

The Power of Feedback in An Online Learning Environment

Pramela Krish

Abstract

This paper takes a closer look at human interaction between the instructors and learners and among learners during learning in an online environment. An attempt was made to explore and analyse the power of feedback during online tutorials for English courses in a synchronous mode of learning. Based on learner responses to statements via a questionnaire and interviews, the paper shares the reflection of learners to oral and written feedback received during their online tutorials and how the feedback helped in improving their language literacy. Data from transcripts of online lessons will also be used to illustrate what is meant by feedback during online tutorials. The main findings of the study suggest that feedback has a positive impact on the online learners. The feedback of the instructors was much valued. Like the face-to-face mode of teaching and learning, it is clear that feedback on the electronic mode can help to enhance the language learning literacy.

Introduction

Educators in the 21st century are faced with the task of preparing learners to function successfully in this ever changing and increasingly technological and globalised society. This advancement in technology has also paved the way for new approaches to promote literacy with important implications to current practices in literacy education.

The relevance of incorporating computer technology in language learning has been highlighted by Warschauer (1998). He stresses that computer technology is an essential medium of language learning and literacy practice alongside face-to-face (FTF) communication and the printed media.

In a synchronous learning environment, learning activities tend to be less structured than the traditional instruction. In a FTF interaction, communication between the instructor and learners is instantaneous and bidirectional, but the communication medium used for distance education is not all interactive. Some allow real time interaction between learners and the instructor, while others may allow off-line interaction. An important point to note is that all learning requires a certain degree of motivation, self-discipline and independence on the part of

learners and these factors are more pertinent in the case of distance learning as the learners do not have FTF contact with the instructor. They are expected to be self-directed, and more autonomous.

In such a context, learners can become autonomous provided they receive the right learner support. Sherry and Wilson (1997) share the notion that an effective support environment for a learning community is when groups of people gather together to provide mutual support and scaffolding for learning and performance. Feedback is crucial for distance language learners and particularly in the virtual learning environment. It is not only as a response to learners' performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation during the teaching and learning. Feedback is also an important part of the ongoing instructor-learner relationship. It helps the learner see the role of the instructor and indicates the extent to which the instructor is prepared to provide individual support. Feedback not only enhances the social presence of instructors but contributes to better language literacy engagement online.

The purpose of feedback is to enable learners to acquire information. The instructor must make important decisions on what knowledge information he needs to impart in a timely moment. The feedback learners receive should aid them not only on how to acquire knowledge but also how to acquire it well. Constant, prompt and timely feedback to what one knows and does not know helps in this process of learning. Frequent feedback from instructors and interaction among learners is a good motivator (Schlosser and Anderson, 1994; Fisher, 2000).

In language learning, the term feedback refers to information given to learners that can be used to revise language skills (Ellis, 1994). Feedback refers to any indication to the learners that their target language used is incorrect, which includes various responses that the learners receive (Lightbown and Spada, 1999, p.171).

Hyland's (2001, p.233) study in the context of distance language learning states that feedback has a "crucial role in opening and maintaining a dialogue between tutors and students.... and also serves as an important function in motivating and encouraging students". Hyland's study relates to the product (the strengths and weaknesses of the assignment itself); or the learning process (the strategies and actions the students should take to improve their language). Although she does not mention electronic feedback, her definition stands in line with what is meant by feedback in an online learning environment. Learner-learner feedback is now an important option in the electronic learning environments and Raskin (2001), cited in White (2003, p.191) comments that it is a relatively unexplored area in terms of viability and contribution to distance language courses.

Feedback in the electronic mode of learning

In a synchronous learning environment, the power of feedback cannot be underestimated. According to White (2003), synchronous systems can be highly motivating. Distance learners feel less isolated and gain energy and inspiration from the learning group. The synchronous environment permits immediate feedback by the instructor as well as opportunities for development of feedback within the learning group.

According to Schlosser and Anderson (1994), language teaching from a distance can be effective. With the help of technological innovations, immediate feedback as well as interaction among learners and instructors is possible. This is the situation when the learner can ask his/her instructor questions about the lesson during the synchronous electronic class. Good dialogue elicits those activities that shape, elaborate and deepen understanding.

