

Article

Providing Feedback to International Students in Higher Education: A small scale study

Victoria Mann & Joseph Warburton

University of Sheffield

ABSTRACT

Effective feedback can be useful in supporting a student's academic development and in supporting students to identify strengths and areas for improvement. This paper combines literature about feedback with students' experiences to consider effective and less effective feedback and discusses how effective feedback can provide a basis for improving international students' academic performance. Students' experiences were elicited via a small scale investigation which comprised of a series of three interviews. The first was conducted when the six participants (students) received feedback, the second a week after receiving feedback and the third was when they were starting a new assignment. This was to gauge both the immediate impact of feedback and the extent to which feedback is utilised in future assignments. Working from the perspective of students currently studying in Higher Education, the paper has found that the structuring of feedback can be crucial in ensuring that feedback meets its aim of being a formative learning tool. Clarity, specificity and tone were found to be particularly useful in enabling students to use feedback effectively. If feedback provided clear guidelines to improve future assignments, students were able to utilise this in future assignments.

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Introduction

Feedback is a key area for developing a student academically; it has the potential to both recognise and develop strong areas of writing and to provide guidance to improve weaker areas. Unfortunately, however, feedback does not always achieve this. "Teachers have varied perceptions and beliefs about the purposes of written feedback, and are uncertain about what it achieves and what use students make of it" Bailey and Garner (2010, p.1). Equally, Nicol's (2010) study has found that student surveys have uncovered that students are dissatisfied with their assignment feedback. This article will discuss assignment feedback from the perspective of undergraduate international students. It considers issues around understanding and implementing feedback and will evaluate ways to make feedback more accessible and useable for international students.

Involving Students in Research

This paper is the result of a collaboration between tutors and international students who are currently experiencing receiving feedback on their assignments. This will provide an opportunity to utilise student experience to consider the implications for practice. Hurst (cited in Holloway, 2001) reflects that what is needed is for students' perspectives to be reflected in research. This is echoed by Ferguson (2011) who argues for incorporating the perspectives of

those who are affected by policy and practices, namely the students. This study, therefore, aims to integrate student experience with the literature that considers feedback and provides recommendations.

Methodology

The investigation was a qualitative small-scale study based on six students' experiences of receiving feedback on their courses. The students are undergraduate international students from China and Saudi Arabia, studying in diverse areas including Community Studies, Science and the Social Sciences. The students were recruited via an email advertisement, sent to undergraduate students, and all six students who responded were recruited. The students expressed an interest in participating in the research and have a particular interest in the interpretation of written communication.

Their perspective was underpinned by a review of the literature in this area to consider whether the issues highlighted in the literature reflected the experiences of international students. The literature is discussed in each section of the paper, followed by the students' perspective. Whilst the paper is based on a small number of international students, and thus qualitative by nature, the issues raised could be of interest to both international students and higher education lecturers.

The students' experiences were elicited through hour-long, individual, semi-structured interviews. Each student was individually interviewed three times. The first was when they immediately received feedback for an assignment, the second was after a week to give them an opportunity to consider the feedback, and the third was when they were starting a new assignment to determine if the students had used the feedback to inform their work.

Themes were identified using the thematic analysis tool, namely framework analysis. Richie and Spencer (2002) describe framework analysis as a process which involves a number of different, but interconnected stages. Srivastava & Thomson (2009) describe these five stages as familiarisation; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation. This process begins with the data collection (Rabiee, 2004), as the researcher looks for broad themes. This stage is key in identifying themes to create the framework. Srivastava & Thomson (2009) explain that in this stage, the researcher immerses themselves in the data by listening to the audio tapes, reading transcripts and reviewing the themes from the document analysis. It provides, therefore, a structure for analysis, allowing for the data to be collated and themes to be identified. The themes identified were clarity of feedback, negative feedback, specificity of feedback, and utilisation feedback.

Feedback

Feedback, if used constructively, can be an efficient learning tool providing students with an understanding of both their strengths and areas for further development. For example, Black and Williams (1998) found that feedback has a largely positive effect on students' learning and development. In addition to providing summative assessment, feedback also provides the opportunity for formative development. In this sense, Shute (2008, pp.153) defines the purpose of feedback as "information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning." Furthermore, Rae and Cochrane (2008) argue that for feedback to be effective the focus should be on development, rather than summative assessment, with the aim being to encourage and improve learning. Thus, the emphasis is changed from addressing why a mark was awarded to supporting the student in

improving future grades. A key theme from the interviews was that international students were generally positive about feedback and how it could be used formatively:

“I really want to improve my writing and get a good degree; I try to use the assignment criteria and the feedback helps me to improve this.” (Student C)

“Feedback can be one of the most useful ways for students to develop their writing. The lecturer can comment on the specific elements of your work that are good and areas that would benefit from further work. This can be something simple like referencing, to a detailed explanation about how to ensure writing is critical and not just descriptive.” (Student F)

“I have found that feedback is most helpful when it provides clear guidelines on how to improve future assignments.” (Student E)

Thus, the interviews showed that the students were motivated to use feedback formatively to improve their assignments and to improve their academic writing skills. Many of the students interviewed, however, perceived feedback as overtly critical and found it a source of anxiety and stress:

“Feedback can be a really useful tool, but equally, it can be a real de-motivator. It is easy for a student who isn’t confident about their work to perceive their feedback as wholly negative, even if they have achieved a respectable mark.” (Student B)

“Sometimes I have got a good mark, but really negative feedback and I get confused and anxious about my work.” (Student A)

This experience is underscored by the literature. Ferguson (2011, p.57) found that many students discussed the role feedback has in building confidence and encouragement and conversely how negative feedback could be discouraging; noting one student’s comment that “If all comments are negative I would never write a paper again”. Ferguson (Ibid) also identified the framing of feedback as having an impact on students, for example, suggesting improvements, rather than commenting on deficits. He exemplified this using a student’s comment that the phrasing, “you could have tried this” rather than “you did not do this” was preferred. Finally, he found that students often ignored feedback if it was perceived as too negative. Feedback can therefore, have a negative impact on the student; limiting its effectiveness in terms of improving students’ further work. It is vital that tutors recognise the impact of feedback and how it may affect their development (Pitts, 2005).

