

A Survey of Teachers' Feedback Practices on Students' Written Work

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Abstract

Providing feedback is an essential means to improve learning at the tertiary level of education. However, most teachers provide feedback that is of variable quality. It is necessary to understand the nature of feedback that teachers provide and the reasons for it. This article reports the findings of a survey conducted with 31 English teachers teaching in Engineering Colleges in Tamil Nadu. Data was collected from teachers at the National Seminar on 'English for Specific Purposes—A Reappraisal' conducted at Anna University, Chennai, in 2014. This article discusses the findings of the survey. It recommends the group strategy for detailed feedback as a strategy for providing detailed feedback in large classes.

Keywords: Teachers' feedback practices, error correction, reassess mistakes, positive aspects of feedback, reasons for not providing feedback

Introduction

Feedback has a pivotal role to play in teaching and learning. It accelerates learning, improves performance and helps reduce or close the gaps between capabilities and performance (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989, 2010). When students do not get feedback, their work, learning suffers, and performance becomes sluggish.

Unfortunately, besides completing the syllabus in India, conducting formative assessments, marking the papers and engaging in several other professional agendas, teachers find it challenging to provide detailed feedback. The sheer numbers in class ranging from sixty to eighty students make giving feedback a monumental task. So teachers

generally do provide surface-level feedback. This survey aimed to know about tertiary level ESL teachers' practices in providing feedback on students' writing.

The Survey

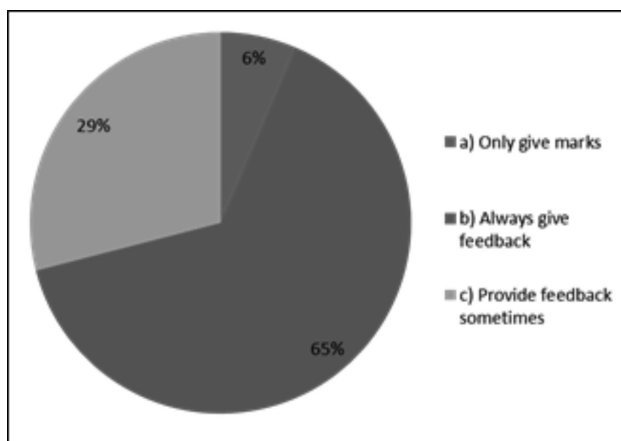
The participants of the study were 31 ESL teachers who volunteered to participate in the survey. They taught English at different engineering colleges across the state of Tamil Nadu. They had attended the National Seminar on 'English for Specific Purposes—A Reappraisal' conducted at Anna University, Chennai, in 2014 and their consent was sought for participation. Their experience ranged from 0 to 25 years. For analysis, based on their experience, they were divided into three groups, 0 to 5 years, 5 to 10 years, and those with more than 10 years of experience. The survey tool consisted of nine close-ended and one open-ended statement. It comprised statements seeking information on feedback practices, namely,

1. whether teachers provide feedback,
2. whether errors of all students are corrected,
3. type of errors corrected,
4. method of error correction,
5. whether teachers comment on the positive aspects of student's work,
6. the focus of error correction,
7. whether teachers check students' learning from feedback,
8. whether teachers reassess students on their mistakes (follow up on feedback),
9. reasons for not providing detailed feedback, and
10. reasons for believing that students do not learn from feedback (This is an open-ended question).

Teacher participants had to respond on a three/four-point rating scale on the nine items. Percentages based on frequency count was used to analyse the data. The findings are presented using pie charts and discussed below.

