers simply carry on 'marking' texts. The author of this article argues that both sides of the argument have valid contributions to make and used the arguments both for and against feedback to create a checklist for effective feedback practice. Adhering to this checklist should counter most of the arguments against feedback, while supporting and improving the positive arguments for feedback.

Keywords: feedback, second-language writing, process approach to writing, consciousness-raising, error, input, correction, second-language learning, language awareness

1. Introduction

Providing feedback on student writing is one of those teaching activities which are considered a 'given' in most teaching institutions in this country. Students expect their texts to be marked without really considering why they expect it, and then often simply discard the feedback since they do not have the skills to interpret and understand the feedback and use it to improve their future writing (Spencer, 1998:208; Hyland, 2003:218). So teachers almost mark mechanically, apparently without considering why they do it, apart from knowing it is expected of them. This in brief and general terms is the position 'on the ground' in SA, despite a long-ranging global debate about the effectiveness and practical use of providing feedback on student writing (see Ferris, 2003:120 and Truscott, 1996).

Dealing with feedback is somewhat of a catch 22 situation: the problems with providing meaningful feedback are numerous, but positives attributed to feedback are also plentiful, and the arguments for and against feedback all cite studies to prove their positions. Some of the problems include arguments over a focus on form (see Spencer, 1998:62; 76 and Ellis, 1996:653), the generic nature of feedback (James, 1997:257), students' inability to spot recurring patterns of errors in their writing or to distinguish between more important errors and less important errors (Wible, Kuo, Chien, Liu & Tsao, 2001 and Spencer, 1998), and students' inability (Hyland,

2003:218) or unwillingness (Hyland, 1990) to use it. Feedback has also been found to confuse learners (Monyaki, 2001:66, 74), often does not have a clear purpose (Moletsane, 2002:27) and could lead to avoidance (Munchie, 2000:49). In some instances it does not lead to revision (Paulus, 1999:266), is sometimes insensitive (Spencer, 1998) and does not appear to lead to independent learners who are able to use the feedback to improve their writing (Munchie, 2000:49 and Monyaki, 2001:76).

On the other hand, feedback is expected by society and learners alike (Spencer, 1998 and Storch & Tapper, 1997:245) and has been found to enhance learning (Hyland, 2003:219 and Askew & Lodge 2000:2), improve writing (Hyland, 2003:218) and reduce errors (Ferris, 2002:17). It could also be used as a tool to counter fossilisation (Louw, 2006:59) and be used as a strong motivating factor (Moletsane, 2002:32-33), encourage communication and rewriting (Lyster & Ranta, 1997:41) and be used for consciousness-raising (see James, 1997:257 ff; Louw, 2006:64).

Accepting as a premise that both sides of the argument have valid arguments and empirical evidence, this article attempts to break out of the binary opposition between the two camps by creating a synergy of the two opposing views in order to present a 'how-to' checklist for effective feedback, with an explanation of the criteria on the checklist. The net effect is that criticism against feedback could wane when the practice of feedback is corrected and used in a more meaningful manner.

2. Methodology

The checklist for effective feedback reported on here resulted from a thorough literature survey investigating the arguments both for and against feedback, as well as the various techniques with which feedback is provided. Effective marker practice was also investigated and techniques found to be effective were analysed to see why they are effective, while arguments against feedback were analysed to find the source of the problems raised by the objectors. Very often the problem turned out to be the *execution* of feedback rather than the *notion* of feedback as such, and the feedback checklist therefore aims to rectify poor practice in order to provide better and more effective feedback.

3. What exactly is feedback?

The first obstacle to overcome when talking about feedback on student writing is the definition for feedback as no two researchers seem to have exactly the same idea when using the term. Since one's definition for the term *feedback* and the subsequent use of feedback is closely related to the concept of *error* and as both terms will be used throughout the article, it is important to define them at the outset of the argument.

