

7 English language Teachers' Use of Oral Feedback

*Hamed Mohammed Al-Fahdi
Deputy Headmaster, Dakhiliya Region*

1 INTRODUCTION

Giving feedback is one of the key roles that teachers play in the classroom. This is an important role and the way the teacher handles it can have a strong influence on the learners' experience. In particular, the way teachers respond to learners can have a powerful impact on learners' attitudes towards the subject (Tsui 1985). This study examines the oral feedback of a group of teachers of English in Oman.

2 BACKGROUND

There are many options available to the teacher in giving feedback but discussions with my colleagues about such issues suggested we were not wholly clear about the choices we make in our own teaching. That is what led me to conduct this study. To understand our work better, I wanted to describe and analyse the kinds of oral feedback my colleagues and myself provide. I could then use these descriptions to think more carefully about my own feedback practices.

3 ORAL FEEDBACK

3.1 Defining Feedback

Ur (1996: 242) says that "in the context of teaching in general, feedback is information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance." As Littlewood (1981) and Lewis (2002) also point out, feedback means telling learners about their progress and showing them their errors in order to guide them to areas for improvement. Feedback can be oral or written.

3.2 Types of feedback

Gattullo (2000) and Harmer (2001) divide feedback into corrective, evaluative and strategic. Corrective feedback focuses on helping learners notice and correct errors. This type of feedback explains why correct responses are correct and incorrect ones are wrong. In language learning, corrective feedback will be primarily concerned with accuracy. Evaluative feedback aims to provide a judgement on the learners' performance. Gattullo (2000) suggests that evaluative feedback is dominant in second and foreign language classrooms. In giving evaluative feedback, teachers use words or phrases to indicate the extent to which learners' performance is good or not (e.g. 'very good'). Finally, strategic feedback usually aims to offer learners

advice on what to do to improve their performance. In other words teachers try to suggest ways of helping learners to overcome their mistake by themselves. Tsui (1995) suggests that using strategic feedback may enhance learning as it can help learners to become self-reliant.

In addition, writers such as McNamara (1999) and Ayoun (2001) have pointed out that teachers' oral feedback might affect learners' attitudes to their learning positively or negatively and so feedback can also be categorised as either positive or negative. Positive feedback shows learners that the teacher is interested in what they say and at the same time encourages them. Negative feedback expresses the teacher's displeasure, frustration or involves some kind of punishment.

3.3 Directing Feedback

A key decision for teachers is whether to provide feedback to learners individually or in groups. Race et al. (1998: 25) suggest that "it can be worth giving general feedback about common mistakes to group rather than individual." This might help other learners to avoid that mistake in future. On the other hand, Harmer (2001) suggests that to avoid frustration and to motivate our learners we should not always correct them in front of the class.

4 METHOD

4.1 Research Questions

This study investigated these questions:

1. What types of oral feedback are used by teachers of English in elementary, preparatory, and secondary classrooms in Oman?
2. To what extent do the teachers give oral feedback to individuals or groups?

4.2 Participants

The data were collected in a boys' school with about 1000 learners. Classes in the school ranged from elementary Grade 1 (age 6) till the final year of Secondary (around 17 years of age). I collected data in my own classroom and in those of six colleagues in the same school. My class was elementary Grade 6 (learners age 12), while those of my colleagues were elementary Grade 4 and Grade 5, preparatory Grade 1 and 3, and Secondary Grade 1 and Grade 2. Classes in this school had on average about 35 learners in each class, though some had over 40.

4.3 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through audio recordings and observations. In one of my own lessons and in one each of the other six teachers, two oral tasks were chosen for analysis. These were recorded,

transcribed and the teachers' use of oral feedback in them analysed. The recordings were also supplemented by notes I made during the lessons of my colleagues (which I observed). During these observations I used a simple observation sheet to record information about the type of feedback the teachers were using and how often.

5 FINDINGS

The analysis of the data from all the lessons studied here provides a clear answer to the second research question this study investigated: all the teachers consistently provided feedback to the whole group and not to individuals. The focus of this section, therefore, is on the findings for the first research question.

5.1 Oral Feedback in My Lesson

Table 1 summarises the types of feedback in the two tasks that I analysed from my own teaching. It is clear from these figures that by far most of my oral feedback was evaluative. That is, when responding to learners I frequently commented in a way that made it clear to them whether their performance was good or not. In giving evaluative feedback, the words and phrases I used most often were 'Yes', 'Good', 'Yes thank you' and 'Okay, thank you'.

Table 1: Types of feedback in my teaching

Feedback type	Task 1	Task 2	Total
Evaluative	23	25	48
Corrective	8	6	14
Strategic	5	3	8

Corrective feedback is also evaluative, with the addition that it involves identifying and correcting errors too. An example of corrective feedback from my work is the following, where the learners were naming objects in their books:

T: No. 11
S: A limp
T: No, a lamp
S: A lamp
T: Okay

Here, I pointed out and corrected the error for the learner, who then repeated the correct form. An example of strategic feedback from my work was when I reminded learners to check if the noun had an -s at the end before deciding which verb to use with it (a learner had used a singular verb with a plural noun). This is the kind of feedback they can use in future to monitor their own work.