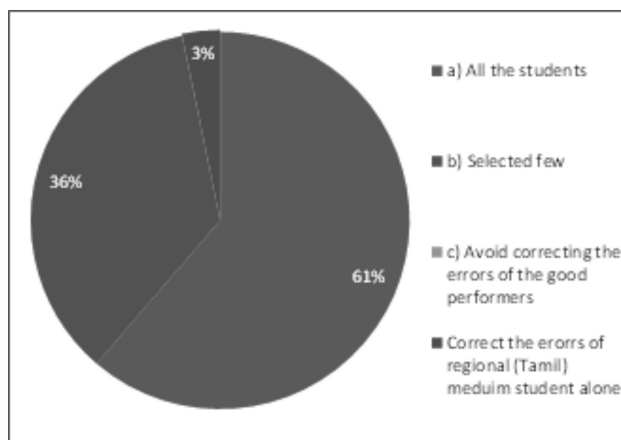
Findings

Pie Chart 1: Feedback on Students' Performance in Assessments



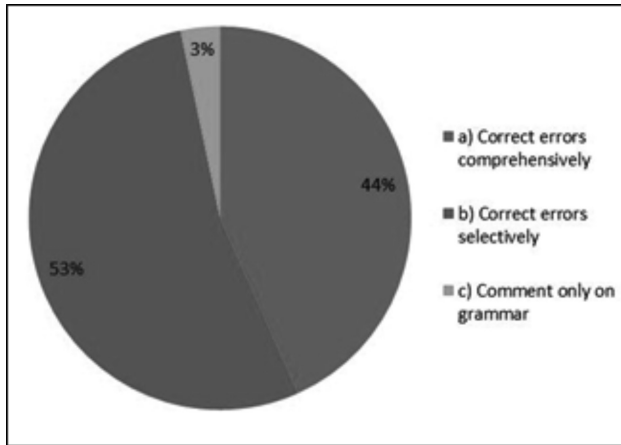
Sixty-five per cent of the teachers stated that they always provided feedback to students, and 29 per cent provided feedback. Six per cent of teachers claimed to give only marks to students.

Pie Chart 2 : Correction of Errors of Students in Class



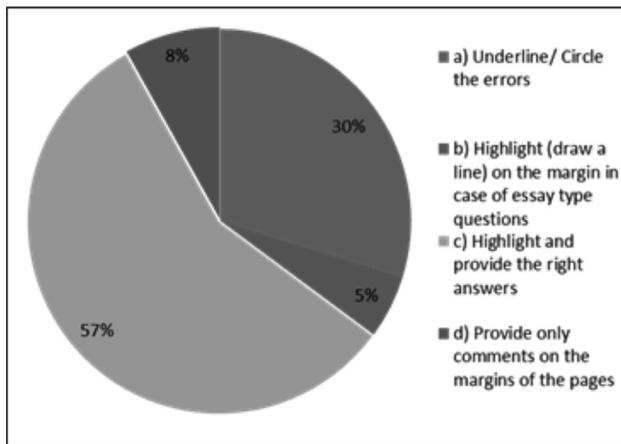
Sixty-one per cent of the teachers stated that they provide feedback to all students and 36 per cent provide feedback to selected students. Three per cent of the teachers belonging to 'less than 5 years' teaching experience category stated they correct the errors of regional medium students alone.

Pie Chart 3: Type of Error Correction or Feedback on Assessment Papers



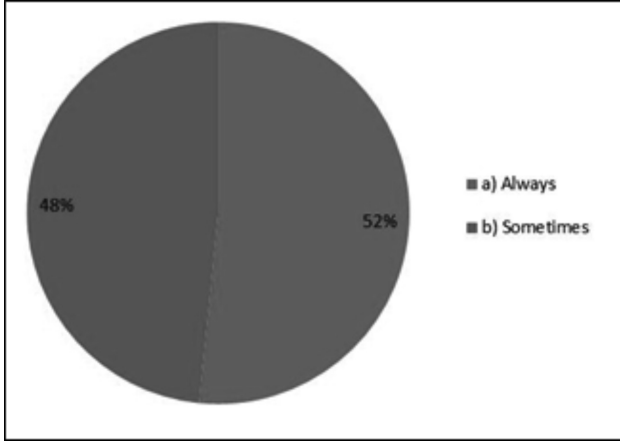
The above data from Pie Chart 3 shows that 53 per cent of the teachers said they correct errors selectively, and 44 per cent provide comprehensive feedback. Three per cent of the respondents correct the errors only on grammar.

