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Assessment Feedback

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In 1997, I was editing a book for TESOL (Brown, 1998) entitled *New Ways of Classroom Assessment* when I unexpectedly realized that the “assessment modules” that people were submitting for the book were basically just teaching activities, that is, they were not fundamentally different from the modules in the other TESOL *New Ways...* books on teaching listening, reading, speaking, and so forth. After considerable thought, I realized that the only way to differentiate these classroom assessment modules from the teaching activity modules in the other books was to incorporate the notion of *feedback*. As I put it in the Preface to the revised edition of that book (Brown, 2013, pp. ix-x):

...most of the assessment ideas described in this book also describe the teaching lessons that go with them. In some cases, the assessment activity is indistinguishable from a regular teaching lesson until the teacher, or the students themselves, do some form of scoring or other *feedback*....To me, assessment *activities* are different from tests in that they are not easily distinguishable from other classroom activities because they are thoroughly integrated into the language teaching and learning processes. In other words, assessment activities do not stand out as different, formal, threatening, or interruptive. At the same time, *assessment* activities are different from ordinary classroom activities in that they provide a way of observing or scoring the students' performances and giving *feedback*...

Once I had realized that feedback was *the* distinguishing feature for classroom assessment, I asked all the contributing teachers to add a section to their modules that focused on the feedback aspect of their assessments. One result was that the word *feedback* occurs 229 times in Brown 2013). More importantly, the modules in both editions of the *New Ways of Classroom Assessment* books instantly became very much about *classroom assessment*.

But what exactly constitutes *classroom assessment feedback*? Shute (2007) provides an excellent definition of what she terms *formative feedback*, that is, “defined as information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner’s thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning” (p. i). In assessment terms, Brown (2013, p. x) went further saying that assessment feedback could take “the form of a score or other information (for example, notes in the margin, written prose reactions, oral critiques, teacher conferences) that can enlighten the students and teachers about the effectiveness of the language learning and teaching involved.”

Unfortunately, those definitions do not explain why *classroom assessment* is so closely linked to *feedback* in language teaching. To understand that overarching issue, I think I need to first answer four sub-questions:

- Why is feedback important in classroom assessment?
- What forms can assessment feedback take?
- What should language classroom assessment feedback focus on?
- What are some strategies for making feedback efficient and effective?

Why is Feedback Important in Classroom Assessment?

First and foremost, teachers should consider regularly providing students with assessment feedback because the "...most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is **feedback**. The simplest prescription for improving education must be 'dollops of feedback'..." (Hattie, 1999, no page numbers, bold in original). Or as I put it in Brown (2013): "But why is *feedback* important in the classroom? My guess is that *feedback* derives its importance from the fact that it is one of the teacher's most powerful tools for shaping how students approach the learning process and for finding out what is going on in the students' minds" (p. x).

The arguments for providing feedback (from Brown, 2013; Hattie 1999; Nicol 2010, Popham, 2009, and personal experience) include at least:

- To provide students and teachers with information about what, how, and why the student knows (or does not know) or can do (or cannot do) what was taught and practiced in class
- To help students improve their language knowledge and performances
- To focus students on those specific aspects of the learning that the teacher thinks are important
- To help students develop their own abilities to observe, notice key issues, assess, change, and develop their own knowledge, abilities, and learning processes during class and even after the classroom experience is finished (ideally for lifelong learning)
- To encourage discussion between students and teachers
- To get students to listen to teachers, and teachers to listen to students
- To reward students for their focus and hard work and give them a sense of satisfaction
- To motivate students to follow up on and do something with the assessment feedback
- And last and perhaps least, to justify to the students how the teacher arrived at any grades involved

What Forms Can Assessment Feedback Take?

You may decide to provide students with feedback on in-class or homework exercises; or on individual presentations, interviews, pair work, groupwork, or other assignments; or on larger assignments like term papers, projects, portfolios, or on group presentations. Whatever you are giving feedback on, there are a number of modes in which you can deliver that assessment feedback and an even larger number of tools you can use to do so.

Modes of Giving Feedback

The *modes* of feedback describe the actions of giving assessment feedback in terms of the people doing so. Written or oral assessment feedback can be delivered in at least the following modes:

- Teacher-feedback
- Self-feedback
- Peer-feedback

- Individual or group student conference-feedback with the teacher
- Various combinations of the above four

Very often assessment feedback is given by the teacher, and indeed, if self-, peer-, or conference-feedback are used, the students will usually also want feedback from the teacher.

