Making Feedback Effective in a Presentation Skills Class

By Debra Jones

Feedback is an important aspect of both teaching and learning. Giving and receiving feedback is regarded as essential for students to improve their performance and also plays a role in developing autonomous learning. However, to be effective, students need to read, respond to and act on feedback. In other words, feedback needs to be an active process which engages students and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. Most research in this area has considered feedback on written work. However, the same principles apply in a speaking context. This paper describes an attempt to create a system of effective feedback in a presentation skills class using a combination of teacher and peer feedback, and self-evaluation to facilitate active student engagement in the feedback process.

Introduction

Formative assessment is based on the notion that feedback is more effective in improving performance if given during the process of production rather than on the finished product (Wiggins, 2004). Its value has been well-documented in recent years building on the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) into the benefits of assessment for learning. Yet, despite the apparent benefits of formative feedback, teachers often complain that students do not read or listen to feedback, or, if they do, they rarely act on it, missing valuable opportunities for improvement (Duncan, Prowse, Wakeman & Harrison, 2003-04; Duncan, 2007).

Another common source of frustration for teachers is that students lack the necessary skills to be independent learners. This is particularly true in an East Asian context where university students have little or no experience of independent learning or critical thinking. There is some evidence to suggest that as well as improving performance, formative feedback can be effective as a way of developing learner autonomy (Murtagh & Baker, 2009), allowing students to "self-assess and self-adjust effectively with minimal intervention by the teacher" (Wiggins, 2004, p. 3). It would seem that formative feedback has the potential to

both enhance performance and foster learner independence, thus developing an effective feedback process could have considerable benefits for teachers and students.

This paper briefly reviews current theory on feedback for learning, and then describes an attempt to implement an effective system of formative feedback in the context of a presentation class at an international university in China.

Review of current literature

Feedback is generally recognized as essential to effective teaching and learning and teachers devote a great deal of time and energy to giving feedback. Traditionally, evaluation was something done after teaching and learning were over, as a judgment on the final product, or summative feedback (Wiggins, 2004). This was often in the form of a mark or grade. More recently, there has been more emphasis on feedback given on a work in progress, or formative feedback, which allows students "to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production" (Sadler, 1989, p. 119). Some advocates of this approach argue that feedback is more effective when it gives guidance for improvement without a grade being assigned (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Others highlight the importance of students acting on feedback

received (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05), something made possible with formative feedback.

However, as studies have shown, and many teachers know from experience, simply giving and receiving feedback in itself will not automatically lead to improvement (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; Carless, 2006; Duncan, 2007). To be effective, students need to be active participants in the feedback process, rather than merely passive recipients of advice and guidance (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05; Murtagh & Baker, 2009). In addition, students need to be given an opportunity for self-reflection and self-evaluation in order to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning (Sadler, 1989; Weaver, 2006). Some research has explored the idea of feedback as a two-way dialogue between student and reviewer rather than a one-way, linear communication (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; Carless, 2006). This encourages students to think about their learning needs and identify issues of concern.

The concept of a dialogue implies a cyclical rather than a linear process (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008) or a feedback 'loop' (Wiggins, 2004) rather than a one-off response to a particular assignment. This notion of feedback as a continuum facilitates the concept of 'feeding-forward', defined by Duncan (2007, para. 1) as applying old feedback to a new task. While formative feedback is routinely used by writing teachers during the drafting and revising process, it is often seen as redundant on the final draft. Students are not likely to read or act on feedback on a final draft as they tend to see it as a finished product and, consequently, do not see how comments on a final draft could be useful to a future assignment (Duncan et al., 2003-04; Carless, 2006; Duncan, 2007). Adopting the idea of feedback as an ongoing process allows for feedback on a finished product to be carried forward to future assignments (Higgins et al., 2001; Hounsell et al., 2008).

The studies cited so far have focused on feedback on written work. Little research exists on the idea of using feedback dialogues and feeding-forward in the context of spoken English. Clearly there are differences between an essay and a presentation or discussion. Most significantly, unlike an essay, a speaking activity is not a tangible product. Unless the event is recorded, once completed, it no longer exists to refer back to. However, students are generally given feedback on presentations in the belief that it will help them improve their performance, so it would seem that the same principles discussed above should apply. If the feedback is to be effective, students need to actively engage with and have the opportunity to act on it as a means of improving performance and becoming independent learners. This paper describes an attempt to devise and implement an on-going, interactive feedback system with the following aims:

Aims

1. To encourage students to act on the feedback given on an in-class presentation by feeding forward to the next presentation.
2. To use the feedback process to develop independent learning by requiring students to set goals based on feedback received.

Teaching context

The context was a Year 1 EAP class focusing on listening and speaking. Students were required to give three group presentations during the course of the semester. They were offered the opportunity to practice the presentation during a tutorial with the class teacher before presenting in front of their classmates and the teacher a few days later.

Students received no grade for these presentations. The purpose was to develop their skills and improve their performance in preparation for the speaking examination, which involved a five minute individual presentation. This seemed an ideal context in which to implement the assessment for learning approach of Black and Wiliam (1998), since feedback was given purely to emphasize positive qualities and highlight areas for improvement, not to assign a grade. Moreover, by setting the exam as the overall goal, each in-class presentation could be seen as a step on the road towards the final goal, rather than as a separate, self-contained piece of work. This created the opportunity for a cyclical process of feedback and feeding forward as described above.

Students received both verbal and written feedback from the teacher after the practice

presentation, and had the opportunity to act on this feedback in the final presentation a few days later. In the final presentation, students were given written feedback from both teacher and peers using evaluation rubrics. The teacher feedback included comments about improvements made since the practice presentation. Based on teacher observation, students generally did act on practice presentation feedback and show improvements in the final presentation. The challenge was to go beyond that and encourage students to carry forward final presentation feedback to the next assignment in order to maximize opportunities for improvement and play a more active role in their own learning.

