THE RELEVANCE OF FEEDBACK MESSAGES IN COMMUNICATING QUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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Abstract

This paper put forward an in-depth reflection grounded on two studies. The first regards to doctoral research designed to investigate teachers 'interpretations of feedback in terms of theory and practice and it explores how this might be informed by their conceptions of how students learn. The inquiry involves three Year 5 and one Year 4 teachers from three different primary schools in London. The main sources of data comprise classroom observation and teachers' interviews focusing on teachers' feedback practices and the underlying principles that guide them in the actual conducting of classroom interaction and through pupils written assignments. Analysis suggested that feedback focused on correcting basics errors, seeking further actions on the task at hand and contrasting the work with learning objective and success criteria. The main lessons learnt from the practices and views held by teachers in England were distilled into little stories and made them accessible to other teachers to help them to reflect on their own positions on the feedback issues. This was endeavoured in the context of the work in Chile within a teacher professional development programme with 60 enrolled primary school teachers. They were asked to select written assignments stemming from their pupils work to design written feedback for these tasks. This is followed by an iterative process of reflection about the messages conveyed through their comments. Data show that the teachers faced difficulties at the initial stages of development as their comments were evaluative, that is, centred on what was missing, with little room for students' self-assessment. The participants greatly improved their elaborated comments as being more descriptive, and with a focal point on the task features. Both studies provide insightful data in terms of the problematic nature of teachers' comments as pupils cannot achieve a broader understanding of quality within their pieces of work. It seems that teachers still hold a remedial approach to feedback. (Black & Wiliam, 2012, Swaffield, S. 2011; Sadler, 2007,2010).

Keywords: Quality, feedback, criteria communication, self-assessment.

1. Introduction

Extant literature highlights the foremost role of feedback in supporting students' learning. Notwithstanding, a notion that pervades across a range of those studies is that the nature and purpose of feedback becomes crucial for students to actually use that information to broaden their understanding (Black & Wiliam, 1998,2009,2012; Black et. al., 2003; Kluger & Denisi,1996; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Brookhart, 2008, 2009). This main assumption draws on Sadler's proposal (1989,2007,2010) who advocates that feedback should make accessible to pupils what quality entails in a piece of work. This, in turn, brings to the fore three important educational challenges, as this author asserts: firstly, it demands externalising aspects of quality out of the teachers' thought, which does not seem straightforward, namely, descriptive statements and key exemplars are needed to illustrate aspects of quality when a learning task is in progress. Secondly, it requires expanding students' abilities to make complex and holistic judgements on their work which should be substantiated on intertwined criteria, trying to avoid the practice of sharing a check list that comprises separated fixed components against which their work will be assessed. Thirdly, feedback seeks at developing pupils' capacity into self- assessment by fostering them to make their own choices about the pertinent strategies to enrich their tasks. Thereby, Sadler's approach to feedback (1989,2007,2010) stands out not just how teachers communicate concepts of quality to their students, but also how pupils themselves come to an in-depth understanding of this sense of quality. This is to say, the way feedback messages are conveyed by teachers and interpreted by pupils matters a great deal when seeking that the formative purpose of assessment is not being subverted in practice.

It could be ascertained that a large body of research has been concentrated in exploring feedback quality and the role it plays in learning. Kluger & Denisi's (1996) meta-analysis investigated the effects of feedback interventions on performance. Hattie & Timperley (2007) expound that feedback can be accomplished at different levels: providing helpful information for knowing how to complete the work, searching for and the use of strategies and processes implied in doing the task, fostering pupils self-regulation and giving comments about the self as a person. These levels concern to diverse feedback focus which influence differently teaching and learning processes. Bearing this in mind, Brookhart (2008) contends that feedback inside the classroom should be descriptive and criterion-referenced, giving guidance on how to improve the task at hand and also enlightening pupils in making sense of the involved processes, so they might identify the next learning goal. By contrast, this author does not recommend norm-referenced feedback, in her view, it encourages competitiveness, which is especially threatening for low achievers.

This paper examines some developments from two inquiries. It is grounded on the theoretical insights and findings from a doctoral research carried out in England, which addresses feedback from the part of the teachers, since 'it can lay the foundations for pupils to develop a sense of quality and be able to use that knowledge to analyse their work' (Yanez-Monje ,2017:42). The overarching learnt lessons from this study shaped our decisions for conducting a subsequent research initiative in Chile with a focus on written forms of feedback. Hence, this article reports on a variety of perspectives that drive feedback practices given by teachers to pupil's writing assignments and how these endeavours seem to trigger different possibilities for students in terms of strengthening or hindering their understanding.

