FEEDFORWARD AS A MEANS OF SELF- EDITING BY STUDENTS: PRIORITIZING PREVENTION OVER CURE

DR. P. BHASKARAN NAIR,

Formerly of the Department of English,

Pondicherry Central University

India

Email: nairpbhaskaran@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Drawing the metaphor of the two faced God Janus from Roman mythology, the pair of notions - feedback and feedforward can be re- presented in pedagogic contexts. One face of the god looks backward and the other, forward. In pedagogy, this two-way process namely, feedback and feedforward, which moves in opposite directions, can effectively be employed in self-editing their own writings by students.

Though we are very much aware of the effectiveness of feedback at work at the end of any planned activity, the presence of feedforward in our day to day activities has not been much noticed or studied. Feedforward too has been made use of in enhancing the quality of the task at hand, but less frequently and less consciously too. Like the notion of feedback being not restricted to the field of academia, feedforward too is part of the cognitive processes at work in decision making in life in general. Though in real life, the emotional aspects of feedforward get foreshadowed in varying degrees of intensity such as premonition, anxiety, anguish, caution, warning and threat, it rarely has been given a deserving position in teaching-learning. This paper argues that, feedforward can be made use of better than feedback in second language learning, especially in writing.

RESEARCH PAPER

'Remediation' is a term familiar to all teachers; and the pedagogic notion has been practised by all in various forms. The objective common to all remedial programmes is leading the learner from 'the wrong product to the right one'. Remedial teaching has a base to take off— a rather solid and strong one. There is concrete evidence before the teacher in the form of feedback, that the learner has gone wrong. Mostly the evidence emerges from the written product; and that serves as the feedback—the only feedback, the teacher receives. The learner is not in the focus, as far as traditional remedial teaching is concerned; only the product matters. How to 'transform' the 'incorrect product into a correct one' seems to be the ultimate object of all remedial teaching devices. These devices range widely—from the age-old practice of making the learner repeat the correct form any number of times orally or in writing—the latter is the most cursed writing task by learners: imposition.

Taking a detached stand, let us analyse the whole process of instruction leading to a remedial programme outlined above. The flow chart given below may represent the process.

Teaching → Learning → Testing → Feedback → Remediation.

Though we planned to take a detached look at the whole process, it may be noticed that somehow we have been taking the teacher's point of view. In the flow chart, though 'learning' is there as the second stage, teachers are not much concerned about this stage until they past the stage of testing. That means, the learner is nowhere in the picture till the process reaches the point of assessment.

A closer analysis of remediation at the micro-level may reveal its structure as given below.

Evaluating the product → Identifying the wrong part → Selecting the remedial device from the available ones → Make the learner follow the prescribed course of remediation → Re-test → Re-evaluation → Comes to a dead end if the product is right / Remediation gets repeated if the product is again wrong.

It may be noticed, neither at the macro- nor at the micro-level, the learner is focused. Nor do we see the long, intrigued internal processes of learning analysed during teaching or examined in testing. Let me quote an earlier statement of mine: "How to 'transform' the 'incorrect product into a correct one' seems to be the ultimate object of all remedial teaching devices. Remediation, from the teacher's perspective aims only at 'transforming' the product from its unacceptable 'form' to the acceptable 'form'. Neither a retrospection by the learner on where he/she had gone wrong nor the teacher's introspection whether the learner has internalized the 'why, how and what' of the wrong and right product takes place at any point.

If we make a switch over first from teacher's standpoint to learner perspective, and then from product-orientation to process orientation, a great amount of positive changes can be brought into learning output, especially in writing at the discourse level.

Since the overall frame of the traditional remedial programme which is based on feedback has already been outlined above, now let us look the potentials of feedforward in designing a different type of remediation.

It seems to be a paradox that a notion and the accompanying term which were put forward by an eminent academic about seventy years ago, got wide currency in disciplines such as technology, neural science, behavioural studies and management, but little prominence they gained in the academia. The term 'feedforward' was coined by the great literary critic, I. A. Richards in 1952.