According to Fisher (2000), frequent feedback has been a good motivator and has kept many participants logging on. In addition, the types of questions put forward by the instructors to learners are important to encourage communication. As with any other educational activity, it is how an instructor structures and answers questions that will determine the educational effectiveness of the delivery mode. Online courses need better questions because one has no access to those subtle non-verbal expressions that exist in the FTF classroom. Similarly, feedback is not restricted to that of the instructor, but includes collegial responses from learners in various geographical locations.

Fisher (2000 p.95) cites Iseke-Barnes (1996) to explain that the educational effectiveness of the Internet is similar to any educational activity and it depends on how one structures and answers questions. She advises instructors to respond to all initial comments by learners during discussions and ask questions in response to learners to encourage discussion at a more in-depth level. Such facilitative feedback allows learners to track their progress in achieving the goal of the learning.

In an earlier study with online instructors, Pramela and Wong (2004) found the practice of instructors giving immediate feedback as a common feature during online tutorials. Instructors also shared that they would usually respond to learners posting in a supportive and non-judgemental manner so as to create a comfortable and non-threatening atmosphere.

Chong (2005) reported that learners with very little experience in online learning highly appreciated peer support in terms of ideas provided and efforts made to give feedback on English as a foreign language (EFL) project. In addition, the success of online courses also depends upon timely feedback designed to maximise learning effectiveness and satisfaction.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted at a private virtual university in Malaysia where the learners and faculty members engage in teaching and learning through the mixed mode of FTF and online. It aimed to seek answers to how learners responded to feedback in distance language learning in a synchronous electronic mode and the types of feedback received by the learners during the online tutorials (OLT).

The study focused on empirical evidence to unveil learner perceptions to feedback during OLT. It also illustrated some extracts from the transcripts of online lessons to explain the nature of feedback received by the learners. Because of the complex nature of the language learning process and differences among learners in the online environment, the researcher believes it is more beneficial to combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect the necessary data for this study as both methods complement each other.

The sample comprised 200 undergraduates in their 1st, 2nd and 3rd years of their study. From the sample, ten learners who were highly recommended by their instructors were considered most appropriate to be interviewed. These learners had undergone the OLTs regularly and were considered mature enough to understand, evaluate and give valuable informative feedback on the OLTs.

The Instrument

A questionnaire was used to gather the quantitative data. A four-point Likert scale with responses ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* was used to find out learners' responses. As for the qualitative data, the learners were interviewed with open-ended questions from an interview schedule. Samples of text chats (transcripts of the OLT) were collected by the researcher to extract the required information on feedback so as to provide a clear picture of the feedback.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher sought the help of the instructors to administer the questionnaires during the FTF classes. As for the interviews, she interviewed all ten learners individually to obtain their responses. She also obtained the permission from the instructors to observe OLTs and collected the transcripts of the OLT. The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using percentages while the learners' responses from the interview were transcribed in the verbatim form. The researcher then analysed the type of feedback and transcribed them without editing to show 'real time' learning.

Findings and Discussion

This section on findings and discussion are grouped under the data obtained from the questionnaire, the interview and the transcripts of the OLTs.

The findings below in Table 1 show responses of learners towards feedback during OLTs.

Table 1: Responses of learners towards feedback during OLT

Item	Responded Positively (Strongly agree to agree)		Responded Negatively (Disagree to strongly disagree)	
	n	%	N	%
1. I also learn from the feedback/corrections made by my instructor for other learners.	166	83.9	32	16.1
2. The feedback I receive from my instructor helped me to understand my work better.	165	83.3	33	16.7
3. My instructor provides feedback on my work immediately.	165	82.9	34	17.1
4. I learn a lot about the language from the feedback.	163	81.9	36	18.1
5. I learn a lot about the content from the feedback.	158	79.4	41	20.6
6. I receive private messages from instructor on my work.	101	50.7	98	49.3

The statement, 'I also learn from the feedback/corrections made by my instructor for other learners' received the highest number of positive responses. 83.9% of the learners were attentive to the feedback given during the OLT. These learners either listened attentively or read the text chats for feedback given to other learners. 83.3% of the learners agreed that the feedback from their instructors helped them understand their work better. A total of 82.9% of the learners said that their instructors provided them with feedback immediately. The data clearly show that the instructors were keeping track of their learners' progress in order to maximise learning outcomes. Clearly then, feedback from instructors played an important role in guiding learners to improve their work online.