There are numerous distinctions between the two definitions, but a close analysis reveals the distinctions to be mostly cosmetic or highly theoretical. In essence, the term 'feedback' has two main definitions in the literature and is generally used to refer to any correction by a lecturer (implied by Moletsane, 2002), or any response to a text by any reader (Hyland, 2003, 1990 and 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; and Askew & Lodge, 2000). In practice, both definitions aim at providing the learner with information that would enable him or her to adapt to a certain standard of language use, with the teacher as 'knower' of what that standard pertains. The main

difference between the two definitions lies in the amount of information provided. An all-out correction may provide less information than a well-structured explanation, and it may provide less learning opportunity as well. The amount of information provided should therefore assist in the communication process between the creator of the text and its audience. In this case, the communication aimed at the text creator also has the aim of facilitating his/her learning.

Communication is never a one-way process. In the 'writing-as-process'-approach, much emphasis is placed on the meaning of the text and the fact that the meaning of a text is not simply created by the writer *but co-created by the reader*. Feedback given by the reader should be indicative of the way an audience would experience the text. The problem with this is that the general audience of a text (average readers) would most probably not recognise all the errors in a text, and feedback is still a tool to provide learning as well.

In this approach, feedback is ideally a 'ping-pong game' (Askew & Lodge, 2000) of comments going back and forth between the reader and writer until near perfect communication is created. Feedback may be provided in different formats and may differ in intensity and purpose, and one can therefore conclude that feedback is part of a communicative process, in which a knowledgeable person about a *language* and a *subject* (teacher/lecturer) provides information on different levels of language use and content to a learner of the language or subject. The process of feedback can therefore be graphically illustrated as follows:

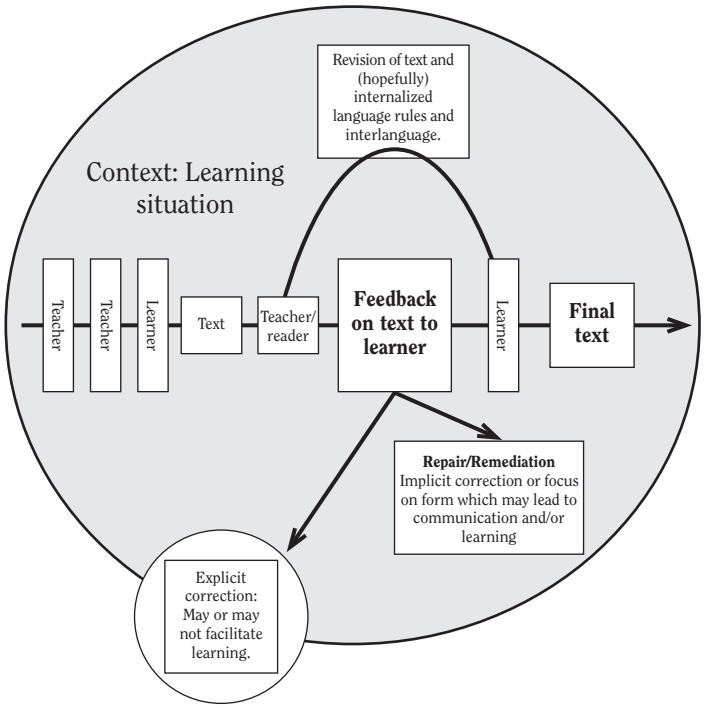

Figure 1. The communication timeline of feedback on writing in a learning context.

In figure 1, the communication timeline of feedback in a learning context is illustrated graphically.

Within the larger context of a learning situation, a teacher or lecturer will give a writing task to a learner. The specific situation will determine the goal of this writing task, which may or may not have a specific language-educational motive. It may only be to test a learner's knowledge of a specific topic, or it may be to evaluate the learner's writing competence, or even to test a specific style of writing. It may also be to see how well learners have understood a teaching objective such as mastering the passive voice for example.

The learner will receive the writing task either orally, or in written form and may or may not know the specific goal of the exercise. The learner then creates a text, which may or may not contain certain errors (based on the definition of *error* below, all texts do contain some errors), and returns it to the teacher, or maybe a fellow student (reader) for their comments.

The fellow student reader or teacher then provides feedback on the text. This feedback will differ in method and the specifics it focuses on. It may be either (or a combination of) *repairing feedback* leading to communication between the learner and reader, or it may be *explicit correction*. If explicit correction is considered to be the same as explicit instruction, the value thereof is debated (see Spencer, 1998:69-75 and Ellis, 1996:653).