2. Methodology

The studies followed a qualitative paradigm (Mason, 2022; Berg & Lune, 2012; Silverman, 2011) seeking consistency with its focus on practices, interpretations and processes being carried out as well as addressing teachers' reflections in these respects. The enquiries sought to have access to the meanings that participants attributed to their feedback strategies that were applied. These were small- scale studies that addressed how two different groups of participant teachers see themselves dealing with the object of the study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

2.1. Research questions
Both studies have a broader scope and perspective, in what follows the research questions that are answered in the context of this report are considered:
- How do teachers interpret feedback from a theoretical and practical standpoint in relation to their teaching and their students' learning?
- What are the teachers' feedback practices and the underlying principles that guide them in the actual conducting of classroom interaction and through pupils written assignments?

The focus within this paper regards mainly to written forms of feedback.

2.2. Participants
In England, the teachers were selected on the basis of their having declared and interest in implementing feedback as a strategy for formative assessment. It was also a criterion to choose participants with different teaching experiences and backgrounds and pertained to schools with distinctive sociocultural context. In addition to this, it was deemed that only those teaching Y5 or Y4 classes would be included, because these schools years may have been less influenced by the external accountability purposes of assessment.

In Chile, 60 primary teachers took part of the initiative. A scholarship was granted for them to attend the two-years teaching professional development programme at the University of Concepción. They were taught, amongst other subjects, on written production assessment within the context of an assessment for learning approach.

Accordingly, the same tenet drove sampling selection through these studies. It was purposive, within a qualitative stance (Mason, 2002, Cohen & Manion,2011). It was strategic or theoretical in nature, for it sought to capture diversity in relation to a wider universe, but did not involve pursuing representativeness (Mason, 2002).

2.3. Data collection and analysis
Within the study conducted in England classroom observation and participant interviews were selected as methos for gathering information. The observation process aimed to document events in which feedback have occurred. An event was understood as a theoretical construct or a heuristic deployed to

investigate how people can create meanings when they are acting and reacting to each other (Bloom et al., 2008; Bloom et al., 2009). Follow-up interviews were carried out seeking to enrich the understanding of feedback events observed. A semi-structured format was adopted for the interviews so as to explore the teachers' intentions in the feedback process with reference to pupils' written assignments. To analyse the interview data, 'meaning coding', as suggested by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) was applied. This within an iterative process that allowed the data to be constantly compared (Charmaz,2006)

Regarding the study undertaken in Chile, the main source of data comprised feedback messages devised by teachers to their students' writing tasks. The messages were analysed by using Brookhart' (2008,2009) framework, which focused on the content of the teachers' comments, trying to elucidate its focus, kind of comparisons used, function, orientation, clarity, specificity and tone.

3. Results & discussion

A number of key elements can be identified in the ways that participants-teachers from the three schools in England enacted feedback: The first was in relation to the basics of the writing, whereas the second concerned the dimensions that emerged from the content of the feedback messages and the third, had to do with their views about pupils' possibilities to recognise quality in a piece of writing.

The data illustrated a common orientation towards correcting basic errors, although with distinctive underlying emphasis. For instance, *Teacher 1* came up with a strategy focusing on marking misspelled words that were familiar to the students and those directly linked to the subject matter. This teacher was highly concerned with not discouraging students, who were very weak in spelling, by correcting all the mistakes in their work. *Teacher 2* did not appear to use a selective strategy, he underlined all spelling and punctuations mistakes that needed to be amended but giving the students the responsibility of checking their own work and making corrections by themselves. Teacher 3, began by stating that basic errors should not be at the center in marking, but in practice all these technical aspects did appear to take on more importance as she tended to spell out all these sorts of details within the children's work. Whilst *Teacher 4* reported spotlighting some aspects related to grammar, but not stressing what was wrong, and rather pointing out what was right. Hence, the results revealed differing choices made by the participants to dealt with this part of the feedback process and their practices remained aligned with the strategies and procedures suggested within the policy documents of each school.