Tools for Giving Feedback

Most teachers are well aware of some of the traditional tools for providing students with feedback. I will briefly list those traditional tools here and then dwell in a bit more depth on some of the other more efficient ways of giving systematic assessment feedback, which are especially useful for larger classes.

More or less traditional ways of giving assessment feedback that teachers sometimes overlook include:

- Comments written in the margins (handwritten or Word tracking comments)
- Feedback lectures on general problems applicable to the whole class
- Class discussions (teacher-led or student-led)
- Self-assessment reflections on submitted assignments
- Quizzes with detailed feedback
- Oral comments (or conferences) on assignments
- Audio (or video) recordings of comments by teacher on student work in think-aloud mode

In addition, some of the more efficient ways of giving systematic assessment feedback (which are especially useful and efficient for giving large-scale feedback) are rubrics, praise sandwiches, and checklists.

Rubrics. Popham (2009, p. 122) argued that: “Rubrics, typically employed to help evaluate constructed-response or performance assessments such as essay tests, speeches, and projects, can supply students with helpful guidance. Because the skill-specific evaluative criteria set out in a well-conceived rubric can supply students with a judgmental framework for self-appraisal, such rubrics are extraordinarily important in a formative assessment context.” Rubrics can be either *analytic* (giving separate feedback/scores for different aspects of the language as shown in Figure 1) or *holistic* (providing a single score or set of feedback as shown in Figure 2)

The example of an *analytic rubric* shown in Figure 1 was designed to give students feedback on class presentations.¹ To do so, this rubric provides separate feedback (in rows) for five aspects of language (labeled to the left): Content; Speaks Clearly; Vocabulary; Posture and Eye Contact; and Enthusiasm. The column labeled 4 at the top describes the behaviors for each aspect of language in terms of *excellent* performance, the column with 3 is *good* performance, the 2 column shows *okay* performance, and the 1 column describes *poor* performance. The five aspects of the language that I chose to include were ones I felt were important at the time for this particular presentation, but there are many other categories that I could have chosen (for example, grammar, organization, quality of PowerPoint slides, so forth; for more possibilities, see Figure 5 below).

Such a rubric would be fairly easy to apply while the student is doing a five-minute classroom presentation by simply circling the box containing the applicable description for each category of language and writing in other comments as appropriate. In other words, the feedback should take no longer for the teacher to do than the presentation itself takes. As a part of teaching how to do these

¹ Note that this particular rubric was created in a very useful website called *Rubistar* (at <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>), which is free once you sign up. After creating the rubric in *Rubistar*, I simply block copied it into the Word document that became this article.

presentations, it is always a good idea to give the students copies of the rubric and go over it in advance with them so they know what is being expected of them during the presentation itself.

Student Name _____				
CATEGORY	4 Excellent	3 Good	2 Okay	1 Poor
Content	Shows a full understanding of the topic.	Shows a good understanding of the topic.	Shows a good understanding of parts of the topic.	Does not seem to understand the topic very well.
Speaks Clearly	Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time and pronounces most words intelligibly.	Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time but pronounces a few words unintelligibly.	Speaks clearly and distinctly most (94-85%) of the time. Pronounces a number of words unintelligibly.	Often mumbles or can not be understood OR pronounces many words unintelligibly.
Vocabulary	Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Extends audience vocabulary by defining words that might be new to most of the audience.	Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Includes 1-2 words that might be new to most of the audience but does not define them.	Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Does not include any vocabulary that might be new to the audience.	Uses several (5 or more) words or phrases that are not understood by the audience.
Posture and Eye Contact	Stands up straight, looks relaxed and confident. Establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation.	Stands up straight and establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation.	Sometimes stands up straight and establishes eye contact.	Slouches and/or does not look at people during the presentation.
Enthusiasm	Facial expressions and body language generate a strong interest and enthusiasm about the topic in others.	Facial expressions and body language sometimes generate a strong interest and enthusiasm about the topic in others.	Facial expressions and body language are used to try to generate enthusiasm but seem somewhat faked.	Very little use of facial expressions or body language. Did not generate much interest in topic being presented.

Figure 1. Example analytic rubric for giving feedback on classroom presentations.