5.2 Oral Feedback in Colleagues' Lessons

5.2.1 Elementary Classrooms

Table 2 compares the frequency of feedback types in my two tasks (conducted in an elementary classroom) to those in two tasks in the lessons of colleagues also teaching elementary classes. The overall trends evident here are very similar. In particular, in my colleagues' work as in mine, evaluative feedback was by far the most common type used.

Table 2: Types of feedback in elementary classrooms

	Evaluative	Corrective	Strategic
My tasks	48	14	8
Teacher 1	72	8	6
Teacher 2	64	12	4
Total	184	34	18

The range of expressions used by my elementary teacher colleagues to give evaluative feedback was similar to mine. For example, Teacher 1 regularly said "Thank you, very good", "Good" and "Yes, yes" whereas after correct answers Teacher 2 said "Yes, good. Thank you (name)", "Okay, good", "Very nice" and "Very good". They also said 'No' when incorrect answers were provided, as in this example from Teacher 1.

- S: Her a scarf.
T: No. Her scarf. Again (name).
S: Her scarf.
T: Yes, good.

My colleagues also used corrective feedback in a similar way that I did, i.e. by providing the correct answer and asking learners to repeat. Here is an example from Teacher 2:

- T: (name) Read the sentence.
S: Waleed caught a some fish.
T: Waleed caught a small fish.
S: Waleed caught a small fish.
T: Okay.

5.2.2 Preparatory Classrooms

Table 3 summarises the types and frequency of oral feedback used during two tasks by the teachers in preparatory classes. Once again, evaluative feedback was the most commonly used.

Table 3: Types of feedback in preparatory classrooms

	Evaluative	Corrective	Strategic
Teacher 3	12	6	0
Teacher 4	14	5	1
Total	26	11	1

Common expressions used to give such feedback by the teachers were “Yes”, “All right”, “Excellent” and “Yes, that’s right”. ‘No’ was also used to give evaluative feedback, as in this example:

- T: Water.
 S1: There are some water in the glass.
 T: No. Who can say the correct answer ?
 S2: There is some water in the glass.
 T: Again (name).
 S1: There is some water in the glass.
 T: That’s right.

5.2.3 Secondary Classrooms

Table 4 summarises the analysis of the tasks from secondary classrooms. The patterns seen in the other classrooms are repeated here, though strategic feedback did not occur in the tasks observed at this level. Key language used by the teachers in giving evaluative feedback was “Excellent”, “Yes” “Well done” and “That’s good”.

Table 4: Types of feedback in secondary classrooms

	Evaluative	Corrective	Strategic
Teacher Five	10	2	0
Teacher Six	8	3	0
Total	18	5	0

Teacher 6 also used ‘No’ to correct learners’ responses:

- S1: A potter is a man who make pottery.
 T: No, who can say it correctly?
 S2: A potter is a man who makes pottery.
 S1: A potter is a man who makes pottery.
 T: Excellent. A potter is a man who makes pottery.

6 DISCUSSION

Although only two tasks in each of seven lessons were studied here, there are some interesting points to comment on. Evaluative feedback was by far the most common type of oral feedback used by the teachers in this study, at all levels. This finding supports Tsui’s (1985) claim that evaluative feedback dominates classroom interaction. Also, the frequency of feedback overall decreased as the level of the class increased. This might be because at elementary level teachers feel their learners need more feedback, perhaps in order to motivate the learners more. Another explanation might be that learners at lower levels make more mistakes, which teachers respond to. The data studied here showed more examples of teachers’ responding positively to learners than of them responding negatively, with words such as ‘No’. Although the fact that so much of the feedback in these classrooms was

evaluative may be a cause for concern, the teachers did seem to be aware of the need to avoid discouraging learners by being too negative in their responses. As McNamara (1999) asserts, such an attitude might frustrate learners and create in them negative attitudes towards learning.

Another finding to note here is that strategic feedback was not used very often by teachers. Such feedback helps learners to develop skills which allow them to avoid errors in future by monitoring and checking their own performance. This study suggests that learners are not being encouraged to develop these skills; rather, they are dependent on the teacher for feedback about the quality of their work.

Finally, as noted earlier, all the teachers gave feedback to the whole class rather than to individuals. This may have been the result of the tasks which were studied – oral tasks directed from the front of the class by the teacher. Such tasks are actually typical of the General Education curriculum all the teachers in this study work with. Whole class feedback does allow all learners to learn from each other's mistakes, but at the same time it may mean that shy learners may sometimes be embarrassed and after that less willing to participate.

7 CONCLUSION

This study raises some interesting questions about the way teachers of English in Oman give oral feedback. A new curriculum is currently being introduced which encourages teachers to use language more meaningfully in the classroom and to use more modern approaches to language teaching. In adopting this new curriculum, teachers will also need support in thinking about classroom interaction and in particular the way they respond to learners' contributions.

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