

FEEDBACK FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS

by William D. Cline

The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines feedback as, "1. return of part of the output of a system to its source, especially so as to modify the output. 2. the return of information about a product, etc. to its supplier." Feedback for teachers can come through exams, verbal and non-verbal behavior of students in class, conferences with students outside of class, and from colleagues (McKeachie 1978: 275 - 76). Feedback can also be supplied to teachers through audio and video recordings of their instruction. Student opinion gathered through written questionnaires is another form of feedback. McKeachie lists the following most common purposes for collecting student opinion:

1. To assist an instructor in improving instruction.
2. To provide evidence relevant to evaluation of teaching effectiveness for promotion and salary decisions.
3. To provide information useful for students in choosing courses (269).

This paper will focus on the use of written student opinion to assist in improving instruction. This focus is closer to the definition of feedback as "the return of information about a product, etc. to its supplier." The need for such an orientation is noted by Rivers and Melvin (1981).

Who are the consumers of what we have to offer in language teaching and what will they be wanting from us in the 1980's? Our consumers are not only students, but also the society of which they are a part. As in all marketing research, we must not merely identify what we think our consumers need, but also what they want. As educators we must provide for a balance between these two if students are to be motivated to learn what we offer (81 - 2).

Before giving some of the ways in which student feedback can assist instruction, there are at least three objections to consider. First, teachers may not believe that student opinion is accurate enough to be of any concern. However, McKeachie reports that typically there are, "... moderate correlations between student ratings of teachers and the average achievement of the teacher's students ...". Furthermore, "... the only study that was adequately controlled through random assignment of students to sections found substantial positive correlations between ratings and achievement" (265). Morrison and McIntyre (1973) report that when the same students have spent a good deal of time in the same microteaching classes and are trained in the use of rating scales, their "assessments can be more reliable than those of supervisors and can also lead to greater change in teaching behavior" (89). A second objection to student feedback is that pleasing students is not necessarily educating them. McKeachie reports that research on methods has not revealed a strong relationship between the achievement and the satisfaction of students (276). Teachers do not need to feel bound by student opinion. The fact that students want something in a course does not mean it must be done. At times, the teacher may need to explain why some things are done and other things are left undone in a course.

Getting student feedback can help to identify such times. A third source of resistance to feedback may be fear. Canfield and Wells (1978: 78), and Morrison and McIntyre (213) observe that teachers require courage to ask for student ratings of their behavior. Hopefully, the desire to improve one's teaching will be stronger than the fear of possible student criticism.

One purpose of student feedback is to develop better insight in the classroom. Foreign teachers in Japan may be misled by their perceptions of students.

The Japanese have a faculty of enjoying speech regardless of content ... This makes the Japanese the world's best listeners. lecturers get along with them famously until they discover that their most brilliant addresses are, in effect, soliloquies (Rudofsky 1965: 162).

Effective teaching depends among other things, on assessment of students through non-verbal cues. However, teachers vary greatly in their ability to interpret such cues (Morrison and McIntyre 206). A teacher's ability to interpret non-verbal cues will be challenged by Japanese students who, 'in general are amazingly long suffering, docile, and restrained in physical response' (Hale 1985). Foreign teachers can interpret eye contact and a nod of the head to mean, 'I understand,' but for the student it may mean, 'I am listening and trying to understand.' Japanese students in general are also reluctant to give verbal feedback in class. Students are reluctant to admit ignorance or misunderstanding. They are reluctant to "selfishly" take class time to request an explanation of something they did not understand. Students may vary in their reactions to foreign teachers. Most foreign

teachers use methods, routines and behaviors that differ from those the students are familiar with. Furthermore, what the teacher and students expect of each other and the course may be quite divergent. Since students will seldom volunteer their views on such matters, the teacher may have to rely on other means to understand the student. Written questionnaires, or written comments by students on assignments and test papers may help the teacher understand how well instructional practices are perceived by the students. The feedback from such questionnaires can be the beginning of a dialogue leading to better mutual understanding between the teacher and the students. Such feedback may lead to adaptation by both the teacher and the students.