In some teaching situations, this is where the process for this specific text will stop. The *first* version of the text will also be the *final* version. In other situations (specifically the process writing approach) the learner will have to revise the text and again return it to the student reader or teacher (see Krapels, 1990). During this revision process, the learner may learn something about the topic, about writing or even about his/her internalised rules of language (see Ellis, 1996:30 for an explanation of these inter-language rules). Feedback in this context can be considered effective if the learner in fact, *learns* something about his / her use of language, style or even the topic.

This does not mean that feedback can only be effective in a process writing approach. In situations where the first version of a text has also been the last, the possibility still exists that students may use the feedback to revise their internalised rules of language. In effect, they will have to refer back to the feedback on a previous text to enhance a different future text. Applying this technique can get very difficult – especially if the student never looks at the feedback. In situations where a process approach to writing is not practised, something should be done to ensure that students still utilise the feedback. Students should somehow be forced to not only look at, but also use the feedback they receive.

Given this context a working definition for feedback is:

> Feedback constitutes any mark by an external reader on the text. The mark may indicate something that is considered to be wrong, or something that is considered less than optimal. Feedback may also indicate instances where the reader is satisfied or impressed by something in the text.

From this definition it is obvious there is a focus on indicating instances where a text could be improved, but which are not necessarily wrong. One should be careful of simply focusing on incorrectness as this would not be effective feedback. There is a much greater opportunity for learning if the marker also focuses on parts of the text that could be improved – i.e., indicating something which may not be inherently wrong, but which could have been better. Only if

'error' includes something that could improve, real learning starts to take place. Consequently, it is essential to link the definition for feedback in which the facilitation of learning is central, to a working definition for 'error', which is defined for the purposes of this article as follows:

> An error is any instance in a text which is incorrect language use, or language use which is not inherently wrong, but which could have been better.

With these two definitions in mind, the checklist for effective feedback practice is presented.

4. What is effective feedback practice?

The checklist for effective feedback is a work in progress in that some of the requirements are at present still difficult to achieve. Others may need a change in attitude from teachers and markers alike.

In essence, effective feedback should:
1. be clear and understandable;
2. be consistent, complete and thorough;
3. be correct;
4. indicate error status;
5. aim at improvement, not just correctness;
6. be a learning opportunity;
7. be purposeful;
8. place responsibility on the learner;
9. encourage communication and rewriting;
10. encourage language awareness;
11. be individualised;
12. be time effective; and
13. be searchable/ archiveable/ recordable and allow for research.

While the checklist is necessarily short and cryptic in order to function as a practical checklist, each of the criteria merits some discussion and explanation.

4.1 Feedback should be clear and understandable

Feedback being understandable is really stating the obvious. The theory makes sense, but the practice is a different story. In Louw (2006) the term *hieroglyphics* is used to refer to squiggles, lines, circles, question marks and ticks commonly used as feedback on student writing. While it is true that students are often able to identify an error if it had simply been indicated to them, research has shown that students are sometimes also unable to identify an error which has been indicated (Louw, 2006:134-146).

Likewise, what exactly does a tick indicate? A student can guess a lecturer was satisfied with something, but the exact nature or object of satisfaction is not clear so the action taken cannot be duplicated – was it a correct sentence structure, a satisfaction that a difficult word was spelled correctly, or was it an indication of agreement with an argument?

Indicating more than one error in the same way is also not effective (compare Ellis, 1996:585 and Nwaila, 1996:83). Hieroglyphic feedback often falls into this trap by, for example, encircling

more than one type of error simply to indicate that an error had been made. In effect then, the student is in the same position as when an error was indicated, but not identified.

In addition to an error being clearly identifiable, feedback markings should not be all over the text, making the feedback and the text illegible. Some texts are full of errors and adhering to this guideline can get tricky. If all errors are to be identified, some student texts do not leave enough room for all the feedback. This may especially be true for second-language students. Difficult though it may be, this is one of the most important guidelines. If a student cannot even decipher feedback or if they fail to distinguish one comment from another, they cannot act on it. Due to the negative and uncritical attitude most students have towards feedback and rewriting (Spencer, 1998:73), one can speculate that the least bit of confusion may be the final straw that results in students discarding the feedback on a text completely.

