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Feedback in language learning and teaching

ABSTRACT. The text analyzes routes and ways of processing feedback as well as discusses the most important psychological, pedagogical and linguistic factors influencing the effectiveness of feedback in developing learner autonomy and determining its impact on cognitive and affective processes in the learner. It also sets out to assess the place of feedback in the evaluation of educational attainment and to identify ways of promoting so-called formative feedback, both on the school-level and in the language classroom. Implications for developing teacher autonomy via pre- and in-service teacher education are also sought.

KEYWORDS: feedback, language learning, language teaching, learning goals, educational attainment, formative evaluation, classroom assessment, teacher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-development based on the ideal of autonomous growth implies finding and following one's own way rather than imitating others. Yet success is full of surprises, a phenomenon noticed by Pablo Picasso who is said to warn Liberman, stating that success is dangerous only when one starts copying oneself as it is far more dangerous to do than copying others (Hadden 2007). Moreover, as our identity contains a relational component, for self-defining purposes we need other people. Self-actualization usually means approval or recognition by our significant others, hence the role of feedback, a concept in need of more attention now that a variety of preconceptions hinder the promotion of pluri- and multilingualism and individual learning plans are at risk due to strong influences of educational marketing.

Feedback can support the process of reflection by asking questions crucial for the development of autonomy in the now widely used triad of reflection

directed at what one does, why and how (Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017) or that suggested by Hattie and Timperley (2007) based on how one is doing, where it leads oneself and what it means for the future. It can also help to provoke pondering on preconceptions and implicit theories and undermine beliefs which block development. This may be achieved through questioning causal explanations that tend to consolidate beliefs, reducing their emotional load, targeting central beliefs strongly connected with the network of less important concepts and opinions and – last but not least – eliciting change in behavior often followed by the change in beliefs. Feedback is especially important if beliefs are central, powerful and intense (Pajares 1992).

The concept of feedback, first used in cybernetics and medicine of the early 1950s, entered the field of business in the 1960s and gained status in psychotherapy in the 1970s. In psychology and education, interest in feedback was born within the area of interaction studies and has since been understood as a direct verbal or non-verbal reaction to a person's performance. The reaction is intended to modify the next stage of that person's attitude or activity, though feedback can also be generated to motivate its receiver to maintain a desired behavior or attitude (Hattie 2008; Hattie & Timperley 2007). In behavioural approaches feedback concerned observable output only, while in the cognitivist and constructivist perspectives it targeted both internal self-regulation mechanisms and goal-oriented behaviour (Askew 2000). In second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, feedback has so far been analyzed mainly in relation to error correction. Feedback on students' learning plans and more general classroom learning has been given attention mainly within the frames of formative evaluation, while feedback on the content of the message, on attitudes or intercultural interaction has only been analyzed in the context of teacher education and mentoring (Crookes 2003; Gan 2013; Orlova 2015; Wilson 2006). Promotion of feedback on the school level and in the classroom context calls for a more detailed analysis. To examine the impact feedback can have on the interactant's attitude and behavior, a number of factors need to be taken into consideration (Harks, Rakoczy, Hattie, Besser & Klieme 2014; Venables & Fairclough 2009). The effectiveness of the modification process depends on the appropriateness of feedback giver's reaction to performance, the precision of the message, smoothness of communication flow and readiness to process new information received.

2. PROCESSING FEEDBACK – A PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Feedback can only be effective if processed by the individual to whom it is directed. This, however, depends on the motivation to engage in analyzing new information and on the type of processing. According to the Elabo-

ration Likelihood Model designed by Petty and Caccioppo (1986), when the individual concentrates on the content and argumentation used, the so-called central route of possible attitude and behavior change is selected. If, however, the individual decides to put less effort and concentrate on the credibility of the source of information or on possible gains and losses following acceptance or rejection of information, peripheral route of processing is used (Petty & Caccioppo 1986; O'Keefe 1990). The type of processing often depends on the readiness to accept information provided within the frames of oral or written feedback. If the message lies within the individual's acceptance sphere, the probability of using information in the future in order to change attitudes or behavior is high; otherwise, the individual is unlikely to make use of information provided. Eventually, feedback can be accepted, modified or rejected (Petty & Wegener 1999; Griffin 2001). In the case of accuracy-oriented performance, the effect of feedback is usually predictable, but it is less so when it comes to attitude, content or style.

