

Teachers' Beliefs and Practice Concerning Feedback Strategies

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Abstract

This study aims at surveying what strategies teachers believe they use in giving feedback, what strategies teachers actually use in giving feedback and the relationship between their perceptions and the reality. The six subjects were teachers who taught Fundamental English II at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). Each of them was observed teaching once and then asked to rank feedback strategies by perceived frequency of use. The results show that some of the perceptions about frequency of use match the actual strategies they used in class but some of them do not. Some feedback strategies, such as *zero feedback* and *repeating student utterance*, were used more frequently in actual practice than teachers believed, possibly since those feedback strategies do not require a conscious thinking process; on the other hand, the strategy *summarizing strategies* was used less in practice, perhaps because this strategy needs a great deal of conscious effort.

Introduction

In the era of globalization, life-long learning plays an important role in teaching and learning language. This view brings about changes in teachers' roles. As the saying goes, "you can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink" (Scharle & Szabo, 2000: 4). Comparing this to teaching, teachers can provide all the necessary circumstances and input, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute. Therefore, teachers have to regulate their teaching strategies in order to help students become autonomous so that they succeed in language learning.

The way to encourage fruitfully our students to be life-long learners emanates from teachers. Thus, as teachers, we should attach significance to helping learners be able to reflect on their learning so that they can make progress with it. As Lewis (2002) points out, 'feedback' can be provided by teachers or by students themselves. Before students are able to give feedback by themselves on their learning, however, they need some guidelines from teachers. In other words, teachers' feedback can provide some information for learners to realize the way to reflect on their learning. In addition, it can enable learners to discover what and how to give feedback by themselves. For this reason, in this study, the researchers emphasize feedback from teachers, especially in the classroom.

What is teacher feedback?

Cole & Chan (1987) characterize that, in the classroom, feedback can be any form of communication that attempts to provide information to students about the quantity or quality of their performance in a learning situation. Furthermore, Cole & Chan (1987: 242) mention that feedback is information that is "fed back to individuals about the appropriateness of their actions and responses". It flows from a teacher to students in

order to inform students of their correct responses and their errors. So, what the teacher says about students' performance in the classroom is called teacher feedback.

There are many ways in which teacher feedback can be classified. Cole & Chan (1987: 242-6) provide the following six categories that teachers use most frequently:

Positive and negative feedback: When teachers inform students whether their responses are appropriate or correct, it is called *positive feedback*, for example, "That's right" or "That is a good answer". In contrast, when teachers inform students that their behavior or performance is inappropriate or incorrect, it is called *negative feedback*; one example of this is "Not right".

Reinforcement and punishment: *Reinforcement* aims to strengthen a particular student's behaviour or response, for example, "Keep up the good work". When teachers reinforce or act to strengthen responses, teachers are informing students that they have made appropriate responses. On the other hand, if teachers punish or act to weaken responses, they are informing students that there are some mistakes in the responses, for example, "Your grammar rules are weak". This is called *punishment*; its aim is to weaken a student's particular behaviour or response.

Intended and non-intended feedback: If the students have the same interpretation of the feedback message as the teachers intend, it is called *intended feedback*. Watson Todd (1997: 91) gives an example where the teacher says, "But what about the tense?" and the student may interpret this as meaning "There is a mistake with the tense". On the other hand, where students have different perceptions of the original message from their teachers' intention, it is called *non-intended feedback*.

Evaluative and non-evaluative feedback: Statements that contain words like "Good" or "Bad" are *evaluative feedback*; they focus on students' performance. On the other side, *non-evaluative feedback* makes no judgment on students' performance, for example, "You have made two mistakes" (Watson Todd, 1997: 91).

Verbal, symbolic and non-verbal feedback: Cole & Chan (1987: 246) state that "*Verbal and symbolic feedback* refer to language ... and symbolic ... forms of communication given to inform students of the correctness or incorrectness of their responses". On the other hand, when teachers smile, nod or use physical acts to respond to students' performance, it is called *non-verbal feedback*.

Corrective feedback: This provides some information on correct responses and errors plus instruction to correct errors to remedy particular problems in students' learning; for example, when students make errors on grammar rules, teachers may re-explain the rules to them.