The statement 'I learned a lot about the language from the feedback provided by my instructors' received 81.9% positive responses. Only a small percentage of learners (18.1%) felt otherwise. Probably this latter group of learners needed

personal attention or guidance to enable them to keep pace with others during the OLT. A total of 79.4% of the learners felt that through feedback given by the instructors, they also learned a lot about the content. Learners taking the ESP courses like Business Communication I or Business Communication II which are content-orientated courses could have been the ones who gave favourable responses to this item. In addition to this, 50.7% of the learners obtained feedback in the form of private messages from their instructors. The private messages were in response to individual e-mail messages posted by the learners or feedback given in one-to-one consultations outside class hours.

The value of feedback given to learners on the online mode and FTF differed greatly. Learners who were intrinsically motivated must have found the feedback in the OLT beneficial, while learners who had difficulty adapting to this mode of learning due to low proficiency may not have clearly understood the importance of such feedback.

The Interview

This section provides the verbatim account of what learners shared about their experience on feedback during their OLTs.

Lead off question

Is there importance given to feedback? If so, why?

Follow-up question

How do you learn through feedback? Explain.

Does your instructor encourage feedback from you? Explain.

How do you feel if there is no feedback? Explain.

Learner 8 comments on feedback by his instructor by saying:

Feedback is given by explaining our mistakes. She uses the microphone to speak seldom writes on the text chat. So during that time we take down notes.

Learner 9 felt the same on the feedback by her instructor:

Feedback the lecturer give me help to learn So far feedback enough but if not enough I e-mail her or I make appointment to see her. Sometimes after FTF class I stay back to ask questions.

In addition to the instructor's feedback, peers also gave feedback. Learner 2 said:

Feedback is very useful, especially when feedback is given by our Instructor. Sometimes when I feel confident about my answer and I know my answer will benefit so I give my feedback to my friends.

Learner 5 spoke of immediate feedback and its significance to her:

When my answer is correct, she will give us praises like good work or well done. If answers are wrong, then she will give the answer but not make us feel small. Immediate feedback is important. Makes me happy so that I can go on to answer other questions. If there is too much of rush to answer she will slow us down.

All the learners interviewed valued feedback and accepted the feedback given by their instructors. They considered the feedback as supportive and they were comfortable in accepting the corrections. Feedback during the OLT increases confidence and this has been supported by other studies (Kivela, 1996 and Davis and Thiede, 2000). While feedback by the instructors was valued, feedback among their peers was limited. Probably these learners treat peer-feedback as criticisms and thus to be avoided.

Feedback comes in many forms. For example, praising the learners such as *well done, very good, good try*. Learners who were reluctant to participate were at times teased by the instructors to participate by asking "why don't you speak, you have such good voice". Instructors also clicked on the icons on the computer to give feedback. A smile or an applause icon indicates that the instructor was happy or satisfied with the answer.

As the instructor cannot listen to all the learners at the same time, reading the entries by learners in the text chat and using the icons mentioned above helped in the teaching. Learners who did not want to interrupt their instructor, preferred to write their queries in the text chat. They knew that their instructors would definitely read and give their feedback.

Transcript of the OLT

The following samples below were extracted from the transcripts of online tutorials¹ and are grouped according to the nature of feedback.

Feedback given for incorrect spelling

Su: *my mic is not working.*
 Mas: *came down*
 Instructor: *Do you mean 'calm down'.*
 Mas: *yup, sorry.*

The sample above shows the instructor's attempts in giving feedback. Here the instructor indirectly provided feedback on the incorrect spelling of the word calm.

Rani: *I agree with the topic because mostly love marry increase the number of diverse. So marry someone who loves that make new relationship.*

Instructor: divorce

Rani: *yes*

The instructor only corrected the spelling error but did not correct the noun form of marry and the incoherent sentence structure.

Atan: *high education – we can learn more and get more knowledge. With higher education it can bright our future. We can find a better job with higher salary.*

Instructor: *higher education We can learn more and get more knowledge. With higher education it can brighten our future. We can find a better job with higher salary*

Here the instructor had chosen to reproduce the sentence and corrected selected spelling errors. The instructor must have felt it is an area in which learner must receive immediate feedback. Instructors can decide areas in which he needs to give feedback during the OLT. Though the feedback is not wholesome it can help the learners to improve their writing skills over a period of time.

Feedback for incorrect usage of words

Lan: *Yes, I'm support boys should learn to cook, as example at tomyam [a Thai dish] restaurant the cookers are mens. Other example like most successful chef, chef Wan*

Instructor: *COOKER vs cook (explains the error using the microphone)*

Lan: *oooooo.....*

In some cases the instructor prefers to use the microphone to highlight the error to the whole class.

Jeet: *I refuse to drive in traffic conjunction*

Jeet: *I mean traffic jam*

Instructor: *congestion*

In the faceless environment, where the extra linguistic cues such as facial expressions and gestures are not possible, the instructors have to be more selective in the choice of words when giving feedback.

To focus on form, the instructors used various other feedback techniques such as repeating preceding errors to direct the learners' attention to the incorrect form. They also emphasised the written text by manipulating the typography such as using capital letters for serious mistakes. Such feedback was incorporated in order to obtain meaningful interaction with the learners. In some cases, the instructors did not explain the meaning of words but left it to the learners to understand the meaning by reading other examples of entries (sentences). Flexibility in the feedback helped the instructors to ensure that the OLT lessons were conducted smoothly. Often probing questions as feedback in the text messages by the instructors also encouraged learners to participate.

When the entries in the text chat were typed fast, the instructors could not read all answers and provide feedback to them. The instructor would then select entries at random to give feedback. In many situations, immediate feedback was given to promote active learning. Feedback allowed the learners to track their progress in achieving the goal, and can be considered as a form of motivation as well.

The samples below show the use of feedback by instructors to initiate focus on forms. This compelled the learners to focus on forms and linguistic items. Immediate feedback gives the best results if the goal is to master a simple procedure or grammatical structure.

Feedback to improve grammatical structure

- Ani: *I'm interested in playing drum and sing*
 Instructor: *the drum and singing*
 Dani: *I'm interested in watching horror movie*
 Instructor: *horror movies*
 Cheng: *I'm interested in chating with my friend everyday*
 Instructor: *chatting with friends*

A further examination of the text chats revealed that learners attempted to self-correct their mistakes, resulting in a more target-like form. Learners were aware of the errors, because they read the text chat attentively. However, some learners have not practised peer-corrections for fear of making mistakes. Below are some samples of peer-corrections.

Feedback by fellow learners

- Athi: *I suport you*
 Banu: *suport = support*
 Athi: *I just type it too fast but I know the spelling ...*
 Ana: *Boys should leran to cook even cooking Maggi or fried eggs!*
 Jeet: *Sorry! Wrong spelling leran = learn*

Learners' active participation came about by taking turns, giving feedback and expressing opinions, even when they had comparatively restricted linguistic abilities. In the synchronous mode, learners needed to develop writing and thinking skills in tandem because an immediate response was necessary. However, some slow learners preferred to enter messages (answers) late. Often their entries come in after two or three messages have been posted by other learners. They would eventually join to contribute in terms of a 'yes' or 'ok' to show agreement. This suggests that the learners are still dependent on the better learners to provide some guidance until such time as they were able to cope with the independent learning mode. These learners who had language problems became increasingly sensitive to the written medium of communication and only made attempts to correct mistakes especially on typing errors. For example, a learner who sent an entry with spelling errors would correct himself in the following entry. Probably they were uncomfortable that the instructor or other learners may look down on them. Most of the time, the errors were corrected by the instructor in a supportive way.