"Feedforward, as I see it, is the reciprocal, the necessary condition of what the cybernetics and automation people call 'feedback" (Richards, 1952). Though the term may sound in antithesis to feedback, Richards clearly posits feedforward as an essential prerequisite for genuine feedback. After about a decade and a half, he further clarified that "The point is that feedforward is a needed prescription or plan for a feedback, to which the actual feedback may or may not confirm"(Richards, 1968).

Instead of providing positive or negative feedback once the task is accomplished, it may be more productive to point out in advance, the various options of carrying out a task, advantages and disadvantages of one over the others, impediments likely to arise, and possible ways of overcoming them so that the end product is likely to be better. More than that, there is a constant awareness on the part of the person engaged in the act, about the whole process through which the act has to go through. This fine balance between product and process is of paramount importance not only in industry, perhaps more in teaching-learning.

Why preference on feedforward?

As asserted by Richards, feedforward and feedback are mutually related. The former sharpens our perceptions on the process of the forthcoming task or task at hand, it fine-tunes the end product; and moreover it provides a vantage point in future (maybe by the end of the task or after the completion) wherefrom a clear reflection into the past is made possible. This reflective practice is the key to professional perfection (Schon, 1983).

In the field of management –industry, business, or any profession—feedforward has been given prominence as tool for effective communication among personnel. A list of positive

features has been cited below (https://www.metasysteme-coaching.eu/english/to-feed-back-or-to-feed-forward/)

• Feedforwaris solution-oriented, providing clear indications on how to solve a problem without offering positive or negative criticism.

• Feed forward addresses precise solution-oriented actions rather than general concepts.

• Feedforward is future-oriented, avoiding comments on past behaviours or results, that indeed cannot be changed.

• Feedforward is behavioral or focused on precise actions rather than on general principles,

• Feedforward is not judgmental.

• Feedforward is empowering, very simply offering optional avenues for improvement or for autonomous development.

• Feedforward is respectful, and help reinforce positive and partnering relationships.

• Feedforward is participative, as it allows all involved persons practical means to help solve potentially repetitious negative experiences.

• Feedforward helps resolve conflicts by positioning relationships in a positive and supportive dimension.

Why less dependence on feedback?

Feedback is a post-task event. The doer's interest in the task naturally dies down on completing the task. Therefore, during the appended feedback session, the doer's attitude is likely to be: "So what?" Secondly, too much negative feedback is surely de-motivating, and too much of it the positive way may end up in developing self-satisfaction, over-confidence and complacency. In either case, feedback may not be as productive as we used to expect it to be.

Feedforward as scaffolding in ESL Writing

This point onwards, this paper proceeds by specifically restricting itself to writing in English as a second language. The inquiries are (i) how to incorporate feedforward in ESL student writing and self-editing, (ii) how feedback can be made more learner-inviting by incorporating feedforward, and (iii) how to lead learners from teacher's feedforward to self-feedforward.

The following stages can be identified in an effective feedforward-based remedial programme.

1. Pointing out the main hard spots in advance by the teacher

2. Eliciting anticipated alternative deviant forms from students (where they may go wrong)

3. Categorizing the would - be deviant forms

4. Scaffolding: Prefabricated & instant

5. Options supplied in advance

6. Monitoring while writing is in progress

7. Self editing

8. Editing by better performers among peers

Stage 1. In writing a piece of discourse (above the level of single sentences), the teacher, based on her previous experience or metalinguistic awareness, can tell the students in advance where they are likely to deviate from norms, and the likely to be deviations. Example: *She told us that she would be joining us in a day or two* (Norm). …*she will be joining us …*(Deviant form).

Sage 2. Apart from the common errors, there could be errors specific to individuals, as well. These can be elicited from individual's early writings or from the class then and there, by going back to the earlier corrections made by the teacher. Example: *She told us…* (Norm). *She told to us…* (Deviant form). *...she would be joining us …*(Norm). … *she would be joining with us …*(deviant form).

Stage 3. The would-be errors can be categorized into groups such as verb forms, use of prepositions, ambiguity resulted by the pronoun etc. Example: *Farmers warned the shopkeepers that they would be in trouble* (Who? The former or the latter?).