A second purpose of feedback from students is to help develop a better class atmosphere. Foreign language study is perhaps one of the most emotionally demanding subjects to study at school. No matter how much study is done, it is nearly impossible to learn a foreign language without at times making a fool of oneself through various mistakes. Lack of understanding and the inability to express oneself in the foreign language are also causes of frustration. It is well known that out of the many students who begin foreign language study, only a small percentage attain a high degree of proficiency. Since foreign language students have the cognitive ability to master a first language, it seems that affective factors are the major source of difference among second language learners. The psychologist and theologian Charles Curran did extensive study of the emotional aspects of language learning. He writes:

The complicated and subtle part conflict, hostility, anger and anxiety play in learning recurred repeatedly in almost all aspects of this foreign language learning research. To a certain point we can call these positive factors, for they engage one in the learning experience; they are forms of commitment and involvement. Beyond that point, however, they seem to become destructive forces; they block the student, and make him want to escape the whole experience, or arouse him to a defensive kind of learning. Such a defensive learner tends to disregard what he has learned as soon as it has served its defensive purpose, apparently because the whole experience has been so painful. Many students, for example, spoke of the deep hostility they had toward foreign languages as a result of previous classroom experiences. In their negative anxiety and conflict, most had defended themselves against this threatening situation by getting a passing grade- some even a high one. But afterwards it was difficult and painful for them even to try to speak this particular language in our reaserch group (1976: 21 - 22).

For the long term benefit of our students the climate in which language learning occurs is very important. Therefore, it is not surprising that out of eleven factors involved in language teaching, the ESL faculty at UCLA "chose social climate as the most important" (in Bailey and Celce-Murcia 1979: 316). Among several ideas for improving social climate, Bailey and Celce-Murcia suggest the use of questionnaires, stating, "The social climate can be improved if the students have some voice in what they are learning and feel that the teacher is responsive to their needs" (318).

Student feedback can be more than the chance for the students to have some voice in the class. Students can be given a major role in determining the content of their language study. Littlejohn (1983) argues for increased learner input in course management for a number of reasons. First, class atmosphere can be improved for deeper and more

receptive learning. Second, since learners vary greatly in needs and learning styles, they should have more say in how the class is managed. Third, giving the students a voice in course management also gives the students a chance to really use the target language to communicate about their wants, needs, and ideas. Fourth, motivation is likely to increase. Fifth, student involvement in course management can lead to greater involvement in the subject of the course and thus to greater learning. Finally, students who learn to manage their learning are more likely to continue their study after formal schooling is over (596 - 599). Littlejohn (1985) suggests that students can be given choice in some of the following areas:

- TIME : time spent on the learning material and decisions about when study takes place.
- GOALS : the short-term and long-term objectives of learning.
- MODE : grouping: in pairs / groups / alone / large classes.
activity: types of tasks and skill involved.
- CONTENT : subject matter: story or information content of the learning material.
linguistic content: structures, functions, etc.
- EVALUATION: by whom? when? in what form?¹
- GUIDANCE : degree and nature of help provided (255).

This type of student involvement cannot take place without considerable time spend in student preparation. This type of student involvement also involves considerable teacher preparation. Moffett (1985) observes:

Making students active and teachers reactive seems like a gratuitous relinquishing of power. But empowering others is the teacher's job. How many teachers, though, have been trained to decide how to teach decision making, how to liberate instead of infantilize (54)?

Thus, unless teachers and students are prepared and willing participants in such learning it may be difficult to implement.

Besides helping teachers in the classroom, student feedback can improve the effectiveness of an entire institution. Behan (1985) reported how student comments through discussion groups and questionnaires led to a number of positive changes at the British Council, Hong Kong. The British Council went so far as to enlist the help of professional marketing consultants to oversee the collection and evaluation of student opinion. In numerous public schools Furtwengler (1985) reports improved school climate, improved school culture, increased involvement in school activities, an increase in independent learning for teachers and students, and possible, though not conclusive improved academic achievement (264). All of these improvements were due to a school effectiveness program for which Furtwengler served as a consultant. Again and again Furtwengler points out that student input and involvement were essential to bring about such changes. Obviously, students are a potential resource for improving an educational program. It remains for teachers to effectively tap student resources.

The remainder of this paper will mostly deal with various practical ideas for collecting student feedback. Teachers interested in the following ideas should freely adapt them to their own needs and interests. Teachers might also keep in mind the following conditions under which student feedback is

most likely to be helpful. The students must provide relevant information to the teacher. The teacher must be motivated to improve. The teacher must be able to respond to a class in better ways. When the teacher is involved in selecting the questions for student feedback, improvement is more likely. And, "Research also indicates that little improvement results unless the ratings are discussed with another teacher who can sympathize, congratulate, and make suggestions about other things to try" (McKeachie 269 - 70).