The importance of teacher feedback

Since the view of autonomous learners has an impact on teaching and learning language, teacher feedback can have two main advantages. The first is the information that students get from teacher feedback – this can help them improve their subsequent performances. Cole & Chan (1987) say that feedback is the information that allows students to check the adequacy of their performance and monitor their learning

progress. Watson Todd (1997) states that teacher feedback enables students to check their own performance and monitor the progress of their learning. As a result, feedback is one of the vital factors in students' learning.

The second main advantage is that feedback can make learners conduct their learning effectively because, when teachers give feedback to learners in positive ways, they motivate learners to learn. Feedback aims at enabling students to improve their future efforts. Williams & Burden (1997: 136) assert that:

“if feedback actually provides information to learners that enables them to identify specific aspects of their performance that are acceptable and capable of improvement by some specified means, it should motivate and help students to move into the zone of the next development”.

The way teachers use give feedback may differ from teacher to teacher. It depends on their beliefs. What goes on in their classrooms will be influenced by their beliefs about the learning process. To illustrate, Williams & Burden (1997: 206) explain that teachers' actions in the classroom and their interactions with their learners will mirror, either implicitly or explicitly, their beliefs about learning, their views of the world, their self-views, and their attitudes towards their subject and their learners. As Richards & Lockhart (1994: 29) state, this view of teaching is “based on the assumption that what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe”. As a result, teachers' beliefs may influence the giving of feedback in classroom teaching.

What are teachers' beliefs?

Teachers' beliefs are defined in various ways. Johnson (1995) broadly defines the term by saying that beliefs shape our representation of reality and guide both our thoughts and our behaviors. Woods (1996) describes teachers' beliefs as what a person knows that affects thinking, interpretation and planning action. Also, Pajares (1992: 307) states that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behaviors in the classroom. According to this definition, teachers' beliefs have a powerful impact on their actions. Similarly, the ways that each teacher gives feedback differ because they have dissimilar beliefs.

How do teachers' beliefs influence their giving feedback?

Teachers' personal views of their roles in the classroom are under the influence of their beliefs. Johnson (1995) states that beliefs guide teachers' expectations, judgments and decisions. One example of this is that the way teachers give feedback to students is shaped by their beliefs. Thus, feedback strategies given to learners differ depending on each teacher's individual beliefs.

To examine how teachers' beliefs influence their giving feedback, Wright (1987: 62) identifies two basic types of teacher: *transmission teachers* and *interpretation teachers*. Briefly, transmission teachers seem to be teacher-controlled because they use their power as teachers to control their learners; they concentrate on the knowledge of their subject. On the other hand, interpretation teachers prefer to distribute responsibility for learning among the learners. This seems to be learner-centered because the teachers' duties are to persuade and appeal to students to develop their knowledge of the subject.

From these two kinds of teachers, it appears that there are different beliefs which imply different feedback styles. Wright (1987) believes that the main task of transmission teachers is to evaluate and correct learners' performance. For this reason, the ways the teachers in this group give feedback to students are different from those of the interpretation teachers, who believe that their main task is to distribute responsibility for learning among learners. For example, in the classroom, transmission teachers check the correctness or incorrectness of learners' responses whereas interpretation teachers praise or encourage learners for positive efforts to maintain learners' motivation to do their work. As a result, teachers' beliefs have an impact on the way feedback is given.

Differences between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual practices

Since we know that teachers' beliefs play an important role in relation to their actual practices, some differences between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual practices should be considered. When teachers know what kind of teacher they want to be, this is called 'teachers' stated beliefs'. Johnson (1996: 33) quotes a pre-service teacher (Maja), who described her feeling of "knowing why you are teaching something, what the learning outcome is, and how it fits into the overall goals for the students". The term 'actual practices' refers to the real situation in the classroom, which Johnson's (1996: 34) pre-service teacher describes as "what life is really like in an ESL classroom". In the real classroom, sometimes teachers' stated beliefs match their actual teaching and sometimes there are some mismatches between the two.

Some researchers have studied the relationship between teachers' stated beliefs and actual practices, and they have found some consistency between the two. Richards (1998) gives an example that teachers' planning decisions provide a framework for interactive decisions that are related to classroom management and organization. In contrast, some studies have found inconsistency between stated beliefs and practices. Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis (2004: 245) give an example that "a study by Borko and Niles (1982) found that teachers' stated educational beliefs were unrelated to how they grouped students for instruction". A key issue is what factors cause differences between teachers' beliefs and actual practices, two of which could be said to be the following.