Pie Chart 4: Method of Correction of Errors



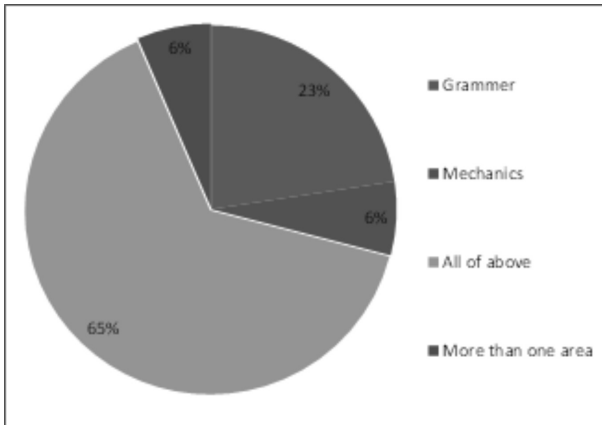
The data in Pie Chart 4 depicts that 57 per cent of the total teachers stated they highlight and provide the correct answers, and 30 per cent stated that they underline/ circle the errors.

Pie Chart 5: Commenting on the Positive Part of Answers



The data in Pie Chart 5 shows 52 per cent of the total teachers chose the option always highlight and comment on the positive part, and 48 per cent said they do the same sometimes.

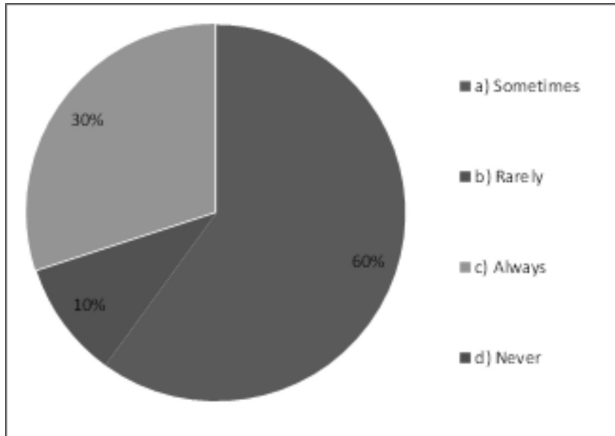
Pie Chart 6: Focus on Areas While Providing Error Correction



In this particular item, respondents had to choose as many options as they wanted to indicate their focus while correcting students’ writing. Sixty-five per cent of the total teachers chose all the areas to focus on while providing error corrections. Only seven teachers among 31, which was the total number of respondents, stated they only chose to make grammar corrections that is about 23 per cent believe in grammar correction. Another 6 per cent stated they only provided feedback on

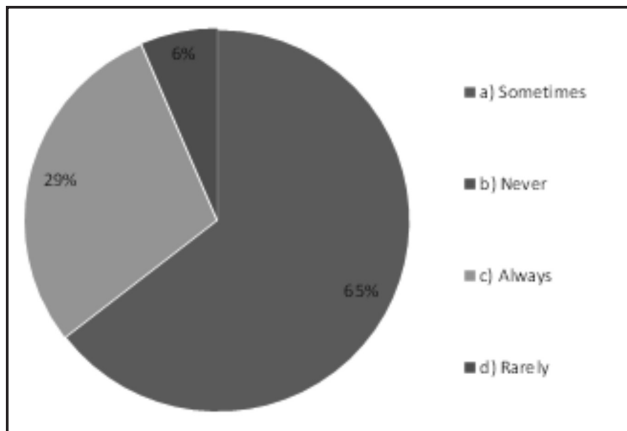
mechanics - spellings and punctuations: The rest of the teachers chose more than two areas and stated they attended to grammar, content and vocabulary.