4.2 Feedback should be consistent, complete and thorough

There is an inconsistency in current feedback procedures and this can cause problems for students (simply compare the problem with the lack of conformity in the definitions for feedback and error in Louw, 2006). The method for providing feedback is not standardised – in fact there are at least 14 overlapping techniques for providing feedback (Louw, 2006:66). Different lecturers use different methods of providing feedback. In some instances *all* errors are indicated *all* the time and in some not. Certain types of errors are more likely to be treated than others and the more often a particular type of error is made, the less likely the teacher is to treat it. Teachers also sometimes indicate errors that had not been made or indicate more than one type of error in the same way (Ellis 1996:585; Nwaila, 1996:83).

This inconsistency and frequent incompleteness is a problem. If all errors are not indicated, students may assume their language usage to be correct, whereas a lecturer might have simply neglected to indicate all errors thinking it is not necessary to mark a recurring error every time it occurs. Moletsane (2002:32-33) points out that comprehensively marking all errors, every time, counters fossilisation. He also warns that it can cause confusion if an error is marked in one place and not in another. On a positive note, some students are motivated to try and lower the occurrence of errors if they note the amount of errors they have made (Moletsane, 2002:32-33).

It should be clear then that for feedback to be effective, it should not miss any errors (be that on purpose or per chance). Errors should be indicated consistently, accurately and correctly.

4.3 Feedback should be correct

Some teachers mark language features as incorrect even though it is correct, because teachers themselves have not completely acquired the language (see Buthelezi, 1995 and Van der Walt & Van Rooy, 2002:115). Given that feedback is a form of input, this is a grave problem since Krashen (1985:43-52) indicates that inappropriate input may contribute to the problem of fossilisation.

If the target language is simply learnt through communication-oriented instruction, communicative competence can be acquired before the grammatical structures of the language has been mastered, thereby increasing the risk of fossilisation (Moletsane, 2002:28). Feedback has to counter that risk. Krashen (1985:43-52) explains that fossilisation may be the result of:

- an insufficient quantity of input;
- an inappropriate quality of input;
- the affective filter;
- the output filter; and
- the acquisition of deviant forms: in order to ensure that deviant forms are not acquired, they should be eradicated.

Feedback is seen as a way to provide input. However, comprehensible *input* alone is not sufficient for successful L2 learning. Comprehensible *output* is also needed, and that is mostly done through speaking or writing. If done through speaking, the learner can negotiate meaning with the listener (which can be seen as a form of feedback). If done through writing, however, the learner has no way of judging comprehensibility, if not provided with feedback. Lyster and Ranta (1997:41) warn that subject-matter teaching does not provide adequate language teaching on its own, but that 'language used to convey subject matter needs to be highlighted in ways that make certain features more salient for L2 learners'.

Feedback is therefore an important source of input and it is important that input be of the quality of language the students are required to acquire.

4.4 Feedback should indicate error status

Often in marking, no indication is given of the level of importance (status) of the error (Spencer, 1998). A student would have to guess how severe his/her problem is. A marker may also be fooled by plenty of typing errors, in an otherwise good text. A typing error for example, is not a high level error since it is more of a nuisance than a hindrance to communication. Errors of syntax or word choice can, however, create much bigger problems by jeopardising the comprehension of the text.

4.5 Feedback should aim at improvement, not just correctness

In keeping with the definition of error, feedback should not only look at things which are wrong. Feedback is a form of input. If that 'input' is only a comment on student output, a student is never encouraged to explore the language to get to know more of it. An overemphasis on incorrectness is therefore counter-productive for the learning process.

Feedback is also a type of consciousness-raising whereby learners are reminded where they do not have the target language features under full control. If handled incorrectly, learners will not see their errors and the lecturers' feedback as a learning opportunity, but instead try to strive for 'perfect' language use. Instead of experimenting with the language, they then stick to what they know they are capable of, resulting in the undesirable effect of avoidance (Hyland, 1998:264).

This overemphasis on correctness is not only an issue of language, but also of argument and style. Students seem to be conditioned to believe that 'revision' refers to 'correcting'. Louw (2006:134) found that students often simply exchanged a word with a synonym when asked to give support for a statement. Students therefore tried to 'correct' a surface element without understanding that they were supposed to improve the overall argumentative qualities of the text.