Even if communication takes place and a given portion of information is acquired and processed, the effect on attitude and behavior can be positive or negative. According to the Social Judgement Theory initiated by Sherif, positive effect demonstrated in reconceptualisation and opinion change takes place not only when argument-based feedback is fully processed, but also when the error of assimilation consisting in a perception deformation occurs and message addressees change their position in favour of the one desired by the feedback giver. When, however, an opposite type of cognitive deformation takes place, the error of contrast produces a strong polarization of attitudes and feedback is not likely to be effective (Sherif, Sherif & Nebergall 1965; O'Keefe 1990).

Feedback also depends on the level of uncertainty of the message addressee. High uncertainty levels increase the readiness to concentrate on new information, although it also increases distance and blocks intimacy in the communication act. Lower uncertainty levels contribute to communication harmony and are therefore more conducive to favourable atmosphere of interaction. As uncertainty tends to be reduced in the course of verbal communication, especially if it is supported by non-verbal signals, feedback generated in direct contact is likely to be more successful (Berger 1997; Griffin 2001).

An interesting problem is that of storage and retrieval of information offered in feedback messages. Sedikides and Skowronski (2009) maintain that both self-protection aimed at defending the self and self-enhancement intended to advance the self in the environment play an important role in perceiving and processing feedback. In their opinion, self-protection "propels individuals to avoid unflattering feedback, minimize its implications, doubt

the veridicality of the feedback and the intelligence of the evaluator, poorly remember the feedback, blame others for failure, make excuses, shield themselves against the shame of performing poorly by manufacturing convenient excuses and compare themselves with inferior others" (Sedikides & Skowronski 2009: 1246). The self enhancement motive, on the other hand, "propels individuals to pursue flattering feedback, globalize its implications, praise its accuracy and the wisdom of the evaluator, construe it as positive even if it is ambiguous, remember it well, credit themselves with dyadic or group successes, exaggerate their virtues, emphasize their superiority over others, present themselves favourably to others and compare themselves with superior others" (Sedikides & Skowronski 2009: 1246).

In educational sciences, feedback is usually analyzed from the point of view of its role in developing motivation and self-esteem, modifying learning direction and enhancing learning outcomes.

Feedback aiming at eliciting and sustaining motivation was for a long time believed to be effective if offered in the form of praise. Research on ways of using educational feedback by teachers shows low levels of strategy oriented feedback and high levels of praise (Hattie 2007). Although praise may have a motivating function, its abundance can even be harmful as learners tend to stop treating it as performance oriented. As early as the 1970s, research commissioned by the UNESCO International Association for Educational Attainment (UNESCO-IEA), and aiming to identify factors correlating with educational achievement, demonstrated that successful teaching correlates with increased amounts of praise only when the average amount of critical remarks is also provided (Lewis & Massad 1975). This shows the value of a matter-of-fact diagnosis which is considered reliable and accepted as such by the learner against manipulative attempts to enhance learner's self-esteem - a statement gaining importance vis-à-vis the correlational inconclusiveness allowing for a reverse interpretation whereby self-esteem is the result of excellent performance rather than its cause. Considering the fact that individuals demonstrate poorer memory for negative than for positive feedback, a phenomenon being most probably a result of evolutionary adaptations (Sedikides & Green 2004; Sedikides & Skowronski 2009), suggestions to increase the amount of praise are even less justified.

Feedback as a factor modifying learning direction is considered effective if offered in the form of stimulating information provided by the teacher. A model proposed for the purpose postulates three stages reflected in three basic questions, i.e. "How am I going?", "Where am I going?" and "Where to next?" (Hattie & Timperley 2007: 86). This model, however, is more appropriate for contexts of literature, history and science, but less useful for skills-oriented subjects such as second and foreign languages, mainly because the

questions crucial for the model are related to understanding or misunderstanding and in consequence to declarative rather than procedural memory.

Educators also stress the importance of the type of the message offered. The linguistic aspect of messages was first studied by Ginott within the frames of his Congruent Communication Theory (1972), later popularized in the field of psychotherapy and management (Ginott 1972; Spitzberg & Cupach 2007). Person-related feedback, often called a *you-message* which directs feedback towards the person of the learner rather than his or her performance, is considered counterproductive, due to the fact that learners perceive feedback delivery as a form of personal attack and do not treat it as objective information. Performance oriented feedback, the so-called *it-message* dealing with the concrete instance of behavior, tends to be perceived neutrally and has a chance to prove effective. If opinions are to be expressed, *I-messages* presenting emotions and interpretations of the teacher are recommended – a conclusion closely related to the issue of criticism and praise discussed above.

Meta-analysis of research projects related to factors impacting on educational achievement shows the highest values for feedback as a didactic strategy. The second place is occupied by individualization, which is also very strongly correlated with attainment, yet considering the fact that feedback is by definition individualized, its role in maximizing student learning is definitely the most significant (Hattie 2007; 2008).

3. FEEDBACK IN EVALUATION PROCEDURES

In traditional educational systems, what would now be considered feedback meant no more than informing students of the grades they earned. Since the arrival of summative evaluation in test formats information has been presented as a student's score or percentage (Alderson 2005; Bachman & Palmer 2010). Any other information offered in lecture-based transmission teaching was content or management oriented.

The first signal of information generated by teachers and directed at their students came with early research on school curricula and the aims they set. Educators became aware of the need to precisely identify and clarify educational objectives after the publication of Bloom's *Taxonomy of educational objectives. The classification of educational goals*, a seminal work in two volumes, the first of which analyzed educational aims related to the cognitive domain (Bloom 1956) and the second – to the affective one (Bloom 1964). In the decades to come this enabled the construction of more advanced evaluative methods and techniques by means of which teachers were expected to

assess the degree of achievement of the objectives set in the curriculum, identify weaknesses and explain the problem in an oral or written form to the student in the hope to improve his/her performance in the future (Sadler 1998) – procedures close to the psychological concept of feedback.

Growing interest in the role and type of classroom feedback is closely connected with the development of formative evaluation. The concept of *formativity*, introduced by Scriven (1967) five decades ago with a purpose of analyzing courses, curricula and coursebooks in the process of their implementation, postulated qualitative analysis instead of quantitative data collection. The idea was transferred to classroom learning and teaching by Black and Wiliam (1998), researchers extremely active in the field over the last two decades (Black 2010; Black & Wiliam 2015; Wiliam 2010), deeply interested in using evaluation as a tool to enhance learning processes. For that purpose teacher-student information flow was indispensable. As formative evaluation flourished, first as opposed to summative evaluation and then as an indispensable complementary procedure to be integrated with it (Allal & López 2015; Bloom, Hasting & Madaus 1971; Looney 2011; Scallon 2000), more attention has been given to patterns of interaction in the classroom.

Classroom interaction has for a long time been considered crucial for the quality of education as demonstrated not only in Hattie's meta-analysis of achievement (Hattie 2007; 2008), but also in a vast number of articles on more general aspects of quality (Heyworth 2013; Muresan 2007; OECD 2008; 2010).