Pie Chart 7: Students Learn From Feedback or Not



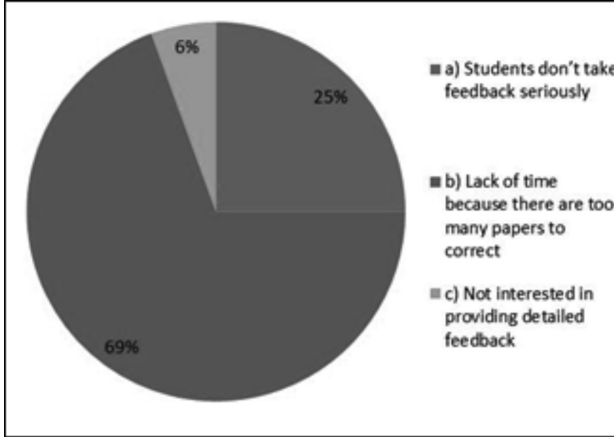
From Pie Chart 7, one sees that 60 per cent of the teachers sometimes check whether their students learnt from feedback, while 30 per cent always check with their students.

Pie Chart 8: Follow Up on the Feedback



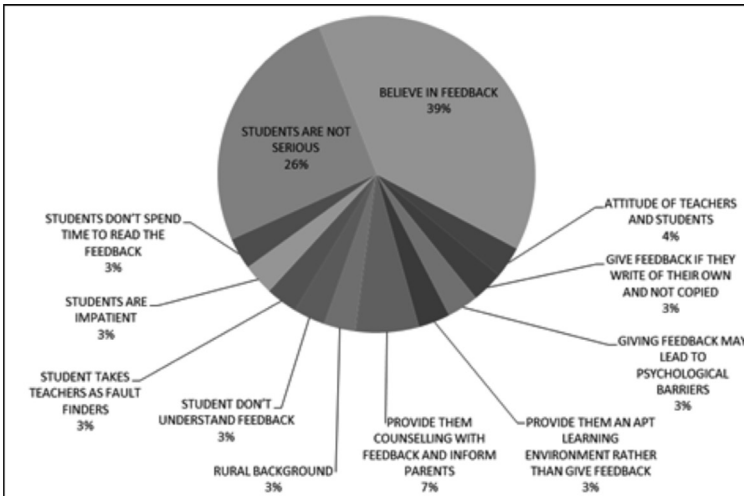
The information obtained from Pie Chart 8 shows that 65 per cent of the teachers sometimes test their students in the same areas, while 29 per cent said they always check. Only 6 per cent of the teachers stated that they do not conduct a test on the same areas that they gave feedback.

Pie Chart 9: Reasons for Not Providing Detailed Feedback



Sixty-nine per cent of teachers mentioned lack of time as the reason for not providing detailed feedback, 25 per cent of teachers stated that they felt that students do not take the feedback seriously. Only 6 per cent of the respondents stated that their students are not interested in detailed feedback.

Pie Chart 10: Reasons for Believing that Students Do Not Learn from Feedback



This item was an open-ended one. Thirty-nine per cent respondents believed in feedback. Of the reasons for not providing detailed feedback,

the belief that students do not take feedback tops the list (26 per cent). The remaining ten reasons are an off shoot of this belief—that it is time-consuming because students have to be provided counselling with feedback and their parents informed (7 per cent) and attitudinal issues (4 per cent). The other reasons are distributed (3 per cent) among worth giving feedback if students write on their own without copying, may lead to psychological barriers, need for providing appropriate environment for learning rather than giving feedback, students perceive teachers as fault finders, students come from rural backgrounds, students are impatient, and students do not spend time to read the feedback.

