

Review research paper

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING OBJECTIVE CRITERIA IN WRITING AND SPEAKING FEEDBACK STRATEGIES IN EFL

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Abstract. *Writing and speaking are termed productive or active skills due to the fact that learners need to produce language when doing these. As EFL teaching is increasingly becoming more and more oriented toward helping learners develop and improve their communicative competence, it is not surprising that speaking and writing skills are becoming ever-more important. Though it goes without saying that speaking and writing undoubtedly go hand in hand with the receptive skills, reading and listening, EFL learners, and instructors, are, nevertheless, focusing their attention on improving speaking and writing skills. This is why it is so significant that clear and objective criteria is established and provided in the EFL teaching and learning environment, as this criteria will benefit not only the learners, but the teachers as well. As assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, it goes without saying that learners are bound to find themselves receiving some kind of feedback at some point in their acquisition of these skills. However, the issue that arises is the fact that this assessment tends to be seen by many learners as subjective rather than objective, which is not the case with assessing listening and reading comprehension, for example, where it is easier to pinpoint the mistakes. This paper takes a closer look at what this includes, and how it can be done, without disrupting either the teachers’ or the learners’ autonomy, and hence make the whole process that much smoother.*

Key words: *productive skills, receptive skills, feedback, criteria, objectivity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence, which is also known as communication skills, refers to the learners’ ability to understand and use language effectively to communicate in authentic social and school environments. Attaining this competence, that is, these skills, is a prerequisite for success in any sphere of life, but it is especially important in foreign language teaching and learning, and, specifically, in the EFL context, as English is undisputedly the lingua franca of the world, and knowing English nowadays is seen not so much as an advantage but, rather, as an essential skill, like possessing literacy and numeracy skills. From early school years until later in life, learning and using English

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either in teaching scenarios or in everyday situations have become usual global citizen's activities (Dincă and Chitez, 2021).

The concept of communicative competence is a broad one and it covers numerous aspects, such as: *linguistic skills*, in terms of understanding and using appropriate vocabulary, various linguistic conventions, such as grammar, punctuation and spelling, as well as syntactic conventions, as in proper sentence structure; *strategic skills*, such as planning for effective communication by being able to make modifications and adjustments bearing in mind the target audience and the overall purpose, being fluent and achieving coherence and cohesion of thoughts and ideas, and being able to overcome various language gaps, all of which are connected to *discourse skills*, in terms of understanding and employing patterns of organization and a variety of discourse markers to achieve smooth transitions and logical and consistent flow of ideas and train of thought; and last, but not least, *socio-linguistic skills*, connected to an awareness of the social rules of language, such as tone and level of formality (register), various non-verbal behaviors, as well as cultural knowledge as illustrated in the appropriate use of idioms and other cultural references.

However, more often than not, EFL learners tend to equate communicative competence with speaking, and sometimes, writing skills, and focus their attention on improving these segments at the expense of all the other aspects. Effective foreign language learning, however, cannot be achieved by focusing simply on one area, as they are all intertwined and go together. This is why it is especially important that learners are made aware of the importance of learning a foreign language by combining all the various competences at hand rather than focusing on specific areas.

Another important aspect of language learning, though by far the least popular, is that of assessment, which allows both the learners and the teachers to see what has been successfully acquired, and what needs further work and practice. The punitive use of assessment is something that will unfortunately always hover in the background; nevertheless, when carried out in a consistent and predictable manner, and predictable in the sense that it is formulaic and anticipated, it will undoubtedly yield much better results and a more positive outlook. This is why it so vital that teachers provide learners with clear and objective criteria where feedback is concerned, and especially in these areas of speaking and writing, as these are the areas that cause learners the greatest anxiety due to being flagged as being the most overtly subjective where feedback is concerned.

There are numerous feedback strategies that may be employed to make this stage less stressful for the learners, and less time-consuming for the teachers, ultimately making it advantageous for both parties. This is why it is so important to have the learners be as fully engaged as possible in the assessment stage of the learning process, and to provide them with a clear and precise set of objective criteria that will facilitate their role at this point.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Providing feedback to learners, no matter what form it comes in, written comments, error correction, teacher-student conferences, or peer discussions, has become accepted as one of the most important aspects of EFL learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Despite the role feedback plays in the EFL context, however, not very many studies have been conducted to directly look into whether EFL students who receive corrective feedback in a given area do improve as compared with those who do not receive such feedback

(Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005). Interestingly, most of the studies that have been carried out (for example, Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992) report that there is no significant difference in terms of learner improvement.

In this context, we may mention that there are, nevertheless, some studies which have made attempts to investigate this, such as the studies by Lee (1997) and Ferris and Roberts (2001), which did have control groups that received no corrective feedback. Lee's study of EFL college students in Hong Kong, for example, concluded that there was a significant effect for the group whose errors were underlined in comparison with those groups that did not receive any corrective feedback or received only a marginal check.

Ferris and Roberts (2001) also examined the effects of three different feedback treatments (errors marked with codes; errors underlined but not otherwise marked or labelled; no error feedback), and found that both error feedback groups did significantly better than the no-feedback control group, but, like Robb et al. (1986), they found that there were no significant differences between the group that received coded feedback and the group that did not receive coded feedback.

Sanosi (2022), for example, concluded from the study they conducted concerning the use of automated written corrective feedback on EFL learners' academic writing accuracy that the participants who used Grammarly as a writing assistant for 14 weeks demonstrated significantly better writing accuracy scores as compared to the participants of the control group, who did not.

Though there is expanding but far from conclusive body of research on feedback strategies, there is not much data concerning the effect of other feedback strategies, such as teacher-student conferences, peer-editing sessions, and the keeping of error logs (Ferris, 1995), which all help to focus the learners on the process of learning rather than on the final product of it. Some studies have been looking into whether certain types of corrective feedback are more likely than others to help L2 students improve their EFL skills, such as, for example, the accuracy of their writing. Truscott (1996), for example, noted that none (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992) had found significant differences across any of the different treatment groups (content comments only; error correction only; a combination of content comments and error correction; error identification but no correction), yet when the evidence from studies that have considered other feedback distinctions is examined, it is clear that such a conclusion should at this stage be treated with caution (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005). Many EFL teachers, for example, see teacher-student conferences to be potentially more effective than other types of corrective feedback because the one-on-one meetings enable them to clarify, instruct, and negotiate (Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), but the absence of published empirical research on this means that this popularly held belief cannot be taken as evidence of effectiveness.

Thus, there is obviously a need for further research which will look at and compare the impact of receiving corrective feedback and no corrective feedback (Truscott, 1996), as well as what types of feedback would best serve the function of helping the learners acquire, develop and improve their speaking and writing skills.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to take a closer look at the issue of how to best help EFL learners deal with developing and improving their writing and speaking skills, a small-scale survey was conducted to see how learners view the aspect of receiving feedback on specifically these

two areas. In addition, some informal research was carried out at the same time, where the same subjects were arbitrarily divided into two groups, Group A and Group B.

The subjects were seniors at the Department of English Language and Literature, at the “Blaže Koneski” Faculty of Philology, within Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, N. Macedonia. There were 32 respondents in total, 29 females and 3 males, all from the teaching stream offered at the Department. In all probability, the factors that the subjects were seniors and that they were from the teaching stream played a significant role in the results, as it is expected that their previous experience at the Department significantly helped them to do the tasks successfully, even those that were not provided with the set criteria beforehand. Had the subjects been first-year students, or even second-year students, for example, the results are expected to have been different.

Furthermore, these were all students from the teaching stream, which means that they had some previous (limited) teaching experience, and were, more or less, aware of the stages involved in the process of assigning tasks.

The fact that the great majority of the subjects are female is not surprising bearing in mind the great female to male ratio at the Department of English Language and Literature, and is not believed to have had an impact on the overall results.

3.1. Data collection and analysis

As this was done as an optional activity with absolutely no negative repercussions on those that decided not to participate, the subjects are all students who decided to volunteer and who wished to take part. There might be different reasons as to why they decided to participate, but this was not something they were asked to elaborate on.

The majority of the subjects were at a B2+/C1 level of proficiency, in accordance with the CEFR, and this was ascertained through a placement test that was administered at the start of the research. The seniors at the Department of English Language and Literature are expected to be at a C1-C2 level of proficiency, and the placement test was administered as a precaution, to avoid surprises in terms of the types of errors that might appear in the writing and speaking tasks. Thus, we may note that the results from the placement test were not surprising, since, as noted previously, the students are expected to have reached this stage of English proficiency. There were three subjects that demonstrated a C2 level of proficiency, which is also within our expectations. The research itself was carried out over four weeks in the spring semester of 2021/2022.

After having completed the placement test to confirm their level of English proficiency, the subjects were then asked to answer the following questions concerning their feedback of writing and speaking skills: *How would you assess learners' writing and speaking skills?; What are some potential issues that you might encounter?*

Then, the subjects were divided into two groups, arbitrarily, and were asked to complete a writing task and a speaking task. In one task, one group was the control group, while in the other task, the other group became the control group.

The writing task was done first, and it included having the subjects write an opinion paragraph of 300-350 words on a given topic. They all had the same topic - *Exams do not best reflect a student's knowledge on a particular subject and should be eliminated*. None of the subjects were given explicit instructions on how to write an essay, as they had already had done this in the previous semesters in some of the courses at the Department.