Soon *formative assessment* was born – a relatively new type of classroom oriented evaluation crucial for the development of innovative approaches to feedback (Looney 2009). In consequence, the role of feedback moved from information about learning outcomes to an approach supposed to enhance the quality of learning, but also to elicit and sustain students' motivation (Locke 2000; Nevo 2002). Relatedly, a specific type of feedback was recommended, the so-called *formative feedback*, defined as "information intended to modify learner's thinking or behavior with the purpose of improving learning" (Shute 2007: 1–2). It is an integral part of formative assessment which presupposes not only identification of a desired level of skill and an assessment of its present level in the learner, but also a detailed comparison with information on ways to improve performance. It should also help the learner to identify his or her strengths and weaknesses, raise awareness of their learning preferences and select appropriate learning strategies. With a view to these expectations, feedback is further classified according to its aim, which is either identifying achievement and interpreting it or outlining progress and helping to understand suggested ways of acting, processes

labelled constructing and interpreting feedback (Black, Harrison, Lee & Marshall, Wiliam 2003; Dunn 2002; Tunstall & Gipps 1996).

Formative feedback – as many other issues related to the quality of educational practice – is not in the least unproblematic (Hayworth 2013; Herman, Osmundson & Silver 2010). Researchers point out that the concept itself is flawed by an internal contradiction. It is, for example, expected to be not only supportive, timely and specific, but also non-evaluative (Shute 2008). Yet, if the very idea of feedback in education is related to a difference between desired objectives and their attained levels in order to help the learner close the gap “between what they know and what they need to be working on” (Chappuis 2012: 1), feedback is, by definition, evaluative. What is more, the evaluative aspect is likely to incite competitiveness (Askew 2000). The only way to avoid it would be to restrict the scope of information included in the teacher’s reactions to mere advice on learning styles and strategies. The narrowing down of content in this way, however, does not seem to be productive.

Another problem is the question of frequency often considered one of the crucial factors in the effectiveness of feedback (Venables & Fairclough 2009). Some researchers insist on the frequency of feedback, stating that it should be offered within the frames of a continuous dialogic relation of teachers with their students (Askew 2000), while some (e.g. Shute 2007) suggest that in order to be effective, feedback should be infrequent.

4. SUPPORTING FORMATIVE FEEDBACK ON THE SCHOOL LEVEL

In spite of a variety of advantages, formative evaluation and, in consequence, also formative classroom feedback are not at all easy to promote among teachers (Hattie 2008; Earl 2013) due to the lack of conducive educational environment or insufficient knowledge of strategies and techniques which could be helpful in classroom assessment. Fields of activity facilitating the introduction of formative assessment and *eo ipso* enabling the promotion of formative feedback include national curriculum construction, administrative approach to teachers and teaching, contacts of schools with parents as well as in-school educational solutions (Allal & López 2015; Köller 2015).

Curriculum constructors tend to believe that a solid ground for changes in evaluation procedures can be prepared by means of modifying curricular approaches (Alismail & McGuire 2015). The reform in Italy promoted *personalizzazione* – personalization (Looney et al. 2015), Canadian national curriculum emphasizes metacognition, i.e. planning, managing and self-assessment activities (Sliwka, Fushell, Gauthier & Johnson 2015), while

the Finnish system stresses competences useful in life long education, i.e. learning to learn, working skills and development, rather than comparison both at school and at the individual level (Voogt 2015). Educational administration seeks solutions in encouraging school's self-appraisal as its lack is, e.g. in Denmark, considered one of the most important obstacles in the promotion of formative assessment (Townshend, Moos & Skov 2015). School principals stress the role of general curricular guidelines on how to systematically use assessment for teaching and for learning, while some believe in the value of personal learning plans, which are reported to work well in Scottish schools (Sliwka & Spencer 2012). The educational landscape is more varied, but at the same time less problematic in educational systems in which there has been a long tradition of formative assessment, approach to the teaching of science in English schools serving as a good example here (Looney & Wiliam 2015).

Positive atmosphere among the staff members is considered crucial because it is a motivating factor and a *sine qua non* for the quality of education (Mercer, Oberdorfer & Saleem 2016). As one principal states, "Teachers cannot make progress unless they are happy" (Looney & Wiliam 2015: 147). A systematic in-service teacher development is considered crucial as well as increased integration within the staff resulting in team projects and teacher collaboration.