There are several ways a teacher can get feedback to improve classroom insight. The ideas that follow should help a teacher to see how effective his or her teaching is to the students. The teacher should also get some idea of how the foreign students view their teacher.

McKeachie (291 - 295) gives a rating form (with permission to copy) based on those used at a number of major universities. Basically, each question asks for a numerical rating and includes space for comments.

Student Perceptions of Learning and Teaching

W. J. McKeachie
*The University of Michigan**

The items on this questionnaire ask you to comment on various aspects of your course.

Thank you for taking the time to fill this form out thoughtfully. Your answers and comments will help your teacher improve the course.

* Teachers are welcome to use this form or items from it without requesting permission from the author.

- 1 - almost never or almost nothing
 - 2 - seldom or little
 - 3 - occasionally or moderate
 - 4 - often or much
 - 5 - very often
 - 6 - almost always or a great deal
- If not applicable, leave blank.

Impact on Students

1. My intellectual curiosity has been stimulated by this course.
Comments:

2. I am learning how to think more clearly about the area of this course.
Comments:

3. I am learning how to read materials in this area more effectively.
Comments:

4. I am acquiring knowledge about the subject.
Comments:

5. The course is contributing to my self-understanding.
Comments:

6. The course is increasing my interest in learning more about this area.
Comments:

Instructor Effectiveness

7. The instructor is enthusiastic.
Comments:

8. The instructor gives good examples of the concepts.
Comments:

9. The instructor goes into too much detail.

Comments:

10. The instructor is helpful when students are confused.

Comments:

11. The instructor seems knowledgeable in many areas.

Comments:

Rapport

12. The instructor knows students' names.

Comments:

13. The instructor is friendly.

Comments:

Group Interaction

14. Students volunteer their own opinions.

Comments:

15. Students discuss one another's ideas.

Comments:

16. Students feel free to disagree with the instructor.

Comments:

Difficulty

17. The instructor makes difficult assignments.

Comments:

18. The instructor asks for a great deal of work.

Comments:

Structure

19. The instructor plans class activities in detail.

Comments:

20. The instructor follows an outline closely.

Comments:

Feedback

21. The instructor keeps students informed of their progress.

Comments:

22. The instructor tells students when they have done a particularly good job.

Comments:

23. Test and papers are graded and returned promptly.

Comments:

Notice!!! This Scale Is Different!!!

Student Responsibility

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 - definitely false | 2 - more true than false |
| 2 - more false than true | 5 - definitely true |
| 3 - in between | If not applicable, leave blank. |

24. I had a strong desire to take this course.

Comments:

25. I actively participate in class discussions.

Comments:

26. I try to make a tie-in between what I am learning through the course and my own experience.

Comments:

27. I attend class regularly.

Comments:

28. I utilize all the learning opportunities provided in the course.

Comments:

29. I have created learning experiences for myself in connection with the course.

Comments:

30. I have helped classmates learn.

Comments:

Overall Evaluations

Indicate your evaluation of characteristics below, using numbers based on the following scale:

1. Poor 2. Fair 3. Good 4. Very Good 5. Excellent

31. Rate the instructor's general teaching effectiveness for you.

Comments:

32. Rate the value of the course as a whole to you.

Comments:

Added Comments Below

I used this form once, during the last course of the year. There were two problems I encountered. First, few students took time to write comments. The numbers that the students gave as rankings were interesting but without comments it was hard to know, other than generally, why the students gave the ratings they did. Without knowing the reasons for the ratings it was hard to know how to improve. The second problem was that a number of students had trouble with some of the vocabulary. Before using this form again I would want to plan for the following changes. I would give adequate time and ask students to write comments for every response. I would want to use the form before the last day of a course. This would allow further time for questioning students about any responses that were not clear. It would also allow time for discussion of the results. In response to the questions which students had about vocabulary, I would either rewrite some of the questions or prepare a glossary for the students.

Canfield and Wells offer several ideas for Student feedback but one which seems the most interesting to me is the following. "Report Card: At the end of the grading period, distribute to each student a facsimile report card. Then instruct the students to grade You, commenting on your attitude and effort ..." (78). Again, it should be more useful to the teacher if students explain why they give the grades they do. Since students are graded by subjects, I wondered what "subjects" teachers might be graded on. The following qualities of teachers are commonly considered important by students and seem suitable for grading teachers.

1. