

Effective Feedback Between Instructors and Learners in College ELT in China

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Abstract: In this article, the author first describes the background of college ELT in China these years and points out the main problem of it is that the lack of effective feedback between instructors and learners. Then the author explores the possible reasons and offers some effective approaches from instructors asking learners for it, giving it back to learners and instant feedback in classroom. At last, the author highlights the necessity for further research in the field.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT); feedback; higher education; instructor; learner

1. Background

With the amazingly rapid development of China's higher education these years, English Language Teaching (ELT) has become a focus in all fields of society, for China has a great need in English professionals and employees with accomplished English skills. But the inefficiency of English teaching remains the same. Many instructors in colleges or universities have encountered such situations. They tried their best to teach their learners with hard-working preparation, clear teaching plans and careful explanation day after day, week after week. Similarly, their students or learners worked hard to listen and take notes carefully as well. Unhappy indeed was the moment when test results were revealed, as most of instructors would find that what their students had learned was not at all what they thought they were teaching. The more troubling fact is that most instructors are unprepared to meet the increasingly complex challenges they face in college ELT today.

Surely there are many reasons for the situations. For example, instructors' pronunciation is not so clear as it is thought, the unexpected factors from surroundings such as noise, or some learners' ab-

sent-mind all can be excuses. But I think the most essential point concerning it is the lack of effective feedback between instructors and learners.

Now, what does feedback mean? Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus (2000) defines it as "information or an opinion in response to an inquiry, proposal, etc". Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics (2000) says feedback is " (in teaching) comments or information learners receive on the success of a learning task, either from the teacher or from other learners". In my opinion, feedback is the information about current performance that can be used to improve future performance. It is mutual. Instructors get it from their learners to improve teaching and learners get it from instructors to enhance study. Feedback to any instructors or learners should be about the particular qualities of their work, with advice on what they can do to improve. Comparisons with other instructors or learners should be avoided. When given properly, it can encourage positive stimulus that motivates instructors or learners to action and can discourage the negative stimulus that inhibits action.

Feedback is one essential key to ELT. This is because if feedback in college ELT is of high quality,

that is to say, if it produces accurate information about instructors' or learners' achievements, then sound decisions can result and instructors or learners can prosper. But if it is of poor quality, then instruction cannot be effective and learning cannot be productive either. The fact is, many instructors have not been aware of the importance of feedback. Even today, many instructors only complain about the learners' casual attitude to study or the external factors mentioned above.

2. Why cannot instructors achieve effective feedback between instructors and learners?

2.1 There are powerful barriers which could prevent them from achieving the aim. The first barrier has been our social and psychological factors. Socially speaking, as one gets older, there is a decline in the kind of social interaction that promotes language learning. In other words, language is essential for social interaction and people generally crave such interaction. However, it is rare for adults in China to have the opportunities to meet and talk with foreigners in some places, especially the developing areas, though the situation is changing. And furthermore, the planned classroom situation has its own characteristics where learners have to get used to learning language as an academic subject (Steinberg, 1994). Many learners are bored and unconcerned about learning. Psychologically speaking, most Chinese undergraduates are between 18 to 22 years old and they are not so open-minded as Westerners or as they were children. There is some reservation in their minds. Consequently, they would be bashful if they give the wrong answers. These situations result in the quietness of the classrooms and only the sha-sha note-taking sound in most college ELT classrooms.

2.2 Another barrier relates to the increasingly larger classes these years. With the amazing rapid development in China's higher education since 1999, more and more high school graduates went to colleges and universities. It is common that there are 100 to 150 college English learners in one classroom on many campuses. Some could even extend to over 200 learners. Brumfit and Roberts (2001) note that good communication between teachers and students

can improve their mutual feedback. Nevertheless in such large classes, for one instructor to communicate with each learner is impossible, let alone to achieve effective feedback.

2.3 The third barrier regarding it is that a great number of instructors typically cannot turn to the learners for feedback. They partially think that instructors in colleges and universities are offering knowledge, but not to communicate with learners. To learn or not or learn well or badly depends on learners themselves. According to Stiggins and Conklin (1992), typical instructors should spend as much as a third to half of their available time involved in assessment-related activities. Also, feedback is the important component of assessment. Thus, a fundamental mismatch is uncovered between professional competencies and the requirements of their teaching. It makes the situations even more troubling.