Complexity in classrooms: There are some causes for complexity in classrooms such as time, learners' differences and teachers' differences. Johnson's (1996: 34) pre-service teacher gives an example that there is a constant flow of interruptions, such as "knocks at the door, announcements over the loud speaker, the attendance sheet, students flying in, students flying out". These things might mean that teachers cannot give the feedback intended because teachers are unable to concentrate on their teaching.

Tensions: Trainee and inexperienced teachers are often stressed while teaching because of lack of meaningful instructional activities, lack of knowledge about students and lack of academic preparation in the content area (Johnson, 1996). For example, when students test trainee teachers' knowledge, this makes trainee teachers feel tense.

How to give feedback?

Since teachers have differing beliefs about teaching language, there are various ways of giving feedback that are based on their beliefs. In language classrooms, there are two stimuli for feedback: *content* and *form*. Richards & Lockhart (1994) state that feedback on students' spoken language may be a response either to the content or the form. The term 'content' refers to what students say without checking grammatical errors. The term 'form' refers to grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and discourse features; feedback on form is directed toward the accuracy of what students say.

Selecting the ways of giving feedback depends on the situation of teaching and learning. In regard to the English curriculum at KMUTT, the main focus is on task-based activities. Nunan (1989: 10) defines the term 'task' as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form". In addition, Krahnke (1987: 58) maintains that "the intent of task-based learning is to use learners' real-life needs and activities as learning experiences, providing motivation through immediacy and relevancy". From these definitions of 'task' and 'task-based learning', we can see that teachers' roles in the classroom have to be changed so that teachers can help learners reach the objectives of the lesson. As a result, giving feedback in some courses at KMUTT tends to put an emphasis on content rather than form; however, this does not mean that feedback on form is ignored.

The reason that this study focuses on feedback is that the researchers believe it can help students develop self-confidence, stay on task, and keep students responsible for their own learning. The ways that teachers respond to students or deal with affective factors, especially to increase motivation or build a supportive classmate in order to help students' performance, are not easy. There is a variety of possible strategies for giving feedback. The following list represents a slightly modified version of Richards & Lockhart's (1994: 189) set of strategies:

Table 1: Feedback strategies (adapted from Richards & Lockhart 1994)

Feedback strategy	Description
Acknowledging a correct answer or indicating an incorrect answer	The teacher indicates that a student's answer is correct or incorrect by saying, for example, "Good", "Yes", or "Mmm".
Praising or criticizing the utterance	The teacher praises a student for an answer, "Yes, an excellent answer".
Repeating the student utterance	The teacher repeats a student's answer.
Expanding or modifying the utterance	The teacher responds to an uncertain or incomplete answer by providing more information, or paraphrasing the answer in the teacher's own words.
Asking follow-up questions	The teacher asks some questions to expand a student's utterance.
Summarizing	The teacher gives a summary of what a student said.

In reality, teachers sometimes do not give feedback to their students; for this reason, the researchers think that *zero feedback* should be included as a category of feedback.

Zero feedback or no feedback is one strategy whereby teachers do not inform students of the correctness or incorrectness of their responses (Cole & Chan, 1987). So, zero feedback shows implicit feedback. This means that students do not know exactly whether their responses are right or wrong because the teacher does not react directly to their responses.

The research questions in this study are:

1. What strategies do teachers actually use in giving feedback?
2. What strategies do teachers believe they use in giving feedback?
3. What is the relationship between what strategies teachers believe they use and what they actually use in giving feedback?

Research methodology

This section provides information on the participants in the study, the instruments, procedures and data analysis.

Participants

The six subjects, four female and two male, were all teachers of Fundamental English II (LNG 102) in semester 1/2005, a fifteen-week course organized by the Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts at KMUTT; they all met their students twice a week. They had between two and ten years of teaching experience. They were willing to have their teaching observed, and the researchers observed each of them once for about 100 minutes.

Instruments

Observation sheet: This was used to find out what strategies the teachers actually used in giving feedback. It was written in English and consists of seven feedback strategies (adapted from Richards & Lockhart, 1994: 189) (see appendix).

Ranking scale form: The ranking scale form was a survey on the teachers' beliefs about feedback strategies. Its objective was to find out what strategies teachers believed they used in giving feedback. This instrument consists of the same seven feedback strategies as in the observation sheet.

Procedures

Stage 1: Preparation

1. The instruments (observation sheet and ranking scale form) were designed.
2. The subjects were selected.
3. Each subject was asked for permission to observe his or her teaching once and an appointment was made for the observation.

