Feedback: Functions and Time in Reference to Writing

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ABSTRACT   *This paper examines the functions of feedback and the appropriate time of giving it on the leaners'
writing. Broadly, feedback has three main functions in language teaching. Firstly, feedback can prevent fossilization.
Errors leaving without correction can become a part of the learners' language system to the point the learners cannot
use the correct items in their normal output even after receiving correction. Secondly, feedback motivates the leaners to
study more, especially when it is positive. Thirdly, it aims to guide the learners to write 'reader-based prose' in lieu of
'writer-based prose'. Concerning the time of feedback, it is preferable to give it as soon as possible, especially, between
drafts in the case of writing multiple drafts.*

Keywords: *feedback, fossilization, process.*

Introduction

Feedback has a pivotal role in developing the learners' writing skill and improving the quality of their performance. In fact, it is a means for constituting and consolidating the learners' knowledge. Although the high status of feedback it has, many teachers of writing ignore its importance. They engage their students in writing activities without giving them feedback or guiding them to other types of it like peer feedback. Such an attitude affects negatively the learners' writing quality in grammar and content. Hence, it is of great importance to raise the teachers' awareness of the feedback functions to stimulate them to use it in writing classes. Besides, they should know that the time of giving feedback is a necessary factor to obtain good results.

Feedback: Definition and Function

The emergence of the term 'feedback' can be traced back to the research in the field of biology. According to Rinvolucri (1994), it was first used to describe the signals that any living being receives from the outside environment as a result of its actions. Then, one forms of feedback, i.e. reinforcement, was used in the field of psychology. Many experiments have been carried out on animals to make them adopt a certain kind of action. Those experiments followed the sequence: stimulus-response-reinforcement. An example of this is Pavlov's famous experiment in which the secretion of the saliva of a dog was connected to the ringing of a bell.

Bates (Cited from Anderson, 1989, p. 87) defines reinforcement as "the process of increasing the frequency of accuracy of a low frequency behavior or maintaining the frequency of occurrence of the high-frequency behavior". For Gagne (1970), this process involves 'reward' for a good response, and 'punishment' for a bad. The ideas about reinforcement paved the way for the current 'feedback' to take place in many fields like language teaching. Child (1981, p. 45) defines feedback briefly as "knowledge of results". Similarly, Gebhardt & Rodrigueous refer to feedback as "signals that inform you whether you have performed an action well, or whether you should modify the way you perform it the next time" (1989, p. 271). In the light of feedback definitions, it means the information which anyone receives and it tells him/her whether what s/he has done is correct, not enough, or incorrect.

Fossilization is one of the baffling problems in second language learning and it is often related to the grammar aspect. Selinker (1972) describes it as the case of getting wrong rules of language which become a part of the learners' internal language system with the passage of time. Thus, it is assumed that these wrong rules cannot be corrected at all. To avoid fossilization, Anderson asks the teachers to pay attention to the importance of the feedback process. He warns them of the bad consequences of leaving errors without treatment: "If errors and misunderstandings are allowed to go unmentioned, they might accumulate and interfere with future learning" (1989, p. 87). Hence, feedback can stop fossilization if it is given at the appropriate time.

Secondly, feedback increases the learners' motivation. Child (1981) emphasizes the role of feedback as one kind of the learners' extrinsic motivation to pursue their way in learning. He affirms such an impact, especially when the learners' performance is good. Positive feedback, like praising what the learners have done, can help build their confidence and create good feelings for active participation and

better involvement in classroom activities. It is truism that high motivated students outperform the other ones. Additionally, even in the case of negative feedback, the motivation can increase; when the learners observe that their teachers are attentive to what they write, they, especially the diligent ones, will work harder to improve their writing.

The prevention of fossilization and the improvement of motivation are two feedback functions helping develop the writing skill. Furthermore, the feedback importance has increased after the advent of the process approach (Williams, 2003). Keh captures the essence of feedback on writing:

> *Feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. It can be defined as input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision. In other words, it is the comments, questions and suggestions a reader gives a writer to produce 'reader-based prose',… as opposed to writer-based prose (1990, p. 294).*

White (1988, p. 10) notes that what is written by the learners in the first draft, such as the ideas and organization, relies on the writer's constructs or schemata. These early drafts are called 'writer-based prose'. To produce the final draft, the learners should put themselves in the situation of the readers or present what they have written to other readers to make use of their feedback. The readers may omit, add or change the ideas and reorder the organization to be clear and meet their expectations. Consequently, the production of the final draft on this basis aims at constructing 'reader-based prose'. In sum, this function of feedback focuses mainly of the writing content.