The Group A subjects were the control group for this task, and they were not provided with anything else save the starting instructions that everyone had on the writing task itself, which were *Write an essay of 300-350 words on the following topic*. They were not provided with any other criteria concerning feedback on this task, nor what to pay attention to.

The Group B subjects, on the other hand, besides the general instructions from above, were provided with the following scales, a set of criteria concerning feedback, adapted from a scale developed by the Hungarian School-leaving English Examination Reform Project (Table 1), and a scale with criteria for assessment, with a set of guidelines for assessors, from the above-mentioned Project (Table 2). We should also note that since the subjects here held a relatively high level of English proficiency, the lowest scores on the scale were removed for our purposes.

Table 1 Analytic writing scale adapted from that developed by the Hungarian School-leaving English Examination Reform Project

	Task achievement	Coherence and cohesion	Grammar	Vocabulary
10	all content points elaborated	fully coherent text; cohesive on both sentence and paragraph level	wide range of structures; few inaccuracies that do not hinder/disrupt communication	wide range of vocabulary; accurate vocabulary communicating clear ideas; relevant to content
8	most content points elaborated; all content points mentioned	good sentence level cohesion; some paragraph level coherence and cohesion	good range of structures; occasional inaccuracies hinder /disrupt communication	good range of vocabulary; occasionally inaccurate vocabulary communicating mainly clear ideas; overall relevant to content
6	some content points elaborated; most content points mentioned	some sentence level cohesion; frequent lack of paragraph level coherence and cohesion	limited range of structures; frequent inaccuracies hinder/disrupt communication	limited range of vocabulary; frequently inaccurate vocabulary communicating some clear ideas; occasionally relevant to content with some chunks lifted from prompt

Table 2 Criteria for assessment / guidelines for assessors

Criteria for assessment	Check	Look for
Task achievement	Depth of coverage: which content points are elaborated? which content points are mentioned? Text type requirements: are the text-specific conventions observed?	content points most elaborated with the most detail / just mentioned briefly; any relevant and original thoughts / superfluous details / irrelevant parts that do not belong in the text; formal/informal language use; layout conventions of the text type
Coherence and cohesion	Organization and linking of ideas: is the script coherent? is the script cohesive? Paragraphing: does the script need to be and is it divided into paragraphs? Punctuation:	logical organization of ideas / whether the ideas follow one another logically; clear / correct marking of the relationship between sentences and their parts; variety and appropriateness of linking devices; organization of ideas developing one sub-topic into one paragraph; proper indication of paragraphs: block or indented; clear / correct marking of the relationship between paragraphs; correct use of punctuation marks
Grammar	Grammatical range: is there a range of grammatical structures? Grammatical accuracy: is the grammar correct?	variety of grammatical features (tenses, structures, modals, auxiliaries, etc.) used in proportion of accurate / inaccurate sentences and clauses; the occurrence and reoccurrence of specific mistakes; bad grammar leading to unclear meaning
Vocabulary	Lexical range: is there a range of vocabulary items? Lexical accuracy: is the vocabulary used accurately? Lexical relevance: is the vocabulary relevant to the topic(s) specified in the task?	variety of words and expressions used; words used accurately / inaccurately (meaning and spelling) relevant vocabulary / irrelevant vocabulary; ratio of words and expressions not lifted / lifted from task

Two weeks after the subjects completed the writing task, they were asked to do a speaking task with the teacher. They were kept in the same groups - Group A and Group B, but this time it was Group A that received the criteria for the speaking task, whereas Group B did not, and was thus the control group.

For this task, the students were asked to come together in pairs/groups of three + teacher, who was the interlocutor. Students were asked to come together in pairs or groups of three as establishing groups and group roles enables stronger students to adopt leadership roles and it encourages more hesitant students to provide more input, thus improving participation (Bury & Hair, 2022). The task was organized for both groups in the same way, and both groups were informed as to how the speaking activity would be organized, with the difference being that the Group A subjects were also informed on how their speaking skills would be evaluated, provided in Table 3, below. Like with the writing task previously, the lowest scores have been removed from the rubric, bearing in mind that these are subjects with a level of English proficiency of B2+ to C2.