Stage 2: Data collection

1. The first researcher observed each class and recorded on the observation sheet the feedback strategies each subject used while teaching.
2. After the subjects had finished their teaching, they were informed that giving feedback strategies was the main focus of the observation. Then the first researcher distributed the ranking scale form to the subjects and asked them to rank the strategies they thought they had used by frequency (1 = most frequent; 7 = least frequent); to avoid bias, the obtained data were not shown to the subjects.

Data analysis

To answer Research Question 1, the researcher counted how many times each strategy was recorded on the observation sheet and then ranked them by frequency (1 = most frequent; 7 = least frequent). The data from the ranking scale form were used to answer Research Question 2. Then, in order to answer Research Question 3, the data from both instruments were compared by using Spearman's rank order correlation. All the data are presented and interpreted in the following section.

Results

The findings are presented as rankings of teachers' believed and actual use of feedback strategies and as a correlation between teachers' beliefs and practice.

Rankings of teachers' believed use and actual use

Table 2: Feedback strategies ranked by teachers' believed use and actual use*

Feedback strategies	Subject A	Subject B	Subject C	Subject D	Subject E	Subject F	\bar{X}
Asking follow-up questions	2 (4)	3 (2.5)	2 (4)	2 (1)	3 (2)	3 (3)	2.50 (2.75)
Summarizing	1 (6)	4 (6)	4 (6.5)	5 (6.5)	4 (5.5)	2 (6)	3.33 (6.08)
Expanding or modifying utterance	5 (2)	2 (2.5)	3 (5)	3 (4.5)	2 (3.5)	5 (4)	3.33 (3.58)
Acknowledging correct, or indicating incorrect, answer	6 (1)	1 (6)	5 (2.5)	4 (4.5)	5 (3.5)	4 (1)	4.17 (3.08)
Repeating student utterance	4 (7)	6 (1)	6 (1)	1 (2)	1 (1)	7 (2)	4.17 (2.33)
Praising or criticizing utterance	3 (3)	7 (6)	1 (6.5)	6 (6.5)	6 (7)	6 (6)	4.83 (5.83)
Zero feedback	7 (5)	5 (4)	7 (2.5)	7 (3)	7 (5.5)	1 (6)	5.67 (4.33)

* Numbers without brackets represent subjects' perceived rankings; those in brackets represent actual rankings observed (1 = most frequent; 7 = least frequent).

From the right column in Table 2, it can be seen from the numbers without brackets that the teachers believed that they used various strategies in giving feedback, especially *asking follow-up questions*, and they believed that they used *zero feedback* the least. The bracketed numbers in the table show that the teachers actually used different feedback strategies from those they believed they used; in particular, *repeating the student utterance* was the most frequently used strategy while *summarizing* was the least frequently used.

Correlation between teachers' beliefs and actual practice of giving feedback

In Table 3, Spearman's Rho is used to measure the correlation between the teachers' beliefs and actual use of feedback strategies. It can be seen that, for most of the teachers, there are differences between the feedback strategies they believed they used and those that they actually used. However, whereas there is no significant correlation between the observer and five of the six subjects, a significant correlation exists between the observer and one subject (Subject E).

Table 3: Correlation between teachers' beliefs and actual practice

Observer-Subject	Correlation	p-value
O-A	-0.36	n.s
O-B	0.00	n.s
O-C	-0.61	n.s
O-D	0.59	n.s
O-E	0.80	p<0.05
O-F	0.36	n.s

Significance = $p < 0.05$

Table 4 shows that there is a general pattern for most teachers that some of the feedback strategies in their beliefs match their actual use of strategies but some of the beliefs do not match their actual practice. However, the relationship between the strategies the teachers believed they used and those they actually used differed among the teachers. These results are discussed further in the following section.

Table 4: Differences between believed use and actual use of feedback strategies

Feedback strategies	Differences						\bar{X} of modulus of difference
	Subject A	Subject B	Subject C	Subject D	Subject E	Subject F	
Repeating student utterance	-3	5	5	-1	0	5	3.16
Acknowledging correct, or indicating incorrect, answer	5	-5	2.5	-0.5	1.5	3	2.91
Zero feedback	2	1	3.5	4	1.5	-5	2.83
Summarizing	-5	-2	-2.5	-1.5	-1.5	-4	2.75
Expanding or modifying utterance	3	-0.5	-2	-1.5	-1.5	1	1.58
Praising or criticizing utterance	0	1	-5.5	-0.5	-1	0	1.33
Asking follow-up questions	2	0.5	2	1	1	0	1.08

Discussion and implications

This discussion begins by focusing on the relationship between the teachers' beliefs and practice and then considers ways of reducing the gap between their beliefs and practice.