Blanket phrases such as ‘please proofread’, can also be unhelpful in terms of formative guidance, the errors may not necessarily be in the work because of a lack of care, but because the student genuinely has not seen the mistakes. This is not to say that issues regarding proofreading should not be addressed, rather that this statement does not provide any guidance on the grammatical and structural issues in the writing. If the lecturer commented on a specific element of the writing that could be improved, such as by suggesting reviewing the use of apostrophes, this gives the student a starting point for improvement. Equally, it is really important to include positives elements in the feedback, where possible.

A further issue with feedback is ensuring that students are able to understand and act on the written advice given by their tutors. One of the key themes emerging from the interviews was a lack of clarity around what the feedback to trying to communicate to the student:

“The problem with written feedback is that it is one way and can be misinterpreted. The misinterpretation can come from a student not understanding what the tutor wants, or from being unclear about how the feedback matches the criteria.” (Student C)

“I had a comment on my work saying I needed to be more critical, I don’t know how to do this, or what it means.” (student A)

“I have found that feedback can be too vague. An example of this is phrases such as ‘along the right lines’ which doesn’t provide anything to work with.” (Student F)

This is supported by Higgins (2000, p.1) and Chanock (2000) who argued that many students are simply unable to understand and interpret feedback comments correctly and that students frequently misunderstood comments provided, such as ‘too much description, not enough analysis’. Chanock (ibid) found that almost half the students sampled did not interpret this comment in the way that it had been intended.

For feedback to be effective, Sadler (1989) considered that three elements need to be in place. Firstly, the student must know what constitutes a good assignment. This can be achieved through the use of clearly defined criteria. Secondly, the student needs to know how their current work compares with a good assignment as this enables students to understand the reasoning for the marks they are currently getting. Finally, the student needs to know how to improve their assignments to close the gap between their current work and the level of work they are aspiring to achieve. Feedback, therefore, works within the context of students having an understanding of the criteria of an assignment and the extent to which they are meeting the criteria. The students interviewed in the study were particularly unclear about what constitutes a good assignment and how to improve their assignments. To ensure that feedback is useful for international students, these issues need to be considered. The section below discusses ways to make feedback more purposeful for international students.

Strategies for providing feedback

If feedback is to be used effectively, it needs to be clearly understood by the student and specific enough for them to take action on it. Equally, the issue of student anxiety raised by the students in this study when receiving feedback must also be considered. Brookhart (2008) suggests that tutors consider three aspects of providing feedback; clarity, specificity and tone. Clarity is concerned with ensuring the student understands what is written and can be as simple as ensuring the feedback is typed or written neatly. The use of language is also important. Brookhart (ibid) gives the example of using straightforward vocabulary and sentence structure and ensuring that the feedback matches the student’s development level. Equally, a jargon free criteria and avoidance of the use of symbols can improve readability, as some students misunderstand what a symbol is trying to express. Specificity considers how to provide feedback that the student can use. The use of clarity, specificity and tone can be especially important for international students who may be just beginning to be acculturated into the academic practices of their department. Here, Students A, D and E discuss feedback that they have found useful in their courses.

“Feedback that addresses the assignment guidance specifically really helps me to know what went wrong and what I did well at” (Student A)

“The best feedback is feedback that is clear and provides specific targets. The more targeted it is the better. I am looking for concrete ways to improve my written performance and feedback can provide the guidance to make that happen.” (Student D)

“An example of good feedback I have received is ‘the overall structure is good, but think about including models of person centred support, to link more closely to practice’. This example encourages me to think about theoretical models, but, just as importantly, points out that the theory needs to be applied in practice.” (Student E)

Brinko (1993) discusses ways that the content of feedback could be improved in terms of being more specific. These include ensuring the feedback contains concrete information, for example, referring to lines of enquiry in the student’s assignment and providing specific targets for improvement. An example of this could be to suggest that a student makes use of Web of Knowledge to broaden their reading. Glover and Brown (2006) also consider specific and clear feedback to be important in improving its usefulness and suggest a strategy to achieve this could be to ensure that it is clearly aligned to the course criteria, using criterion referencing in relation to the learning outcomes. Finally, tone refers to ensuring that the feedback is supportive; Glover and Brown (2006) suggests focusing on the main weaknesses of the assignment rather than highlighting every mistake, arguing that an overly critical stance can be disheartening. This was a theme running through the study with a number of students saying that they found the feedback experience to be disheartening, as some of the feedback seemed negative.

Conclusion

Feedback can be a powerful learning tool, enabling tutors to identify key areas of strengths and areas for further development. Equally, students often find feedback to be a source of stress and may misunderstand what they need to do to improve their future performance. This is particularly the case for international students who may not be able to make use of general statements such as ‘please proofread’.

Tutors can work towards addressing these issues with feedback by considering how the feedback can be used formatively to improve future performance, as opposed to justifying the mark given. If tutors utilise Brookhart’s (2008) three aspects of feedback, clarity, specificity and tone, they can address issues of understanding feedback, effectively using the suggestions and responding positively to critical feedback.

The case study has highlighted international students’ perspectives on feedback, demonstrating that making the assignment criteria clear and referencing the criteria in feedback can be effective in supporting students in closing the gap between their written performance and a model performance.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

v.e.mann@sheffield.ac.uk