Emphasis is also given to the co-operation of schools and teachers with parents. Canadian schools value electronic portfolios and logs for parents and students (Sliwka et al. 2015). For instance, Denmark boasts of a long tradition of parental participation in school decision-making, but also of requesting parents to fill in expectation charts, an activity which enables teachers to understand parental needs vis-a vis the educational institution and obliges them to hold regular parent-teacher meetings to discuss how far expectations have been fulfilled by school (Townshend et al. 2015). Some Italian school work on questionnaires administered among parents to find out their satisfaction levels later presented in the form of a parent satisfaction index (Looney, Laneve & Moscato 2015).

In-school solutions vary considerably. Most of the schools integrating summative and formative evaluation procedures resign from publicizing results of formative evaluation and respect the privacy of teacher-student information exchange. Some schools insist on having feedback in the form of descriptive assessment, offered before summative evaluation is publicized or grades are given. Most of them require teachers to prepare detailed individual formative reports at least four times a year and handing smaller report cards more frequently. Some schools organize their activity around learning cycles of up to ten days with feedback offered at the end of each cycle, some

see a lesson as a basic assessment unit. If a single lesson is treated as such, attention is given to identification and clarification of its aims. These are presented at the outset of the lesson, though some teachers ask students to discover learning goals in the course of the activities they engage in and identify aims at the end of the lesson on the basis of their own observation and reflection (Laveault & Allal 2016).

Self-assessment of the student's overall growth is widely promoted (Vidmar 2015). New students are encouraged to prepare their own learning profiles, based on the so-called "What are you good at philosophy", some schools advise learners to self-assess using the concept of multiple selves, e.g. their academic self, social self, artistic self, etc. (Sliwka et al. 2015). Logs, portfolios and reflection groups help in this process. On-going self-assessment, especially if geared toward soft skills, is, however, not always strongly connected with the curricular content. Not only teacher- but also peer-assessment is usually encouraged (Haslam, Wegge & Postmes 2009).

Although success in raising the quality of education is very difficult to pin down, student satisfaction is easier to notice. It has been demonstrated that students feel more attention on the part of their teachers, although formative evaluation calls for more time and effort on the part of the whole staff. One of the students admits "Teachers notice how much work you have put in, how you have improved based on where you were before" (Sliwka et al. 2015: 115). Students, therefore, know they are important for their teachers and consider the feedback received as personally relevant, which tends to enhance their motivation.

5. PROMOTING FEEDBACK IN CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

Feedback is considered more readily processed if it is generated by various sources: teachers, the learner him- or herself and their peers. Feedback coming from the teacher may have one of three basic purposes. The first one is connected with the students' personal learning plans and is offered in the course of face-to-face conversations or report cards. It also calls for transferring this information to parents, an activity possible only when appropriate levels of co-operation between school and parents were earlier established. The second one occurs during a lesson and aims at closing the gap between current performance of a given student and the desired standard. Feedback to be effective must, therefore, be immediate. It also needs to be specific, both aspects being strongly stressed not only by the learners, but also by student teachers in pre-service teacher education (Orlova 2018). The third one is related to the degree of the achievement of lesson aims. To provide

this kind of information, learning goals need to be presented in a clear way, often in the course of a lesson preview, and some form of assessment should follow at the end of the contact hour. Paradoxically, feedback of this kind is only effective if some form of feed-forward was provided at the beginning of the lesson. Feedback is given and received at an end-of-lesson plenary and if time for more extensive group assessment does not permit it, a visual self-assessment technique is recommended, whereby at the end of the lesson each learner is asked to put up a colour card signaling their sense of achievement of the learning goals planned for that session. This simple procedure forms a bridge between teacher- and learner-generated feedback.