Figure 2 shows an example of a holistic rubric, which provides much more general feedback than an analytic rubric. Notice that the words inside the rubrics in Figures 1 and 2 are exactly the same (that is, the column labeled 4 in Figure 1 contains the same words as the row labeled 4 in Figure 2); they are simply arranged differently. However, my experience is that holistic rubrics, like that shown in Figure 2,² are quicker and easier to apply because I only need to make one decision per student (4, 3, 2, or 1) rather than five decisions. However, it is important to recognize that holistic rubrics provide less detailed feedback to students and may therefore prove less useful to them than the analytic rubrics explained above with regard to the learning/teaching processes so important in the classroom. [For more information on designing and creating rubrics, see Brown (2017a, 2018a & b) and for much more information see Brown (2012a).]

² Note that this holistic rubric was created from the rubric shown in Figure 1 by merging the five cells for each score together.

Student Name _____	
Holistic Score	Description of Behavior
4	Shows a full understanding of the topic. Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time and pronounces most words intelligibly. Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Extends audience vocabulary by defining words that might be new to most of the audience. Stands up straight, looks relaxed and confident. Establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation. Facial expressions and body language generate a strong interest and enthusiasm about the topic in others.
3	Shows a good understanding of the topic. Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time but pronounces a few words unintelligibly. Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Includes 1-2 words that might be new to most of the audience but does not define them. Stands up straight and establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation. Facial expressions and body language sometimes generate a strong interest and enthusiasm about the topic in others.
2	Shows a good understanding of parts of the topic. Speaks clearly and distinctly most (94-85%) of the time. Pronounces a number of words unintelligibly. Uses vocabulary appropriate for the audience. Does not include any vocabulary that might be new to the audience. Sometimes stands up straight and establishes eye contact. Facial expressions and body language are used to try to generate enthusiasm but seem somewhat faked.
1	Does not seem to understand the topic very well. Often mumbles or cannot be understood OR pronounces many words unintelligibly. Uses several (5 or more) words or phrases that are not understood by the audience. Slouches and/or does not look at people during the presentation. Very little use of facial expressions or body language. Did not generate much interest in topic being presented.

Figure 2. Example holistic rubric for giving feedback on classroom presentations.

Checklists. Another feedback option that teachers should consider is the use of *checklists*. For giving detailed feedback, checklists are generally quicker to apply than analytic rubrics for giving detailed feedback. For example, the checklist shown in Figure 3, which was also designed to give feedback on class presentations, provides feedback on 10 aspects of the *content* of the presentation and 10 on *delivery*. When I have used this type of checklist, I have typically used a $\sqrt{-}$, $\sqrt{}$, or $\sqrt{+}$ system for each of the categories where $\sqrt{-}$ is 1 point, $\sqrt{}$ is 2, and $\sqrt{+}$ is 3 points. Hence, two scores can be provided, one with a total possible of 30 points for *content* and another with 30 points for *delivery*. I have also used a 20-point based system with $\sqrt{}$ being 1 point and $\sqrt{+}$ being 2. But the score is not really the point, because I try to use the *suggestions* space over to the right to explain with a suggestion why the student received a $\sqrt{-}$ or with praise for a $\sqrt{+}$. Thus, the feedback is written and descriptive.

Presentation Feedback Form	
Name _____	Date _____
<u>Content</u> <input type="checkbox"/> Effective attention getter <input type="checkbox"/> Clear overall organization <input type="checkbox"/> Introduction includes purpose/thesis and preview <input type="checkbox"/> First main point supported by details <input type="checkbox"/> Second main point supported by details <input type="checkbox"/> Third main point supported by details <input type="checkbox"/> Conclusion contains review of main points <input type="checkbox"/> Concluding statement was clear; presentation ended smoothly <input type="checkbox"/> Content interesting <input type="checkbox"/> Evidence of critical thinking	<u>Suggestions for Improvement</u>
<u>Delivery and Visual Aids</u> <input type="checkbox"/> Extemporaneous delivery (not memorized) <input type="checkbox"/> Direct and effective eye contact <input type="checkbox"/> Effective body movement <input type="checkbox"/> Effective gestures <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate vocal variety (rate, pitch, volume) <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate & effective language use <input type="checkbox"/> Effective articulation and pronunciation of words <input type="checkbox"/> Visual aids were easily seen by the audience <input type="checkbox"/> Visual aids provided additional information & were effective <input type="checkbox"/> Effective relationship with audience	<u>Suggestions for Improvement</u>

Figure 3. Example checklist for teacher feedback on classroom presentations.