If students and lecturers alike are aiming at improvement instead of only correctness, more attention should be paid to the content of the writing instead of just focusing on the language (surface elements) thereof.

4.6 Feedback should be a learning opportunity

Despite the call for correctness of feedback and thoroughness of feedback, a marker should never just become a proof-reader who focuses on incorrectness. An excessive focus on incorrectness is counter-productive for the learning process. Feedback is a type of consciousness-raising whereby learners are reminded where they do not have the target language features under full control. If handled incorrectly, learners will not see their errors and the lecturers' feedback as a learning opportunity, but instead try to strive for 'perfect' language use, which may once again lead to avoidance as explained above. This is counter to what is sought after with feedback. As mentioned earlier, feedback is part of input and as such should be an input opportunity.

As early as 1979, Selinker and Lamendella claimed that extrinsic feedback may assist in language learning. This is, however, a controversial statement, as there are almost equal numbers of researchers who have raised their voices for and against feedback. Lately it seems as if the tide is turning in favour of feedback. This may have to do with a change in feedback techniques based on the growing attention given to the subject since the 1980s. Techniques are getting better and teachers are more aware of what NOT to do. The problem, it seems, has to do with *connecting* feedback and learning. Due to teacher awareness and techniques such as corpus analysis and error analysis, feedback can now enhance learning if used correctly (compare Wible *et al.*, 2001).

Lately more and more evidence points towards the effectiveness of feedback. Hyland (2003:219) mentions that 'studies which measure student improvement longitudinally after error correction in terms of accuracy … suggest that students who receive error feedback over a period of time do improve their language accuracy'. Askew and Lodge (2000:2) have come to a similar conclusion in their report on seminars on effective learning. They found that feedback is important in supporting learning at individual, group and organisational levels. They observed that a focus on feedback was popular and that the notion of feedback seems unproblematic. Askew and Lodge (*ibid.*) also observed that people had different perceptions of feedback and its functions and processes based on their perceptions of learning. Feedback should be seen as a crucial feature of teaching and learning processes and should be considered an element in a repertoire of teaching techniques and connected strategies to support learning (Askew & Lodge, 2000:1).

The way to support this learning is by simply being a guide to recognise what has been done wrong (or which could be better), in order to prevent new errors. However, note that feedback on its own is not sufficient. Askew and Lodge (2000:1) warn that 'learning is supported by a whole range of processes, one of which is feedback'. Feedback for the sake of feedback is not effective teaching, but should be an ongoing intervention strategy which is not simply aimed at the here and now (Monyaki, 2001:14-16). This trap of short-lived focus is easier to fall into than one may think. Hyland (1990:279) found feedback itself to become the focus of the action, instead of learners acting on it. When working with large class groups, for example, teachers may also be tempted to just finish their marking in order to get a grade for all their students, without considering the teaching implications of the rushed job. Teachers willingly degrade themselves to proofreaders and spelling checkers because that is all they have time or energy for. Clearly then it is not part of a teaching strategy, but just some mechanical action that goes

with the territory. An ideal feedback technique should therefore also remind the marker of his/her purpose and role in the communication creation process.

Many researchers have found that students fail to use feedback; mostly because they fail to understand it, or do not know how to use it. In some cases it would also not make any difference on their marks, so they do not see any use to it. Feedback can only be a learning opportunity if *used* by the students, and they should therefore be forced in some way or the other to use the feedback they have received. A learner who simply 'corrects' everything the teacher identified as an error, is not engaged with the negotiation of meaning or the 'ping-pong game' (Askew & Lodge, 2000) of text creation. It also degrades a teacher to a proofreader or spelling checker. Students/learners should use feedback for more than just correcting 'bad text' or errors, as feedback should aim at creating not just not passive 'correctors', but thinking and learning learners who can use this knowledge to produce better / more correct work in future written assignments.

Moletsane (2002:30) and Munchie (2000:49) speculate that students may be afraid to take a risk because of previous feedback [also compare Hyland (1998:264) on avoidance]. Spencer (1998:56; 62; 109) also found that students are likely to omit an idea or construction if they are unsure about the correct action on a specific comment, even though the comment may be easy to understand. This is clearly not making use of the learning opportunity, and the challenge is therefore to motivate (or force) students to use the feedback they have received in order to explore language and not just stick to what they know.