3. Discussion

3.1 The importance

The troubles and barriers we are facing cannot be an excuse to let the college ELT feedback between instructors and learners alone. This is due to the fact that obtaining effective feedback between instructors and learners is essential and fundamental. As Van Lier (1988) notes, if the keys to learning are exposure to input and meaningful interaction with other speakers, what input and interaction the classroom can provide must be found out. He also points out that studying in detail the use of language in the classroom can result in seeing if and how learning comes about through the different ways of interacting in the classroom. Indeed the classroom is not a place where an instructor just carries out predetermined routines, but rather a place where various elements interact. How a lesson progresses and whether it is successful largely depends on the interaction between the instructors and learners. In the language classroom, where a target language is used as a medium of communication, classroom interaction is even more important because language is at once the subject of study as well as the medium for learning.

3.2 Now, how to improve the feedback between instructors and learners?

3.2.1 Asking for feedback from learners

To help facilitate your assessment during the interaction, consider asking your students for feedback. But, remember whenever you ask your students for feedback during the semester, you need to let them know that you 'heard' what they had to say. Review the overall message you received with your students. In addition, let them know how you will begin to alter your teaching style or the classroom environment to meet their needs more effectively. Moreover, encourage your students to take an active role in helping you create the best learning experience possible (i.e., let them know what they can do to create a better learning experience). Experience is associated with increasing instructive effectiveness for some instructors, probably for those instructors who obtain feedback about their teaching and who are flexible enough to modify their methods in response to the feedback.

You can ask for feedback from your students in a variety of ways:

- Assignments. This is the traditional and productive approach to check learners' mastering of the knowledge they have been taught. Instructors can find out weak points of their teaching from correcting assignments and take remedial measures. In the process there are two points that are worth your attention. The first one is: In large classes of over 100 or more learners, for one instructor to check all learners' assignments is incredible. Usually checking 30 copies can meet the requirements. Another one is how to correct assignments. Actually, the ability to correct--sensitively, efficiently and effectively-- is a skill that takes time to perfect. The basic principle, as Gower et al (1995) point out, is that learners learn more effectively if they are guided in a way that they eventually correct themselves rather than if they are given the correct version of something straight away.

- Stop class 2-3 minutes early and ask learners to write a response to a probe--a minute paper. This is a quick and extremely easy way to collect written feedback on what learners have learned, with only minimal investment of time and energy. A minute paper asks learners to quickly answer a question you may have, e.g., what are three key things you learned today? What was the most interesting (troubling, problematic, confusing, important) concept (idea, point,

proposal)? This strategy helps to identify highlights or trouble spots for learners and provides a quick reality check. This information also provides you with the opportunity to clarify issues from class to class.

- Informally talk to students after class (e.g. How was the class today? Is there anything you didn't understand? Is there something we could do differently next time?). Interaction between learners and instructors, particular informal interaction, is one of the most important factors in learner motivation for learning. The opportunity to know a few instructors well often enhances students' intellectual commitment and provides valuable role model.

- Ask your students for some feedback during the semester by using short feedback sheets. The following are some questions that you can include or adapt to meet your own needs:

What would you like to see changed or added?

What should the class or I start doing?

What should the class or I stop doing?

Open Comments: You can distribute the mini-evaluations several times during the semester, by distributing the questions at the beginning of the class period and collecting them at the end. This way the students have the entire class to jot down their ideas.

- Formally ask your students for feedback at the end of the semester. You can either do this during your last class with them to distribute questions that evaluate your performance during teaching. The dialogue between learners and instructors should be thoughtful and reflective. It should aim to evoke and explore understanding, and allow learners an opportunity to think and to express their ideas. Try developing questions that will reflect the specific responsibilities you had in the class and the areas of your teaching that you want to develop.

3.2.2 Giving feedback to learners

What might teachers think about when giving feedback?

The aim of feedback is to bring self-awareness and improvement. Instructors' feedback on responses given by learners is another very important element between their interactions. This stems from the fact that learners need to know whether they have correctly understood the instructors and have provided the appropriate answers. They are likely to feel frustrated

when an instructor keeps withholding feedback.

Providing feedback to learners is one of the most important responsibilities of an instructor. By providing on-going feedback, instructors can help learners evaluate their success and progress. There are a number of giving feedback forms including giving praise and encouragement as informal well done; praising individual achievements privately or in front of the class; "publishing" good work by displaying it; including it in a class magazine or using it as a model; operating a more formal grading system as part of a system of keeping track of learners' progress; setting regular tests; having discussions; giving individual tutorials; etc. You may even consider giving merit marks or small rewards of prizes for good work--though it is more appropriate with a group of young learners.

Everyone thrives on genuine praise and encouragement. When giving feedback on oral or written work, always be on the lookout for positive points to comment upon. As Gower et al (1995) state that to be effective, whether it is oral or written, feedback should be tailored to inform learners about what they have done, against the learning intention of the task rather than on other superficial features. At best, it should focus on where they achieve success, and how they can improve. Hence, try to find areas of improvement in individual learners' work and also comment on progress made by the class as a whole--work successfully completed and achievements made.