Praise sandwiches. It is also possible, of course, to have students do peer-feedback using rubrics or checklists like those shown Figures 1, 2, or 3, but I find that students tend to get bogged down because these formats are too detailed and complicated. However, I have successfully used half-sheet versions of praise-sandwich idea (see Figure 4) for this purpose. To do so, I pass out the checklist (see Figure 3) and explain to them that I will be using it to give them feedback on their presentations. I further explain that they can use the checklist to help plan their presentations. I also explain the praise-sandwich forms that they will use to give peer feedback when they are in the audience and that they should bring the checklist (I also bring a supply of extra forms in case they forget) to use for ideas of what to look for when they are filling out their praise-sandwich forms. This task for audience members not only provides feedback from all students to the presenters, but also gives the audience members a reason to pay attention to the presentations and stay alert.

I find that the praise-sandwich format with *Suggestions for Improving* sandwiched between positive comments (that is, *Best Feature* and *Another Good Feature*) keeps students from focusing entirely on demoralizing negative peer feedback, and yet provides useful feedback—often on things that I did not notice at all. I pass out a supply of praise-sandwich sheets at the beginning of class, and then collect them after each presentation. I then fold my checklist sheet in half and put the praise-sandwich sheets inside, then write their names on the outside. That way, I have a neat packet of feedback from me and all their

peers to give each student at the end of the last day of presentations. Interestingly, I have found that the students not only read through the feedback sheets from everybody but do so *eagerly*.

STUDENT FEEDBACK ON ORAL PRESENTATIONS	
PRESENTER	_____
CONTENT	
	Best Feature
	Suggestion for Improving
	Another Good Feature
DELIVERY	
	Best Feature
	Suggestion for Improving
	Another Good Feature

Figure 4. Example praise-sandwich format for peer-feedback on classroom presentations.

What Should Language Classroom Assessment Feedback Focus on?

After deciding what form(s) feedback should take, it is still necessary to decide on what aspects of language deserve feedback. For example, in a webinar I recently presented (see Brown, 2017b), I listed 20 possible aspects of language that could be included in feedback as shown in Figure 5.

1. Pronunciation accuracy or level used
2. Stress timing, rhythm, intonation
3. Grammar accuracy or level used
4. Vocabulary accuracy or level used
5. Collocations
6. Appropriateness of kinesics, proxemics, facial expressions, or gestures
7. Use of down-graders
8. Pragmatics with regard to degree of power difference, social distance, imposition, etc.
9. Fluency
10. Organization
11. Logical development of ideas
12. Topic coverage
13. Getting meaning across
14. Mechanics (capitalization, punctuation, etc.)
15. Coherence
16. Cohesion
17. Register
18. Style
19. Successful task completion
20. Amount of language produced

Figure 5. Twenty aspects of language that could be included in feedback (originally from Brown, 2012b, p. 20).

Clearly, there are many different aspects of language that could be the focus of assessment feedback depending on the training of the teacher, the needs of the students, the level of specificity that is needed, and so forth. For example, number 16 *Cohesion* in the list in Figure 5 could be further divided into the five different types of cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion) with feedback for each. Indeed, some of the categories listed above are themselves multiple categories (for instance, number 2 includes *stress timing*, *rhythm*, and *intonation*). Moreover, I am sure that any group of teachers can think of many additional aspects of language that they consider important, that do not appear in this list. The crucial thing here is that teachers:

- Realize that there are many possible aspects of language that they can give feedback on beyond the traditional grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation
- Accept that they cannot give feedback on everything
- Take responsibility for deciding what categories of feedback will prove most useful and important for meeting the language needs of the specific students involved
- Recognize that whatever categories are chosen will send a strong message to the students about what the teacher thinks is important
- Spend classroom time (a) talking about, (b) teaching, and (c) helping students practice those aspects of the language that are the focus of feedback

What are Some Strategies for Making Feedback Efficient and Effective?