Feedback is usually offered in the form of affirmative statements, yet it sometimes assumes the form of questions. The teacher may describe, correct, remind or assign activities – a set which formed the first basic classification of classroom feedback (Zellermayer 1989). Other typologies stress the direction of assessment distinguishing between approving and disapproving feedback or use teacher's behavior as a criterion dividing feedback into rewarding or punishing (Tunstall & Gipps 1996).

The most immediate and direct form of feedback is auto-feedback produced within the frames of self-assessment. A typical set of questions suggested for the purpose of end of term or end of year self-assessment is the following

- In which areas of strength did you grow?
- How did you challenge your weaker fields?
- How do you assess your relations to class?
- What plan do you have for next year? (Townshend et al. 2015: 123)

More specific auto-feedback connected with lesson aims is based on criteria presented by the teacher, while that related to a longer learning plan is usually negotiated with the students.

Feedback for the individual can come not only from the Self, but also from peers in the course of pair work. To keep it objective and eliminate possible interpersonal conflicts, criteria accompanied by supporting questions are offered by the teacher prior to the assessment exercise. Sometimes, however, as practised in one of the English schools, two stars and a wish strategy is used in peer-assessment when "students identify two things they liked and something they wish the colleague would improve in his or her assignment" (Looney & Wiliam 2015: 142). Both assessment types are often combined through common rubric, according to which self-and peer-assessment results are then compared and discussed to arrive at a negotiated content and form of the message.

Feedback is also important in the course of group work as group work is not only a form of activity developing positive interdependence and soft

skills, but also a pillar of approaches promoting classroom interaction through co-operative learning. Feedback in group work may be given by the teacher, but even more important is mutual feedback given by group members to one another, which helps to eliminate drawbacks. As one of students observed, "None of our group members listened to each other. We all had ideas but would not explain them. Then it would all end up in a mess" (Sebba & Maxwell 2015: 199). A concrete difficulty noticed by group members is then discussed to plan ways of avoiding occurrence of similar problems in the future. This, however, requires setting aside class time for analyzing and assessing group functioning.

Feedback is productive only when followed by students' effective further learning. This, however, makes schools responsible for creating appropriate learning environments. Organizational solutions are also tried out, such as split grades, which enable older students to function as mentors for the younger ones, or asking parents to volunteer and engage in remedial tutorials for students who encounter problems in developing core competencies. Marking books and working sheets with regard to their level of difficulty is also practised. Didactic procedures such as scaffolding are also employed to add to the students' perception of feasibility, increase the number of satisfactory finalizations of work packages and reduce anxiety elicited by large portions of assignments. All these activities on the part of school support formative assessment and increase the role of feedback (Shepard 2005; Sterna 2016).

6. CONCLUSIONS. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Although formative evaluation often increases the workload for teachers, mainly due to the preparation of diagnostic rubrics and report cards, judicious use of immediate classroom feedback does not necessarily contribute to teachers' overburdening or burnout. Yet, without pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher development it would be difficult to promote ways of enhancing classroom interaction appropriate for developing communicative competence in language learners.

Yet, whatever support is given by researchers and teacher trainers in the course of pre- and in-service teacher education, feedback offered within the frames of classroom assessment remains an issue. Research conducted by the Polish Centre for Civic Education, an institution also engaged in the promotion of formative evaluation, demonstrated that teachers consider assessment one of the two most difficult aspects of their professional life alongside

classroom management (Czetwertyńska 2015). Similar difficulties are pointed out in other countries (Herman & Ripley 2012).

Support comes from what is today referred to as enabling institutions, i.e. those which offer overarching educational support to prospective and already active teachers as well as teacher educators of all levels (MacIntyre & Mercer 2014). An example of an international institution of this kind is the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, but it is hard to envisage success without regional in-service teacher training centres, cooperating with teacher training colleges, fully aware of the local needs and able to provide immediate assistance in the form of well-run courses and workshops. Teachers with an experience of receiving constructive and motivating feedback during their pre- and in-service development courses are more likely to be able to use it in their classrooms.

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