Discussion

Feedback is essential for learning. The findings of this study show that more than 60 per cent of teachers provide feedback (Pie Chart 1) for all students (Pie Chart 2). The feedback appears to be in the form of good and bad comments and involves error correction. From Pie Charts 3 and 6, one can infer the nature of error correction. Error correction is focused on spelling mistakes, wrong vocabulary, grammar and mechanics of writing. This focus has two implications: (a) the obvious and easily treatable errors are corrected by a majority of teacher participants, and the more substantial areas of errors in writing like the logical flow of ideas, connections between sentences do not get any feedback, and (b) a naïve understanding of feedback as something that will help students overcome all language problems. This assumption leads to premature disenchantment with feedback when it does not yield desired results.

The second aspect of the nature of feedback is providing the correct answers (Pie Chart 4) without explaining why an answer is wrong. The nature of feedback is thus extremely superficial and does not help learners improve their learning and become independent learners. It is worth noting that most teachers comment on the positive aspects of students' writing always while the others do it sometimes (Pie Chart 5). This aspect of feedback is vital because feedback does not mean pointing to errors. It includes making observations on what is good or well written.

Follow-up on feedback shows that most teachers check whether students have understood the feedback (Pie Chart 7) and reassess students on it (Pie Chart 8). This aspect of the finding has to be probed deeper and corroborated with actual practice. Teachers teach a class of sixty

to eighty students, with the pressure of completing the syllabus and conduct assessments. Under these circumstances providing feedback, and checking the understanding of feedback retesting students on these, become challenges.

Teachers are familiar with the notion of feedback, which is a part of their pre-service education. Nevertheless, they cannot give detailed feedback citing paucity of time and perceived disinterest on the part of students (Pie Chart 9). The other reasons become evident in answers to the tenth question. Only 39 per cent of teachers believed in feedback. The remaining teachers attributed not giving detailed feedback to student-related issues (Pie Chart 10). This finding fault with students for not providing feedback runs contrary to the spirit of education. Students participate in the tertiary levels of education to learn, and their learning is sub-optimal without feedback.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers do not see the centrality of feedback to learning. This suggestion applies to a majority of teachers regardless of their years of experience with one exception. About 3 per cent of the teachers belonging to the below five years' teaching experience category stated they correct the errors of regional medium students alone. An inference is that they do not see the harm to learning because of a lack of detailed feedback. Feedback is a mechanism for teachers to make adjustments in their teaching according to the needs of the learners. This awareness does not come out in teachers' responses. It underlines a belief in pedagogy as delivering the curriculum and reducing it to techniques. Teachers need to be made aware of strategies of feedback in large classes. The following section talks of one strategy.

A Strategy to Provide Feedback in Large Classes

In most engineering colleges, the class size ranges from sixty to eighty students. In a class of fifty minutes, the first ten to fifteen minutes is used to distribute the papers and give time to students to go through their errors and change of marks if required. The teacher should have highlighted the errors made by each student. It is a common scenario that students start calculating the marks to improve their grades or marks. The teacher asks students to make a note of the errors made by them. The next thirty-five to forty minutes is used for the group feedback strategy.

A group detailed feedback strategy can be used in large classes. In this, the teachers note all the errors made by all students—errors in grammar, punctuations, sentence constructions, subject-verb agreement, other mechanics like spellings, incorrect forms of the words and so on. They then put up this list in the class and explain each error, the reasons for judging them as errors, and provide the corrections. In a paragraph or an essay writing question, they list issues of coherence, cohesion, organization of ideas and talk about these and suggest a more appropriate way of writing. Students are encouraged to look at their errors, understand them, and make corrections. This list will act as a reference for students in their future writings. Students can compare their performance over a few assignments to see if the errors have decreased over time—a testimony to their learning. The teacher can also track the students to see their improvement and make adjustments to their teaching where required.

Conclusion

Feedback is an indispensable part of teaching. Most teachers provide sketchy feedback because of many papers to be corrected, paucity of time, and other work pressures. Teachers need to be taught to strategize by providing detailed feedback. The group feedback strategy is one such strategy that teachers will find helpful in dealing with large classes.

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