4.7 Feedback should be purposeful

Marking for the sake of marking is ineffective, and lecturers and teachers should consciously decide on the purpose of marking and then use it as such. Feedback should be an intervention strategy and not simply aimed at the here and now (Monyaki, 2001:14-16). As mentioned above, Hyland (1990:279) even found that feedback itself, rather than the learners acting on feedback, becomes the focus of the action. Moletsane (2002:27) also found that teachers tend to lose sight of the purpose of feedback, and teachers seem to see their role as to simply identify errors. This is clearly losing sight of the purpose of feedback. Teachers should never reduce themselves to proofreaders otherwise they are missing their purpose of teaching. The difference lies in focusing on the needs of students to provide them with a learning opportunity, versus a lecturer focusing on his/her 'duty' to finish marking a set of assignments.

A problem with lecturers' comments is that the lecturer reads the text expecting something specific – it could be that he/she understood the assignment much differently from the student. This is clearly a mistaken purpose for feedback. Feedback should have a clear pedagogical purpose and should not just be negatively inclined by looking for incorrectness or personal preferences.

4.8 Feedback should place responsibility on the learner

A lecturer, when providing feedback, provides input, but it is still up to the student to use that input to his/her own advantage. Feedback should therefore aim at creating thinking and learning students, not passive 'correctors', disengaged with the negotiation of meaning. Munchie (2000:49) and Monyaki (2001:76) found that learners often indiscriminately use a teacher's comment, which implies a lack of critical processing and evaluation of feedback. Munchie speculates that this lack of evaluative and decision-making reasoning may reduce the impact and long-term

effectiveness of feedback and revision. Spencer (1998:73) also found an uncritical attitude in students' reactions to feedback and she also warns that it may be counterproductive. Learning a language is more effective when learners can explore the language or is forced to think. The challenge to markers is therefore to provide feedback in a way that challenges learners to do more than 'correct'. Feedback has to provide a tool to learners that will make them aware that their text is their own responsibility (compare Ferris, 2002: 78).

Students themselves experience a vague 'rubber-stamp' type of feedback (or error correction as the only feedback) very negatively. This creates an inattention to feedback and may be an additional reason why students fail to see patterns of errors in their writing (see Hyland, 1990:282 and Wible, Kuo, Chien, Liu & Tsao, 2001:308-310). In effect then, poor feedback leads to poor motivation on the part of the students. The ideal is for students to be motivated to try and do better and not to be demotivated to such an extent that they do not even try any more.

4.9 Feedback should encourage communication and rewriting

Paulus (1999:266) indicated that an incorrect focus on feedback may contribute to ESL students' lack of writing and revision strategies. Feedback should encourage rewriting and guide students to see a text as a process and not a final product. This criterion is closely related to the criterion for student responsibility. The operative word here is 'encourage'. However, learners often fail to see rewriting as an essential part of the creation of a text; instead, they see an instruction to rewrite something as a punishment and not as an opportunity to improve their work (Monyaki, 2001:75 and Moletsane, 2002:30). It seems that the problem lies partly in the way feedback is used, and partly in the attitude (both that of teachers and learners) towards rewriting. Learners see rewriting as punishment, and no doubt teachers are reluctant to do 'double marking'.

However, as pointed out earlier, communication is never a one-way process. Feedback should encourage communication between the learner and the teacher. The meaning of a text is co-created by the reader. Feedback given by the marker should indicate the way an audience of average readers would experience the text, *but also* point out errors so as to be useful as a learning experience.

Once again, Askew and Lodge's concept of a ping-pong game of comments is relevant. The principle is sound and can be practised without sending a text back and forth time upon time. Teachers should just be aware that one reading of a text is often not sufficient and should be willing to mark it at least twice. They should also not make the mistake of considering their reading of a text as the only correct one. A problem with lecturer comments is that the lecturer reads the text expecting something specific – it could be that he/she understood the assignment much differently from the student. Students also resent comments on the content of the paper, especially if the content could be considered 'personal opinion' (Spencer, 1998:71-72)[1]. Spencer (1998:55) indicates that the way lecturers read student texts is an 'upside down'

[1] From conversations with my students I have heard that some of them dread 'give your own opinion' questions. If the opinion of the student differs from that of the lecturer, they often get bad marks. Clearly the lecturer then did not want the students' opinions, but simply a rewrite of his/her own opinion.

manner: a reader normally reads a text, assuming that the text has coherence and is structured in such a way as to convey the intended meaning effectively. A lecturer, on the other hand, approaches student writing with scepticism – going against the grain while reading. This type of scepticism is necessary on the one hand because the lecturer is in a position where they can impart knowledge. On the other hand, this scepticism is not desirable when it results in communication failure or one-way (top-down) communication from the lecturer (compare Van der Walt, Van der Walt & Dreyer, 1994:14).