There are some features enhancing the beneficial effect of feedback. For example, Ausubel & Robinson (1969) emphasize the 'completeness' of feedback given to the learners. Detailed feedback that explains why a certain point is good or bad, works better in enriching the learners' knowledge and learning than writing only the comments: 'good' or 'bad'. Regarding the frequency of feedback, Gagne (1970) highlights that frequent feedback is favored in learning. Another feature is how to give negative feedback. Anderson (1989) advises the teacher to be careful in giving it for not hurting the learners' feelings. He asks the teacher to criticize the learners' behavior and product, not the learners themselves. Accordingly, a comment like 'This idea should be developed' is acceptable, while 'You are a bad writer' is not.

The Time of Feedback

Concerning the time of feedback, the teachers should give it quickly without lateness. Ausubel & Robinson (1969) mention that 'immediate feedback' is better than 'delayed feedback'. Similarly, Child puts it more simply, "The longer the time between completing work and being told the verdict, particularly if it is favorable, the less chance there is of the results having a motivational impact on the pupil" (1981, p. 45). Hence, time has a crucial impact on the extent of the feedback influence.

In writing task, Muncie (2000) and Raimes (1983) criticize providing feedback to the learners at the end of it. Apparently, this kind of feedback has fewer benefits because the task is over, so there may be nothing to do with it. What is more, the feeling of depression and the lack of motivation on the part of the learners may exist when they see their final drafts carrying a large number of red marks on the errors. This happens in spite of the great efforts they make in writing. Muncie agrees with Raimes (1983) on preferring giving feedback during the process of producing drafts to the end. He states:

> *One issue which often emerges from the body of research and advice on this matter, however, concerns the aim of feedback in the writing process which seems to be a fairly short-term one of helping learners to improve their drafts in order to end up with a final piece of work which is better than those first attempts (2000, pp. 47-48).*

In the same vein, McGarrell & Verbeem (2007) state that between-draft feedback is stressed in the process approach. For Muncie (2000), he distinguishes between two different teachers' roles. The teachers who correct the learners' errors in their final draft act like only judges or evaluators, and this is one of the features of the product approach. However, the teachers who give feedback between drafts act like audience and consultants as the process approach suggests.

The previous two types of feedback, i.e. between-draft feedback and feedback on the final draft, come under the category of 'text-based feedback' because they take place after a text is produced. Garcia (1999) mentions the limitations of text-based feedback for two main reasons showing its inadequacy. The first reason implies that writing new texts on new topics may present new writing problems that did not exist before in the previous ones. In this situation, the learner's knowledge about the correct forms, which was previously constructed by the teachers' feedback, may not be helpful here. The second reason is that

there are some situations in which the learners may avoid some items and ideas when they feel either unable to get the correct item and describe the ideas, or when they are not sure of them. Due to this avoidance, the learners rely entirely on the 'reduction strategies'; they write only what they think is correct and leave what they doubt. Consequently, the conclusion is: what is written in the texts represents only one part of the writing difficulties which the learners face, while the other part is hidden. To solve this dilemma, Garcia (Op cit.) suggests another complementary type of feedback called 'pre-text feedback'. This type of feedback has the essence of providing the learners with feedback before engaging them in writing tasks. It is given through motivating the learners to tell their teachers about the difficulties that hinder their way in developing their writing skill in general and in doing the writing activity at hand specifically. After discussing these obstacles, the teachers can allow the learners to do the writing activity.

Conclusion

To conclude, directing the learners towards improving their performance is one of the teachers' tasks, and giving feedback is one form of them. Feedback cannot be neglected in language learning classes owing to serving useful functions. The teachers should take the active role in the writing process and offer feedback to the learners, while they are doing the writing tasks, not after completing them. Moreover, it is better to give the feedback quickly without delay in a detailed way as possible. Finally, the teachers should discuss with their learners the problems they face in order to facilitate their performance of the writing tasks.

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The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.
~ Steven Covey