Figure 1. Feed-forward form

Date:
Presentation #1: Final Presentation Feedback
What feedback did you receive from Presentation #1 (write both positive and negative feedback)

What would you like to improve in your next presentation? (Choose 2 goals)
1.
2.
Date:
Presentation #2
Look at the goals you set after Presentation #1. Look at the feedback you received. Have you achieved your goals?
1.
2.
Date:
Presentation #2: Final Presentation Feedback
What feedback did you receive after Presentation #2?

What would you like to improve in your next presentation? (Choose 2 goals)
1.
2.
Date:
Presentation #3
Look at the goals you set after Presentation #2. Look at the feedback you received after Presentation 3. Have you achieved your goals?
1.
2.
How did your presentation skills improve this semester? (Think of specific examples)

What are your goals for improving your speaking skills? How will you achieve this?

Procedure

The procedure adopted to facilitate an effective feedback process is described below:

Group presentation 1

Step 1: During the final presentation of Group Presentation 1, the teacher completed an evaluation form giving comments on content, structure, delivery (i.e. body language and use of voice) and use of visual aids for each individual student. Although the in-class presentations were group efforts, each student was evaluated individually since the final presentation would be an individual performance. In addition, classmates were required to give feedback using peer evaluation forms based on the same criteria. Peer reviews were anonymous to encourage more constructive comments and advice.

Step 2: After the final presentation of Group Presentation 1 (at the end of the class or the start of the next lesson), students were given time to read through all their feedback. Using the feed-forward forms (see Figure 1), they were then asked to summarize the feedback they received and set goals for the next presentation task (Group Presentation 2) based on the feedback. This step enabled students not only to read but to think about the feedback and make decisions about what they needed to improve.

Group presentation 2

Step 3: During the final presentation of Group Presentation 2, teacher and classmates completed evaluation forms as before (see Step 1).

Step 4: After the final presentation of Group Presentation 2, students reviewed their goals and decided if they had met them, thus introducing an element of self-assessment. The procedure in Step 2 above was then repeated. Students were given time in class to read both teacher and peer feedback from Group Presentation 2, summarize it and set goals for the next presentation task (Group Presentation 3). It can be assumed that the goals set were based on a combination of self, peer and teacher assessment, although it is not possible to assert which exerted more influence.

Group presentation 3

Step 5: Before the final presentation of Group Presentation 3, an additional stage was included in order to increase student interaction. Students were assigned another classmate as a 'feedback partner'. Before making the presentation, students discussed their goals from Group Presentation 2 with their feedback partner.

Step 6: During Group Presentation 3, the feedback partner was responsible for evaluating the student specifically on their stated goals. Each student also received teacher and peer feedback as before.

Step 7: After the final presentation of Group Presentation 3, feedback partners gave each other verbal feedback on how successfully they had achieved their goals. After that, students read the peer and teacher feedback. They were then asked to summarize and complete a self-evaluation of their achievements throughout the semester and identify their strengths and weaknesses. The feed-forward form provided a record of all the feedback received, goals set and achieved, and thus helped the students to make a more informed assessment of their progress.

Feedback on the final presentation of the semester could normally be perceived as redundant. However, in this case, the students were motivated to complete this step since the speaking exam would take place the following week. For the students, the exam represented the culmination of all their efforts throughout the semester; the ultimate goal of the feedback/feed-forward process. By creating the concept of feedback as a process, the relevance of feedback and self-evaluation on the final in-class presentation was more evident.

Conclusion

In terms of its aims, the experiment was a success since students were required to engage actively with feedback by summarizing and then comparing it with their own assessment of their performance. They were also encouraged to act on feedback by setting goals for the next assignment, then assessing whether those goals had been met. In this sense, the first aim of feeding forward, or applying old feedback to a new task, was achieved. In terms of the second aim, setting their own goals helped foster an awareness of the need to take responsibility for their own progress, thus developing a degree of learner independence. As a possible extension in future, students could be asked to define what they need to do in order to achieve their goals, thereby taking the process of reflection and action one step further. In addition, it would be interesting to compare the goals set with the feedback received to see whether teacher, peer or self-assessment was more influential.

An additional benefit of the feed-forward forms was the opportunity for students to monitor their own progress through the semester by creating a written record of feedback received, goals set and achieved and future improvements needed. This promoted the idea of feedback as a continuous process as described earlier. Furthermore, the 'feedback partner' step introduced in Group Presentation 3 was effective in creating a dialogue between student and reviewer and also encouraging more student participation. In future, this step could be introduced at an earlier stage, for example during Group Presentation 2, in order to increase opportunities for a more interactive form of feedback. At present, the process described in this paper allows no opportunity for a dialogue between teacher and student and some mechanism for students to ask questions based on feedback should be included in future.

This experiment provides no evidence as to how or if students improved their performance over the course of the semester. Based on teacher observations, students did show improvement but it is not possible to say if the feedback system used contributed to this improvement. However, improving student performance was not the sole aim of this research. The main motivation was to go beyond the short-term goal of improving performance in the end of semester exam. The broader aim was to teach students something about the learning process itself and the need for them to play an active role in this process by taking responsibility for their own learning. The creation and implementation of a more student-centered feedback system was at least a step towards achieving this goal, so in this

respect the project can be judged a success. In addition, for teachers frustrated at students not reading, using or acting on feedback, it was rewarding to see feedback being used. Overall, from the perspective of teachers and students, a feed-forward approach to feedback has much to recommend it.

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