Top-down communication may result in feedback which is 'nasty' to students. Negative feedback is discouraging in itself. Add to that the finding that students consider rewriting as punishment (Monyaki, 2001:75 and Moletsane, 2002:30) and it should be self-explanatory that feedback should aim at being supportive. There is more to being supportive than just giving positive comments though. Askew and Lodge (2000:7) indicate that feedback may encourage competition and comparison which could be negative as some learners would simply give up trying. Askew and Lodge (2000:7) have coined the phrase 'killer feedback' for situations were the receptive-transmission form of feedback blocks learning. Such feedback discourages all further drafting, is too much and feels overpowering, does not give any help and encourages no dialogue between learner and lecturer. It seems to boil down to the issue of a relationship between the learner and the lecturer, but with large classes it is not always possible for the lecturer to know the students well enough to know who will be discouraged by a certain style of feedback.

'Nice' feedback on the other hand, is not as easy as making a tick on the paper. Feedback that is simply indicative of satisfaction with a learner's performance may prove to be unhelpful if it is given in a general or indiscriminate way (Askew and Lodge, 2000:7). They quote Brophy in saying that 'infrequent but contingent, specific, and credible praise seems more likely to be encouraging … than frequent, trivial or inappropriate praise'.

These varying student reactions to feedback should therefore be monitored and if negative attitudes towards feedback, or negative competition among students, is observed, the situation should be addressed. That is why feedback should also be archiveable and searchable.

4.10 Feedback should encourage language awareness

As explained earlier, feedback may be used to counter fossilisation. Any attempt to highlight to students where they have not mastered the target language effectively, can be seen as raising the students' consciousness about language.

Consciousness-raising is a sensitive issue, since it touches on the question of whether or not formal instruction is useful. The term 'formal instruction' refers to grammar teaching. It shows the importance and centrality attached to grammar in SLA (Ellis, 1996:611). Although there are researchers who claim that formal instruction is not useful, some research findings prove otherwise (see Ellis, 1996; Ellis 1992:232-241, and James, 1997:244). Formal instruction has been found to be advantageous for children and adults alike, and for intermediate and advanced students. Formal instruction has helped in acquisition-rich and acquisition-poor environments, evaluated by means of different tests (see Ellis, 1996:613-614). Despite numerous arguments for formal instruction (see Ellis, 1996 and James, 1997:246 and further

for a detailed discussion) there is one limitation: formal instruction cannot alter the *route* of acquisition, but only the *rate* (Ellis, 1996:631). In the end, learners who have had instruction, demonstrate higher ultimate achievement (see James (1997:244); also compare Lightbown and Spada (1999:163)).

Consciousness-raising is clearly linked to effective feedback and the trick is in providing feedback in such a way that it creates the opportunity for consciousness-raising to occur. Some researchers claim that consciousness-raising is not useful as it creates implicit knowledge, while learners use their explicit knowledge more, but consciousness-raising does have a distinct advantage, as it has been found that once learners' consciousness of a particular feature has been raised by formal instruction, they continue to be aware of that feature in subsequent communicative input (see James, 1997:257 and further for a discussion). Learning is also not developmentally constrained, 'which means that there is no fixed order in which it must be learnt: it can be learnt and taught in any convenient order' (James, 1997:257).

The other advantage of consciousness-raising is that it can go both ways. Moletsane (2002:21-22) argues that if teachers are aware of the aims of marking and are conscientious in the application thereof, marking can be of invaluable assistance to them. This means that by indicating errors in students' work, the teachers themselves become aware of the language areas where their learners have trouble (see 'Feedback should be purposeful'). If teachers are aware of the problem areas experienced by their students, they could adapt the input they produce for the learners in order to deal with these areas.