Table 3 Speaking rubric (adapted) from public version of the IELTS exam

	Grammatical competence	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Fluency, coherence and cohesion
10	uses a full range of structures naturally and appropriately; produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech	uses vocabulary with full flexibility and precision in all topics; uses idiomatic language naturally and accurately	uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety; sustains flexible use of features throughout; is effortless to understand	speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self-correction; any hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar; speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features; develops topics fully and appropriately
8	uses a wide range of structures flexibly; produces a majority of error-free sentences with only very occasional inappropriacies or basic/non-systematic errors	uses a wide vocabulary resource readily and flexibly to convey precise meaning; uses less common and idiomatic vocabulary skillfully, with occasional inaccuracies; uses paraphrase effectively as required	uses a wide range of pronunciation features; sustains flexible use of features, with only occasional lapses; is easy to understand throughout; L1 accent has minimal effect on intelligibility	speaks fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction; hesitation is usually content-related and only rarely to search for language; develops topics coherently and appropriately
6	uses a range of complex structures with some flexibility; frequently produces error-free sentences, though some grammatical mistakes persist	uses vocabulary resource flexibly to discuss a variety of topics; uses some less common and idiomatic vocabulary and shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some inappropriate choices; uses paraphrase effectively	uses a range of pronunciation features with mixed control; shows some effective use of features but this is not sustained; can generally be understood throughout, but mispronunciation of individual words or sounds reduces clarity at times	speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence; may demonstrate language-related hesitation at times, or some repetition and/or self-correction; uses a range of connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility

3.2. Discussion and implications

Not surprisingly the subjects that were provided with the evaluation criteria for both the writing task and the speaking task did better than those who did not receive such criteria. In terms of the writing task, the average mark for Group A, which did not receive the evaluation criteria beforehand was 8.1 (out of a maximum of 10), while the average mark for the same task for Group B, which did receive the evaluation criteria prior to completing the task was 9.3. It should be noted that the errors that caused the Group A subjects to lose points in this task were not so much of a grammar and vocabulary nature, but were connected more to task achievement and coherence and cohesion, which would in all probability have been better had they been previously informed of the evaluation criteria. The feedback the subjects received for this task was teacher feedback, with a follow-up meeting individually or in pairs afterwards, for a general discussion of the results. The impressions the subjects shared were that, indeed, had they been previously informed of the evaluation criteria that the Group B subjects had, they would have achieved better results in the writing task.

The speaking task yielded much the same results, in that this time the Group A subjects were informed of the evaluation criteria, and, as expected they did better, achieving an average mark of 9.4 (out of a maximum of 10) than the Group B subjects, who did not have the evaluation criteria beforehand, and who scored an average mark of 8.9. Afterwards the students were asked to come in for a follow-up meeting, to discuss the results and their overall impressions. The impressions, especially of the Group B subjects, went much along the same lines as those of the Group A subjects previously - that they would have done better had they had the evaluation criteria, since the area they tended to lose points in was that of fluency, coherence and cohesion, and not so much in grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation.

Thus, the impressions shared by the participants in the discussion with the teacher post-tasks were in line with when the subjects were a part of the control group - they felt they would have done better had they been informed of the evaluation criteria, and they were able to see first-hand the importance of establishing and providing such parameters.

In terms of the questions they were asked to answer at the start, *How would you assess learners' writing and speaking skills? What are some potential issues that you might encounter?*, the subjects were more or less in accord that though assessing these two skills specifically is more challenging, it is, by no means impossible to carry out objectively. Interestingly, several answers included the option of having these two skills assessed not just by one teacher, but by two or three, and then calculating an average mark, with the aim of making the assessment even more objective. Other answers included having the students being involved in the process of assessment as much as possible, and using peer-review and portfolios, in writing tasks, and pair and group work, and debates in speaking tasks.

4. CONCLUSION

The overriding feeling among EFL learners is that the productive skills - speaking and writing - cannot be taught, hence, assessed. There are several issues that need to be addressed here, all equally important, but all coming back to more or less the same point - that of the importance of feedback and especially of establishing clear and objective criteria in the various feedback strategies employed.

The relative frequency of errors (and the corrective feedback thereof) may contribute to students' understanding of feedback and corrective suggestions (Sanosi, 2022), further emphasizing the vital significance of feedback strategies in the teaching and learning process.

Learners tend to, incorrectly, interchangeably use communicative competence and speaking skills, and these are often seen as the most important to master when it comes to learning a foreign language. As EFL learning enables and facilitates communication, we can see the reasoning behind this, that speaking skills equal communication skills. If the communication is in written form, then that communication requires proficient writing skills, another set of skills seen by learners as difficult to learn, and to be objectively assessed in.

However, these skills, speaking and writing, can be evaluated objectively, within a given set of parameters, by using various rubrics and band scores that provide an accurate description of the learners' proficiency in the given area.

The role of feedback in any teaching and learning context is undisputed, and this goes for language teaching and learning, and especially where a foreign language is concerned. There are many types of feedback that may be employed, which are, in fact, complementary, and not mutually exclusive. What is constant in all this is the importance of the teacher establishing clear and objective criteria, as this will provide the learners with clear expectations, which, in turn, will alleviate the stress that is inevitably present in this stage of the learning process. In addition, this will allow the learners to manage and organize their own expectations, thus enabling them to retain autonomy over their learning. By using a variety of feedback strategies, the learners will, over time, start to focus on learning as a process, consisting of numerous stages, rather than a final product.

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