







## Feedback to student-works: Lifeline of learning

Mohammad Rukanuddin <sup>a</sup> , Kh. Atikur Rahman <sup>b,1</sup> , Prodhan Mahub Ibna Seraj <sup>c</sup> ,  
Kazi Dawood Hafiz <sup>d</sup> 

<sup>a, d</sup> Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>b</sup> Bangabandhu Sheikh Muiibur Rahman Maritime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>c</sup> Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Johor Bahru, Malaysia

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### Abstract

Ensuring the practice of providing feedback to learners' work in different strata of education is a challenging one. The number of researches in this issue identifying the factors that hinder feedback culture in education is still not adequate. Hence, the main objective of this review work is to pinpoint the most commonly studied feedback factors that influence learners' performance. These feedback factors have been discussed based on a critical analysis of research papers published mostly during the last two decades. The results indicate that feedback to learners' work boosts up their learning if provided following right procedures. The findings also show that four factors are obstacles in the way to implementing the wholesome practice of feedback in educational institutions: teachers' unusual workload, lack of institutional directives, absence of appropriate training of teachers on feedback related pedagogy and to some extent teachers' negligence to their duties. The article bears significant insights for the policy makers, teachers and other relevant stakeholders.

*Keywords:* feedback; assessment; formative; summative; peer feedback; self-feedback

## 1. Introduction

Feedback is the information learners receive from their facilitators after they have done and submitted a piece of academic work. This work may be an assignment, a lab report, an essay, a presentation, debate and so on. Regarding feedback Irons (2008) states, "any information, process or activity which affords or accelerates student learning based on comments relating to either formative assessment or summative assessment activities is feedback."

Feedback to student work is essential for the students' effective learning. It is very helpful for students to understand the subject they are studying. Feedback helps them find out their deficiencies and guide them how to overcome them. Researchers argue that feedback concerning academic work is steadily and intensely related to achievement than any other teaching and learning activities (Bellon et al., 1992; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Yorke (2002, cited in Poulos & Mahony, 2008) stresses that feedback improves a learner's confidence, enthusiasm and self-awareness for knowledge. This means

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +880-1670700303  
E-mail address: [kardu2011@gmail.com](mailto:kardu2011@gmail.com)

when learners come to know their drawbacks while learning a lesson, they can rectify them; and finding them on right track, they become confident, more attentive and inspired for their learning. But the way learners are getting feedback does not help them to increase their learning (Glover & Brown, 2006). Researchers (e.g., Weaver, 2006; Glover & Brown, 2006) point out that learners seem to be in much need of comprehensive feedback though some learners give more importance to grade than feedback and for this reason do not try to learn from the teachers' remarks on their evaluated work.

As there is a lack of proper practice among teachers in providing learners with feedback to their academic work according to rule (Glover & Brown, 2006), this paper has made an attempt to explore this area through review of related research literature published on this issue.

## **2. Method**

This article is a review-based study on secondary data. In this article, peer-reviewed papers published mostly during the last two decades were critically studied and investigated. These peer-reviewed papers have been collected from several databases like ERIC, Psyc INFO, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Research Gate, and peer-reviewed journals based on keywords e.g., importance of feedback, types of feedback, formative feedback, summative feedback, assessment and feedback studies etc. All data retrieved from various secondary sources are duly acknowledged.

## **3. Importance of feedback**

Researchers and educators (e.g., Heron, Mc Goldrick, & Wilson, 2015) around the world stress the needs and practice of feedback on student work as it is an indispensable part on the part of teaching as well as learning. Students' academic activities are spread throughout the semester or academic year or quarter and these activities have to be evaluated and assessed timely and as per rules. If they are not conducted and not assessed for any reasons, learners' learning is hindered to a great extent. Shute (2008) argues that feedback is a strong pedagogical design. Appropriate feedback of evaluation of the learners' work enhances their strength and inspiration that help increase their performance (Shute, 2008; Molloy & Boud, 2013). It minimizes the gap between learners' learning and their targeted goal of learning (Sadler, 1989; Brooks, Gillies & Hattie, 2019). Continuous feedback eventually improves the learners' academic performance (Wiggins, 2012; Kealey, 2010). It enables the learners to re-energize their efforts to better attain their target learning. That is why feedback ought to be given while the learning outcome is still fresh in the learners' minds and the learners have time to follow up on the given feedback. Learners should be given feedback about their formative academic activities just after the next day of submission. That is, feedback is so essential that it should be given to the learners as urgently as possible.

Hattie and Timperely (2007) say that providing feedback to learners is a very useful skill for teachers in higher education and has strong influence on the value of the learners' learning. They also support the view that feedback in teaching is an essential part, and it should be used by teachers maintaining proper procedures so that feedback can be useful for the learners.