Conclusion

To maximize learning and improve language literacy, feedback in the online learning environment has to be taken seriously by the instructors. The learners have shown the dependency on the instructors to improve learning in the new learning environment. Instructors should experiment with and improve their feedback technique. Success in this area will help in the promotion of active learning.

Immediate feedback helps the learners to focus on mistakes which they could correct straightaway and remember. With the weaker learners, the instructors only corrected grammar errors which were glaring. Many grammatical errors were left to be discussed later in the FTF classes for the benefit of all learners. This line taken by the instructors may benefit the whole class and saved time on repetitive work by the instructors.

At times the instructors faced the task of which error to correct. Here the choice of correcting errors which impede communication was a solution to the task in hand. There is also a need to balance negative feedback on errors with positive feedback on the learners attempt to produce the language. This could help build the confidence of the learners to progress in the virtual learning environment.

Course mates attempted to correct each others' grammatical and spelling errors. This was usually done by the active learners, as the others appear to fear making mistakes which will be viewed by the online audience. Self-correction was an

interesting characteristic during the OLTs where the learners checked on their own performance during OLT lessons. Self-correction was confined to some aspects of language such as spelling and grammar errors, this being the initial step towards self-initiated learning.

Giving and receiving feedback in the online mode of teaching and learning in the absence of FTF interaction provides the platform for developing collegial relationship with peers and instructors. It also creates a social climate for learning where the online learner does not feel isolated. According to Garrison and Anderson ((2003), establishing social presence by modelling appropriate message makes the learners feel welcome and in gives them a sense of belonging.

This paper has shown how feedback during online lessons can help promote literacy among learners. Instructors and educators need to rethink, re-examine and rediscover their new roles in the new information era to equip learners with the needs to prepare them to function successfully in the new mode of knowledge delivery.

References

- Chong, L. D. (2005). Learner-centred language acquisition through CALL environments. In B.E. Wong (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition: Selected Readings* (pp.140-161). Petaling Jaya: Sasbadi-MELTA ELT Series.
- Davis, B., and Thiede, R. (2000). Writing into change: Style shifting in asynchronous electronic discourse. In M. Warschauer and R. Kern (Eds.), *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice* (pp.87-120). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fisher, M. (2000). Implementation considerations for instructional design of Web-based learning environments. In B. Abbey (Ed.), *Instructional and cognitive impacts of web-based education* (pp.78-101). London: Idea Group Publishing.
- Garrison, D.R., and Anderson, T. (Eds.), (2003). *E-learning in the 21st Century: A framework for research and practice*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Hyland, F. (2001). Providing effective support: Investigating feedback to distance language learners. *Open Learning* 16(3), 233-247.
- Kivella, R (1996). Working on networked computers: Effects on ESL writer attitude and comprehension. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching* 6, 85-93.
- Lightbown, P., and Spada, N. (2001). Factors affecting second language learning. In C.N. Candlin and N. Mercer (Eds.), *English language teaching in its social context* (pp. 28-43). London: Routledge.

- Pramela, K. and Wong, B.E. (2004). Language learning in the virtual classrooms: The instructors' perspectives. In Jayakaran et al. (Ed.), *ELT Matters / Issues in English Language Learning and Teaching*. (pp. 165-172). Serdang: UPM Press.
- Schlosser, C.A., and Anderson, M.L. (1994). *Distance Education: Review of the literature*. Iowa State University: Research Institute for Studies in Education.
- Sherry, L. and Wilson, B. (1997). Transformative communication as a stimulus to web innovations. In B. Khan (Ed.), *Web-based instruction* (pp. 67-73). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications.
- Warschauer, M. (1998). Researching technology in TESOL: Determinist, instrumental and critical approaches. *Tesol Quarterly*, 32(4), 757-761.
- White, C.J. (2003). *Language learning in distance education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.