In order to highlight specific language features more effectively, feedback should sometimes focus only on specific errors without ignoring the others (see 'feedback should be thorough' for an explanation why errors should not be ignored). Thoroughness and focus seem to cancel each other out. Focusing on specific errors does, however, not imply *not marking* others. Teachers should therefore decide on a method to emphasise a specific error by letting it stand out between the others (compare Ferris, 2002:4). This is not just selective marking; one should still mark everything, but should attempt to highlight a specific error.

4.11 Feedback should be individualised

When learners are expected to correct errors in exercise passages, the obvious problem is that 'not every single learner in a class or group has committed all of the errors that are exposed. Those who have not made any or many of the errors might object to or be bored by the exercise' (James, 1997:257). It is therefore important to know which students made which errors in order to provide personalised exercises or exposure (compare Ferris, 2002:58-59). In addition, all students do not react in the same way to feedback. While it is virtually impossible to know how unknown students will react to feedback, lecturers should be aware that the same type of comment may have vastly different reactions from different students. Individual student reactions to feedback should be monitored in order to optimise teaching.

Feedback that is inapplicable to a student, will not achieve the objectives of feedback such as communication or rewriting. If a student cannot learn something from feedback, or does not need to learn something from it because it is simply too generic, the feedback will definitely not achieve the objective of being a learning opportunity.

4.12 Feedback should be time effective

Feedback will always *take* time from the lecturer, but it should never *waste* time. Feedback can be considered a waste of time when students discard it without looking at it or if the teacher does not have a clear purpose with it – in short, if feedback is not used properly and effectively to facilitate learning and improvement. I believe that by adhering to the guidelines in this checklist, feedback would not waste time on the part of the lecturer in that it would be more effective and not just a futile 'must-do' exercise.

4.13 Feedback should be searchable, archieveable or recordable and also allow for research

Feedback should be in a form that allows students to go back to it later.

A written form is not necessarily the only format in which students can return to feedback, but it is the most freely available form. The important issue here is not the format, but the fact that students and lecturers are able to return to the feedback later. One of the biggest problems in feedback practice is that students and lecturers alike are unable to identify recurring patterns of errors in student writing (Wible *et al.*, 2001:308-310). If feedback is not in a format allowing for longitudinal analysis, it is even more difficult to identify recurring errors.

Many teachers of language are obviously not interested in doing a longitudinal analysis of their students' performance or development, but the aim here is not hard-core continued research. Rather, the aim is an opportunity for the teacher and student to step back and take a more objective look at their language learning experience.

James (1997) makes a strong case for error analysis and the effectiveness of consciousness-raising. Unfortunately, most feedback ultimately disappears into student waste baskets. Seldom has a feedback system provided opportunity to study longitudinally the occurrence and change in feedback on a particular student's writing. Taking into account the immense amount of time spent on marking, this seems like a terrible waste of information. (Student portfolios are one way to counter this in that students are at least asked to keep their written assignments a while longer). The problem here is that many quite important errors may disappear in forest of other less important markings (Wible *et al.*, 2001:308-310) with the result that neither a student nor a lecturer will see the importance of these errors. Students should also be in a position where they can do 'research' on their own texts to find their personal weaknesses in order to pay attention to it. They will not do so, however, unless they see feedback as part of their learning experience and take responsibility for their own learning.

Every teaching situation differs. An analysis of different teaching situations will ensure better and more focused teaching. Large scale error analysis is not feasible to be done by teachers for every one of their classes, but if feedback is used correctly it may not be necessary to do large scale research in order to be useful. Learners may be able to do so themselves.

Ultimately, for feedback to be useful for research (both intensive research and self-evaluative research), it must be more than hieroglyphics and it must be stored in some kind of way – preferably in a searchable format.

5. Conclusion

Feedback can be effective, but the way it is currently practised, presents some problems. Feedback should be more than a mechanical action expected by students and society. It seems that what is needed is a drastic change in the attitude towards feedback (compare Moletsane, 2002:21) and perhaps more standardised techniques. If teachers and learners alike see and use feedback as an important source of source language input, it would be possible to get much more teaching and learning out of something being done in any case, every day.

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