## **4. Characteristics of effective feedback**

According to Wiggins (2012), there are seven characteristics of effective feedback. They are (i) Goal oriented: Feedback ought to be connected to definite and assessable learning goals. While providing feedback, it is necessary to see that the feedback is related to the instructions given for doing the work. It ensures that the learners get guidelines about their performance with regards to the expectations. In this way the learners understand their progress of learning in relation to the set goals.

They also get ideas about their weaknesses from the given feedback and try to enhance their quality of their learning. (ii) Priority based: At the time of giving feedback, priority should be given to certain areas of the learners' performance. Instead of commenting on every nook and crannies of the learners' work, the areas which are directly related to the outcome of lesson should be given priority. Brief and selective feedback is more intelligible to learners and easy for internalization and implementation. (iii) Actionable: It should be ensured that the feedback is precise in order to enable the learners to take necessary action. Feedback should clearly state their strengths and shortcomings so that they can self-assess their work and understand what their next steps should be. At the time of giving feedback teachers should consider them learners' guide or coach, not corrector so that they feel confident and abler in the task of what they are learning. (iv) Student friendly: Moreover, he states that feedback should be given in a friendly manner. If feedback is given in an encouraging and helpful tone, it helps students accept the feedback and apply the correction in future. For this reason, teachers should be careful in choosing words, phrases and structuring sentences while writing their feedback. Heron, Mc Goldrick, and Wilson (2015) also emphasized "the quality of relationships between the giver and receiver of feedback" (p. 2317). (v), (vi) and (vii) On going, Consistent, and Timely: These three characteristics are complementary to one another. In order for the feedback to be effective, it should be continuous, steady, and in-time. This means that learners need enough opportunities to get feedback continuously steadily and in a timely manner. If feedback is not given in time, learners become demotivated and disengaged. So, it should be ensured that learners get sufficient feedback throughout the year without delay.

Again, clarity is another feature of effective feedback. Feedback ought to be easily understood by the learners so that they can understand what steps are necessary for their further improvement (Austen & Malone, 2018). Because if learners want to use the feedback, they must understand it. Brook hart (2017) opines that to be effective, a feedback should be able to transfer a clear, and positive note that learners can understand. Supporting her, Huxham (2007) echoes that unclear, vague and slow feedback may act as deterrent factor for accelerating student learning improvement.

## 5. Types of feedback

There is no specific number for types of feedback. Depending on different criteria feedback is classified into a number of types. The types of feedback that are frequently discussed in the arena of research in feedback in education have been discussed below.

### 5.1 Formative feedback

Formative feedback is the information or instruction or advice regarding learners' performance in formative tests conducted periodically during an ongoing course of studies (Dixon, & Worrell, 2016). Formative feedback is usually ungraded, but the tests conducted as the compliance of institutional rules, are graded. It assesses the knowledge and skills learners attain in any time during a course is going on (Kealey, 2010). It is continuous and helps teachers to monitor student progress and learners get guidance how to overcome their deficiencies (Taras, 2009). By formative feedback, finding out what the learners have learnt and what they have not understood, teachers can pay more attention to what they ought to do to meet their learning needs. On the basis of formative feedback, if necessary, teachers can change their ways of teaching and modify the syllabuses. In short, formative feedback is an indicative of the learners' progress in learning and the effectiveness of teachers' strategies for teaching or the effectiveness of the curricula.

## 5.2 Summative feedback

The feedback through which a learner's educational achievement is measured at the end of a particular academic period like academic semester, academic year, etc. is summative feedback (Dixon, & Worrell, 2016). The result of a summative feedback is counted towards the final grades or scores that quantify a learner's academic achievement (Taras, 2009).

When summative feedback indicates that learners' learning outcomes does not match with the goal targeted beforehand, institutions may decide to change the existing curricula or part of it in order to adjust the learning outcomes with the target learning. Chappuis and Chappuis (2014) note that summative feedback is used to make some kind of decision, such as to decide what grade a learner will get on an assignment, quantify the effectiveness of a program, or draw a conclusion if an institution has made expected yearly progress. Summative feedback stereotypically indicates how much learning has taken place at a given time; its purpose is to measure the level of learner, institution, or program success (Kealey, 2010).

Therefore, summative feedback is a measuring kit for judging learners, institutions or programs whether they are fit or qualified for certain standard.

## 5.3 Constructive feedback

The feedback that makes learners feel that the teachers really want them to develop is a constructive feedback. As a consequence of getting constructive feedback learners take initiatives to do extra work to improve their knowledge in their academic work. Hamid and Mahmood (2010) opine that constructive feedback ought to highlight and encourage better performance, mention nonstandard work, suggest corrective actions and involve both teachers and learners as team members. They add that constructive feedback may be utilized as an instrument for better learning and stimulation for growth of learners. Moreover, constructive feedback as a learning tool to enhance students' self-regulation and performance (Toit, 2012).