Three main dimensions were involved within the feedback messages devised by the participants as part of their written comments; to communicate to their students whether they had met the learning objective or the success criteria, to give positive information by recognising students' effort, and to provide advice on follow-up action. The analysis of these purposes from their perspectives allow to understand what they believed quality involves in a piece of writing. *Teacher 1* accentuated mainly on the comprehension of the topic and adjusted her prompts to meet the needs of the pupils whom she considered to be low, middle, or high achievers. *Teacher 2* made suggestions centred on the use of language to clarify meaning. *Teacher 3* placed emphasis on the key elements according to the conventions of a particular genre, as well as aspects of grammar or punctuation, where appropriate. *Teacher 4* also paid attention to the use of words and structures within specific sorts of texts. In addition, she stated that written comments should be composed of differentiated questions attuned to children abilities. These teachers 'outlooks on their feedback messages were consistent with what was observed in the excerpts from the students 'books. These examples suggest that quality was delineated according to the curriculum content. The judgments were made in terms of the particulars words or phrases that characterized the kind of text intended to be produced. The sort of advice was offered as discrete points of information and not in the form of holistic comments. Consequently, it became more difficult to pay attention to the overall purpose of a piece of writing. This notion was still more evident when the participant teachers devised comments according to a list of specified and pre-established criteria. This has implications in the ways that teachers approach feedback, namely: a) In some cases, the students were able to follow the teachers' guidance and corrected isolated features of their work, but remains unclear whether they could understand the reasons underpinning the teachers' advice. b) the messages focused on the particulars were tied with that the teachers asked the students to do in the follow up action or what they needed to do next. However, this last part of the message seemed to be overwhelmed by the emphasis on what was still missing, rather than telling the students how to make quality- b a s e d improvements in the current piece of work.

The results suggest that although written forms of feedback were highly structured in terms of making learning objectives and success criteria transparent, the teachers developed the view that pupils' engagement with these seem to have been problematic at the time that the study was undertaken. *Teacher 1* reported that the students had not yet grasped the intended goal that underpin specific tasks, thereby,

they might not be able to analyse quality in their pieces of writing. *Teachers 3 and 4*, in a similar vein, both claimed that children were not skilled enough to recognise what quality meant and thus, be able to communicate its aspects to others. They also shared the opinion that this was particularly hard for those who were low achievers. By contrast, *teacher 2* indicated that he had developed a strategy of using the learning objective flexibly. He had built up an idea of his students playing an active role in interpreting not only the criteria but also the comments given. Nevertheless, there was not further evidence from the data about how this method was unfolded or whether it thrived.

Data gathered from the study conducted in Chile shed light on the process experienced by teachers when devising written comments. It would be important to note that since the year 2018 the National Curricula adopted and Assessment Policy that accentuates its formative purpose (MINEDUC-UCE,2017). This framed the schools' concerns in terms of modifying not only the regulations but also, and still more important, the tenets that drive their assessment practices. This can help to contextualise the participants engagement to discuss the rationale introduced by the policy and its implications for their ensuing feedback practices. Throughout the training programme the teachers were involved within an iterative process of reflection that considered the insightful findings from previous research, the analysis of their own examples of feeddack messages, and the enhancement of these exemplars. Broadly, the main changes produced over time within the drafting of feedback messages were the following: a) from providing indetermined information about the task at hand, *Good Work!,* towards a more precise focus by explaining the specific characteristics of the task that define quality. b) from being normative and evaluative, *This is the best essays I ever seen!,* to making reference to those criteria already discussed with the children, using descriptive judgments c) exerting a negative orientation by only pointing out what is wrong or missing *you need to include this time connective!* towards a more descriptive advices on what has been done well or suggesting how to improve. d)from just rephrasing the students answers into more appropriate forms, namely, correcting the work for the pupil, to asking questions fostering pupils to think by themselves how the work can be amended. As stated earlier the comments were analysed by using Brookhart (2008) proposal. This helped to realise, from this initiative, that the teachers were on the road of improving written comments, but, there is a still a long road to state the issues were solved. Particularly, what still needed to be accomplished is the feedback focus on the processes implied on the learning tasks and how the suggestions can foster students'self-regulation.

All in all, it could be surmised that, despite the nuances and contextual issues around the participants from both studies some commonalities could be identified. The feedback messages fostered students correcting their work, acting on the teacher advice, but still not reflecting on a broader sense capturing the concepts and principles they should use in future similar tasks.

4. Conclusions

Despite the singularities on the ways that participant-teachers enacted feedback practices from both studies the complex nature of the devised written comments was noted. This regarding the extent to which they support pupils in the improvement of their pieces of work. Focusing on what elements were present or absent within the learning task, then giving advice so that the students might recall what to include next time has resemblance with a convergent view of assessment. (Torrance & Pryor,2001).

The teachers expected pupils responded to their feedback. Thus, they asked further action. The character of these requirements or recommendations reflected the scope and the possibilities for students understanding of what count as good work. The data evoked testing and remediation which in turn meant restricted or limited exploration of quality by the students.

The notion that remained stable across the participants from both inquiries is that there is a need for expanding the students' opportunities to grasp a sense of quality. Nevertheless, in the actual drafting of written comments this purpose seemed to be entangled within other pedagogical priorities.

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