The relationship between the teachers' beliefs and their actual practice

From the findings, it can be interpreted that *zero feedback* and *repeating the student utterance* need little conscious effort, so they are used more frequently in actual practice than the teachers believed. The two strategies do not require teachers' thinking process. The teachers ignore or only repeat the students' responses. On the other hand, *summarizing* requires a great deal of conscious effort, it requires teachers' thinking process, so it is hardly used. To employ *summarizing strategy*, firstly, the teachers need to collect enough information from students' responses, they have to analyze the obtained information, and then present the oral summary by selecting the main points. However, the students' responses may be too short for teachers to use *summarizing strategy*. As revealed by the findings that the teachers' beliefs and their actual practices do not match each other, this may result in failure of teaching. Teachers may evaluate and consider their teaching with reference to their beliefs, while students evaluate and consider their learning with reference to what actually occurred, i.e. the practice. These conflicting viewpoints may lead to misunderstanding between teachers and students. If, however, the gap between teachers' beliefs and practice is reduced, such misunderstandings are less likely to occur.

Ways of reducing gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual practice

Some suggested ways of reducing the gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices are shown as follows:

Having some explicit rules or regulations: The researchers believe it is necessary for some teachers to set up some explicit rules or regulations for the classroom along with the students so that teachers are able to control classroom realities. It can be seen that teachers' tensions occur because teachers lack the ability to manage what happens in the classroom. So, if they develop their ability to have a sense of controlling things along with the rules or regulations, the mismatch between their beliefs and their actual practices may be reduced.

Ensuring rapport between teachers and students: In addition, teachers should have a balanced relationship between themselves and their students. This means that they should be neither too close nor too distant from the learners so that the latter can trust their teachers. This is important because, if learners trust their teachers, it is possible that they will believe in the feedback they receive. Teacher feedback will have value when learners apply it to develop their performance.

Being life-long learners: Teachers should be life-long learners. They should take opportunities to acquire new knowledge by reading and attending seminars and teaching training in order to develop their teaching competence. One of the ways teachers can increase their professional competence is to reflect on their teaching. Richards & Renandya (2002: 385) state that "teachers should constantly develop not only their knowledge of the subject but also their knowledge of pedagogy". One way to help teachers reflect on their teaching is diary writing. Larrivee (1999) states that

diary writing is a kind of self-reflection that teachers are able to use to explore and reflect on their teaching and also talk to themselves in the process of writing their diaries. Richards & Ho (1998) state that the objective of diary writing is to engage teachers in awareness-raising of their teaching by reflecting deeply on their lessons.

From the information above, it is obvious that there are some feedback strategies that need more conscious effort from teachers. Therefore, they should encourage themselves to perform the various feedback strategies. In so doing, they need to develop themselves in terms of their thought and teaching by reflecting constantly on what they do in the classroom to acquire new knowledge for adjusting their ways of teaching and raise their level of professional skills.

Conclusion

In the realization that giving feedback is one of the essential skills teachers use in the classroom, this study attempts to show the relationship between strategies teachers believe they use and those they actually use in giving feedback. The findings highlight that the feedback strategies used depend on teachers' differences. Since every feedback strategy can play an important role in teaching and learning language in class, teachers should be aware of some relationships between the strategies they believe they use and those they actually use in giving feedback. Obstacles sometimes occur unexpectedly in the classroom and these might prevent teachers from utilizing strategies they intend to use. Therefore, in order to foster their own professional development, teachers may need to set up discipline in the classroom, balance the rapport between themselves and their students and be life-long learners. Doing this may help teachers decide which feedback strategies suit the realities of the classroom. The researchers hope that the findings and the suggestions in this study will be useful for other teachers who would like to develop themselves in terms of giving feedback.

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Appendix: Observation sheet (adapted from Richards & Lockhart 1994)

Date: _____ Subject: _____

Strategies	Frequency	Total
1. Acknowledging correct, or indicating incorrect, answer		
2. Praising or criticizing student utterance		
3. Repeating utterance		
4. Expanding or modifying utterance		
5. Asking follow-up questions		
6. Summarizing		
7. Zero feedback		

Comment:

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