Feedback providers also get benefited because of the encouraging effects of constructive feedback. Further, according to Ovando (2005) constructive feedback needs to be unambiguous, helpful, appropriate, explanatory, precise and easily understandable by learners. Because of the positive effects of constructive feedback, it encourages learners, and inspires and stimulates them for learning (Murdoch-Eaton, 2012).

## 5.4 Student peer feedback

When learners assess, evaluate and mark one another's work, it is called 'peer-assessment or peer assessment or peer review (Bostock, 2006). It is just checking one another's academic work to find out if it is up to a standard set by the academics and mark or grade it. In other words, when learners are provided with a number of pieces of academic work prepared by their classmates and give feedback to them, it is peer feedback. Technically speaking, according to Wood and Curzel (2008), the process of providing summative assessment is termed as 'peer assessment' and giving and getting formative feedback is 'peer review'. Whatever the case is, both the receiver and the giver of feedback are benefited (Van den Berg et al, 2006).

One advantage of this peer feedback is that learners find it to be a fear-free procedure that benefits their education by advice from their class mates about the way of improving their work (Wood & Kurzel, 2008). In support of this view, Wessa and De Rycker (2010) mention that there are benefits of peer feedback because while they review one another's work, they feel encouraged. This implies that the learners whose assignments are reviewed are likely to be benefited from the feedback from which

their academic activities may be improved and their critical thinking may be stimulated. Moreover, the learners who do the reviewing task, get benefited by processing and analyzing the work of their classmates (Wessa & De Rycker, 2010). They further state that if learners do the peer review job for a long time, they feel inspired to have a greater level of eagerness for the job for staying long in company with teachers.

But it should be kept in mind, learners cannot assess their peer work by themselves unless they are taught how to do it. According to Brookhart (2017) for giving peer feedback learners take part in peer assessment. While doing peer assessment they apply the principles of standard work which helps in building knowledge about the target learning. Peer reviewing helps to create a classroom setting that signifies feedback and positive criticism. For assisting learners to perform peer feedback, they should be provided with ‘ground rules’ as guidelines. She suggests five-point guidelines on the basis of which learners should do their peer assessing work. The guidelines are (i) reading peers’ work carefully (ii) comparing the work with the rubrics (iii) talking about the work, not the person (iv) not judging as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ rather describing the work’s positive features and what can improve it further (v) making unambiguous suggestions and then (vi) telling what the peer assessor thinks and asking what the assignment’s author thinks. Therefore, to make learners perform their peer assessment job and for giving effective peer feedback, training and guidelines are indispensable.

### 5.5 *Learner self-feedback*

Bedford and Legg (2007) believe that learner self-feedback inspires learners to find out their own strong points and drawbacks. Moreover, they can ask for the sort of feedback they need to get on their work before submitting it. In addition, through self-feedback, the learners can grade and assess their own work following a standard given by clear assessment criteria. Mallet (1995, cited in Bedford & Legg, 2007) stated several benefits of learner self-assessment. According to him, through self-assessment and self-feedback, (i) learners could learn about their learning style, (ii) they could be self-conscious and motivated to reflect on the standards, ‘aims and objects’ of a course of studies, (iii) learners’ self-feedback was helpful for the concerned academics to provide more apt feedback.

Now, how the learners would give self-feedback on their own work is a question. Learners do not become automatically become expert the lessons they are studying. They should be provided with appropriate principles and criteria on the basis of which they would judge and give feedback on their assignment. Sackstein (2017) posits that during assigning learners with self-feedback activity, teachers should explain how to assess the work giving them model answers, samples and clear instruction in order to make them more self-reliant. Supporting this view, Baars et al (2014) state that to scaffold learners’ self-assessment, external criteria can be provided. Then, the learners can find out the similarities and differences between the correct answers and the answers of their own. This helps the learners make a dependable feedback on their own learning. They claim that if the learners are assisted by giving ‘correct answers’ while evaluating their own work, their self-assessment expertise improves.

However, Tejeiro et al. (2012) have pointed out from their research that if the students’ self-feedback is based on assessments which are summative in nature, it becomes inflated. If the assessment is given marks or grades and counted towards the final grade, it becomes summative and in summative assessment learners feel motivated to attain the best possible results and as a result, they give overestimated feedback on their own work.

Hence, it is clear that learner self-feedback is beneficial, and learners should be provided with required rubrics, correct answers, samples and models.