Errors can naturally be categorized as follows:

➢ Ideational: Content insufficiency—Irrelevant points—Factual errors

➢ Grammatical: Wrong verb tense forms—Wrong pronouns, prepositions, adjectives & adverbs

➢ Vocabulary: Wrong choices—Wrong collocations

➢ Mechanics: Spelling—Punctuation—Indenting

➢ Organizational: Coherence—Wrong linkages

Stage 4. In the case of common errors, the teacher can think in advance on the scaffolding to be erected, consequently ready -made   or pre-fabricated options can be used. In the case of individual and random deviation, scaffolding devices are to be decided on then and there. However, these scaffolding mechanisms consist of two parts: content and transactional devices. For example, in the question * *Why you came so early?,* the teacher has to be well aware of the use auxiliary verbs in wh-questions and at the same time, the cardinal exception

when the answer is expected to be the subject of the sentence as in *Who came first*? This is the content part. Classroom strategy may vary from teacher to teacher.

Stage 5. Likely to be deviant forms can be displayed in the form of a chart, written preferably in red, against each hard spot, with instruction that " Avoid these". In the case of common errors, explanations with more examples must follow, minimizing the use of metalinguistic terms such as relative pronoun, adverb of time and so on. For example, in a paragraph on fashion technology, the pair of words *cloth* and *clothe* inevitably occur. Differentiate the meaning and usage between them (Uncountable and countable: Grammar). In another class assignment, while listing and describing the shops in front of the school, the word *stationery* is most likely to occur. Differentiate between *stationery* and *stationary* (Vocabulary), illustrate with the help of examples that the former does not take plural form; plurality can be expressed with phrases like *items/pieces of stationery* or *stationery items* (Grammar).

Stage 6. Going round the class while writing is in progress, the teacher can further help learners in editing and modifying. If three or four students are stuck with the same problem, let the teacher explain the point again, but using some other devices and examples.

Stage 7. During and after composing, let each student modify their writing at the level of phrase, clause and sentence by replacing constituents in them. At the level of individual words, let them be encouraged to find better words, if there are options. For example, *purchase* and *dispose* can be replaced by *buy* and *sell,* respectively. Jyoti Sanyal's guidebook on using plain English offers hundreds of such Indianisms which may be avoided or minimized.

Stage 8. Peer editing can be insisted on for many reasons, and organization is the most important among them. Even if an average learner takes care of the syntax, vocabulary and spelling on one's own, he may not find anything wrong in the organization of points. Another reader may easily find the lack of connection between sentences or ideas.

Organizing ideas in a coherent manner with intra- and inter-paragraph coherence is perhaps the most neglected aspect in ESL writing instruction. We in India seem to focus on the bulk of content, however scattered and disjointed they appear on a sheet of paper. For a short essay, or a long paragraph, two or three skeleton frameworks can be provided in advance. Better performers may be encouraged to follow their own logical thinking and writing. Later some of them can be used as frameworks for below average performers.

Learner's self feedforward leading to learner autonomy

Since the first two research questions have been answered in some detail, the final question namely, how to lead learners from teacher's feedforward to self-feedforward remains to be taken up. While adults provide feedforward to children on a forthcoming task or a task at hand, they naturally expect to withdraw the scaffolding at the earliest instance. No parent is happy in repeating the same advance cautions, in the hope of the child's internalizing the solutions for the possible impediments. And, children grow up as adults my receiving minimum cautions and warnings. The same is true with studies as well. As in real life, learners can identify the possible hard-spots in advance, they can seek guidance from peers, and adults (teacher, parents etc.) and proceed more confidently.

Conclusion

The paper has tried to justify the proverb, 'Prevention is better than cure.' The time and energy being spent by sincere teachers on giving feedback on student writing usually does not get rewarded properly. It has also been suggested that if half of that time and energy is spent in advance in the form of feedforward, the feedback is likely to be more effective and the student writing, more productive.

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 About the Author :
*Dr. P. Bhaskaran Nair also has been working on a project 'Rural Empowerment through English Language Education Programme (REELEP)', organized by a registered NGO of English teachers, in Kerala: 'English Language Teachers' Interaction Forum (ELTIF)'. He is the founder-president of ELTIF and the editor of the quarterly, Journal of ELTIF.