3.2.3 Instant feedback in classroom

The intent of classroom feedback is to gather information from learners about what they know and how they are experiencing their learning. The purpose of such information is to improve the learning experience for learners. Classroom feedback techniques can be used at every class, weekly, or at check-points through the semester. While end-of-course evaluations elicit learners' feedback in the way influences an instructor's choices next time when he or she teaches a course, classroom feedback provides the instructor with information he or she can act on immediately. Classroom feedback has no purposes other than improvement of teaching and learning. An instructor develops the strategies and benefits from the information he or she gathers. But actually,

only when learners are actively involved in the process of developing feedback strategies and when instructors share results with them and respond to their concerns, can classroom feedback work best. In this way, classroom feedback can provide a loop within the learning environment.

Feedback is best if it is related to the learning intention of the task rather than superficial features. When an instructor is teaching, he or she should focus on the reflections from the learners' faces and gestures. If there are head-shakings, whispers or wrinkled brows, most probably that means learners cannot grasp the points that the instructor has just said. A restatement is necessary in this case. But inappropriate explanation or over-explanation hinder rather than help learners to comprehend.

Although some instructors tend to over-explain in college ELT classrooms, questions are needed to require learners to produce the target language correctly both in content and form. What an instructor considers as appropriate contributions and errors is very important, not only in terms of getting learners to produce the target language and to engage in meaning communication, but also in terms of their understanding of how the language works. Hence, if instructors want learners to experiment, guess, and practice, they should encourage their learner's behaviours. Accordingly, when learners make a mistake, praise them for answering and then ask them to try again, tell them the correct answer, or ask another student for the answer. Welker (2003) notes that the one way to guarantee that the students will never say a word in English is to make them afraid to make a mistake. Actually if learners see their instructors quickly and often become displeased with them, they will be more nervous about speaking English and increasingly more likely to make a mistake.

Another effective method concerning feedback is tests. Tests can be a dictation, a quiz or an exam in which testing is the most important way for instructors to assess learners' work. It can assign a grade--to make a summary judgment of an individual learner's level of success or failure, but most important of all, it can provide formative feedback. Therefore, after a test has been administered and graded, it is helpful for instructors to make an item of analysis. It is espe-

cially important to do this when test items will be reused as a guideline in future teaching. By analyzing the learners' performance in tests, their progress and shortcomings are apparent to instructors.

3.3 The following are questions you can ask yourself either after a classroom activity (lecture, seminar, or laboratory) or after the course you have completed.

- How well do you think your class went? What worked well? How can you use? what worked well next time?

- If you could teach the same class again, what would you do differently? What would you do the same way?

- What do you think your strengths are? How can you build on your strengths?

- What do you learn from teaching this class?

- What made this class different from others that you have taught?

3.4 Other clarification:

Sherimin (1987) notes that feedback about progress is helpful because learning is facilitated when a learner is aware that he or she is progressing towards the goals. Critical feedback is only useful if a learner has alternatives to pursue. That is to say, there is no use giving instructors feedback about their performances unless they can do something about it, that is, unless they have some alternative course of action or behaviour.

There are other points concerning it which are also important. More effective feedback should be provided as frequently as possible, as soon after performance as possible, as specific as possible. Focus should be on the quality of the performance rather than intentions or motivations. Furthermore, learners are allowed to assume responsibility for assuming their own progress.

4. Conclusion

Both teaching and learning are enhanced by effective feedback. Without feedback, neither instructor nor learner can improve because they will not know what they need to improve or to what extent they are fulfilling their goals. Conversely, a learners' behaviour will more quickly reach the objectives if they are informed (or given feedback) frequently

about the correctness of their responses. Thus correct responses should be immediately reinforced to increase the "permanence" of learning. That is, a quick and positive reinforcement after a correct response will increase the probability of remembering the knowledge points for ever. For instance, a smile or comment to let a learner know he or she has successfully completed the task is especially good because awareness of successful completion is, in itself, the most effective of all reinforcements.

Effective feedback is associated with giving instructors and learners useful information. Yet not so much research in the field of higher education describes how best to inform both instructors and learners about the teaching and learning in higher education. There is a great deal more to be known about real-time feedback. In addition, research in the fields of interaction and assessment demonstrates only mixed results regarding the values of feedback. Hence, more research is needed to identify the constructive side of feedback in college ELT in China. Moreover, we need further research to determine why and how instructor-learner relationships deteriorate and help faculty achieve more successful relationships, what are the criteria used to evaluate performance and how the learners' performance relates to the standard etc. Better understanding of this phenomenon at the level of higher education could lead to new teaching strategies.

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