### 5.6 Counterproductive feedback

Effective feedback is very much helpful in increasing skills, enthusiasm and knowledge of the learners. Very often feedback becomes ineffective or counterproductive because of the ways it is conveyed to the learners. Even, sometimes feedback becomes the reasons for reducing learners' motivation. Deci et al. (1985) have pointed out that for the following three reasons feedback becomes non-productive. (i) if feedback gives the learners the feeling that their work is being supervised, they start feeling nervous and as a consequence cease learning, (ii) if, because of feedback, the learners think that feedback is a tool to control them, and to direct them how to perform something instead of giving advice how to improve, they react to it negatively, and (iii) if they feel that the feedback is asking them to do competition with their peers, they feel demotivated.

Moreover, in Feedback Intervention Theory of Kluger and De Nisi (1996) the idea that feedback is beneficial is not always true. According to them, the effect of feedback is moderately positive with regard to performance, and feedback gives negative results regarding performance in more than one third of the cases. They add that feedback which focuses on the way how to improve learners' performance on the task and avoids being personal produces positive results. In contrast, feedback that is directed to personal attributes constantly produces negative effects.

Providing learners with personal praise or any concrete prize instead of or, along with significant remark on the learner task has been observed to be harmful to learner success, inspiration and learning outcome (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; William, 2005). Hence, while giving feedback, comments and corrections should be made on the learner work. Any personal praise or tangible reward directed to the learner's self-image or appreciation ought to be evaded.

## 6. Discussion

In view to the above discussion most research literature stated above are in favour of the idea that if feedback is properly given, it has good effect on learning and teaching. Feedback is a useful instrument for augmenting teaching and learning. He adds that when feedback is given to learners with definite and strong directions, simple thought provoking aims, and in a congenial environment using state of the art technology, it enhances the performance of both learners and teachers.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) mention that very often inappropriate feedback is given to learners because in the name of feedback the teachers give grade and marks instead of real feedback that augment the process of teaching and learning. That means feedback should be based on proper assessment of the learners' work whether it is formative or summative feedback. They further state that feedback is the outcomes of the teaching, and it is a very useful means that has strong impact on learning accomplishment and teaching efficiency.

As nothing is impediment free in the world, here also there are two obstacles that hinder the environment that gives importance to feedback. One obstacle is that teachers are so burdened with work that they cannot manage to give proper feedback. There should be some sort of incentive that will make the busy teachers' pay attention to the job of providing feedback to learners. Moreover, the institutional management ought to give teachers time so that they can devote their efforts to the system of giving feedback. Secondly, there is acute shortage of trained teachers in almost all levels of teaching. Teachers' training should be ensured so that feedback can accelerate the learners' learning and increases the teaching quality (Norcini, 2010).

Furthermore, teachers in various levels of education conduct tests and assign work for students under compulsion in many cases. Feedback is also given to students perfunctorily as compliance to the rules of institutions where they work rather than for the benefits of the learners. Alam et al. (2009) in a

research regarding medical education in Bangladesh found out that teachers in general believe that feedback is beneficial in finding out the weaknesses of the learners and can help learners do well in future. They also discovered that in most cases students are not provided with the feedback for their work submitted to the teachers. They add that the existing rule of providing feedback is faulty. They suggest that to make sure that feedback is properly practiced, teachers should be trained and this practice ought to be mandatory in the curriculum.

## 7. Conclusion

Considering the importance of feedback to learners' work, most related literature published in the current decade emphasize that feedback is an integral part of teachers' duties and it should not in any way be neglected (Schartel, 2012). The teachers' assignment is unfinished if they do not provide detail and constructive feedback to learners. It is, therefore, advised to include preparing and providing learners with constructive feedback in their daily routine (Spiller, 2012; Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). Moreover, the reduction of teachers' workload has been proposed to make enough time for preparing and providing constructive feedback to learners (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). For ensuring immediate feedback to make it effective it is also mentioned that if feedback is not given timely, it may cause more damage than good (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010).

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#### **AUTHORS BIODATA**

**Mohammad Rukanuddin** is an assistant professor of English at Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology. He has triple masters: MA in English (JU), MA in ELT (DU) and MA in English (USA). He is currently a PhD fellow in ELT at JU. His research interest is ELT at tertiary level.

**Kh. Atikur Rahman** is an assistant professor of English at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University. He has MPhil and MA (ELT) from Dhaka University and Diploma in Teaching from CIE, University of Cambridge, UK. He is recently submitted his PhD thesis at DU. His research interest is ELT, teacher education and HRM.

**Prodhan Mahbub Ibna Seraj** is currently doing his PhD in TESL at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). He is an assistant professor of English at Sylhet International University. He holds MA in English (DU). His research interest is technology in ELT.

**Kazi Dawood Hafiz** is an assistant professor of English at Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology. He holds MA in English (DU). He is currently a PhD fellow in ELT at BUP. His research interest is ELT at tertiary level.