Given that teachers are often required to teach too many classes (that are far too large) per day, *feedback* may seem like just another bothersome thing to do. After all, giving good quality assessment feedback can be very time-consuming and may sometimes feel repetitive and boring to the teacher. Even worse, feedback may seem ineffective when students do not pay attention to the feedback, do not act on it, or obsess about negative feedback (and gloss over all the positive comments). Naturally, all of this can lead to frustration and a feeling that all the work involved in giving feedback is a giant waste of time.

Many sources and websites provide suggestions for overcoming these issues by giving efficient and effective feedback. For example, Ross Crockett (2016) suggests seven strategies (with much more explanation on his website): (a) make the student feel safe, (b) stress teamwork, (c) use proactive

language, (d), avoid using these three words (that is, *should*, *but*, and *however*), (e) ask guiding questions, (f) use visuals, and (g) check for understanding. These seven suggestions are fine as far as they go, and they probably worked well for Crockett.

However, there are many other possible ideas as well. Here, I will provide an expanded list of suggestions for things to do (and try not to do) to overcome the sorts of problems listed in the first paragraph of this section (this time from Brown, 2013; Crockett, 2016; Hattie, 1999; Nicol, 2010; Popham, 2009; Tee & Ahmed, 2014; and my personal experience) with the hope that teachers will select those ideas that are appropriate for them and their students:

Dos:

- Prepare the students for feedback by explaining what it will be, why it is important, and how they can learn from it
- Provide feedback often and regularly
- Give feedback immediately while the knowledge, activity, and skill are fresh in the minds of both the teacher and student
- Make feedback clear, constructive, and consistent with the goal of motivating student learning
- Frame feedback so it shows where students stand at the moment, but also how they can improve their language knowledge and/or abilities in the future
- Include aspects of feedback that show students how their knowledge and abilities have improved and progressed over time
- Be positive but be honest (that is, use praise only when it is warranted)
- Focus feedback on specifics and link it to clear language learning objectives or activities covered in class
- Help students see language and language learning in new ways
- Make feedback suitable for the age, language abilities, educational level, language needs, and learning needs of the students
- Allow yourself enough time to give each student quality feedback
- Check to make sure that students understood the feedback
- Ensure that feedback helps students develop their abilities to reflect on their own language learning, behaviors, strategies, and/or products
- Have the students respond to or do something with the feedback (with some sort of consequences) to help them internalize it
- Use the feedback to adjust the curriculum so it better meets the needs of the students
- Check periodically what the students think about the feedback and how it could be improved
- Streamline the feedback process so the teacher can efficiently manage it in an effective manner

Don'ts:

- Avoid overwhelming students with too much feedback information
- Avoid underwhelming students with cryptic feedback
- Avoid providing students with incomprehensible information (for example, complicated or jargon laden commentary), especially in their L2
- Avoid insisting on grading or scoring all feedback (numbers, even percentages, can turn students off to constructive written or oral feedback)
- Avoid rushing the feedback process (absorbing feedback takes time)
- Avoid focusing entirely on language details like mistakes in grammar, spelling, word choice, punctuation, phoneme pronunciation, and so forth.
- Avoid commenting negatively on the students' other teachers and learning experiences

Conclusions

In the introduction to this article, I defined *classroom assessment feedback* and then described: (a) why feedback is important in classroom assessment; (b) what forms teacher-feedback, self-feedback, peer-feedback, as well as individual or group student/teacher conference-feedback can take in assessment using a number of tools including traditional ways of providing feedback as well as very useful analytic and holistic rubrics, checklists, and praise sandwiches that can help teachers deal with large classes efficiently, while also proving students with useful feedback; (c) how there are at least 20 different things language classroom assessment feedback can focus on; and (d) what some of the different strategies are that can help make feedback efficient and effective (in the form of Does and Don'ts lists).

I addressed these four sets of issues with the goal of understanding one overarching question: Why is *classroom assessment* so closely linked to *feedback* in language teaching? When all is said and done, it should now be clear that language classroom assessment without feedback is not truly assessment. Or put another way, it is important to recognize that, if you are giving feedback, you are doing assessment. At the same time, only language practice with feedback can maximally promote language learning. All of which would seem to be an excellent argument for including classroom assessment (and its inherent feedback) in as many language classroom activities as possible. Given the immense importance of feedback, professionally responsible teachers must not only include feedback, but also invest the time and energy necessary for providing efficient, effective, and *successful* feedback.

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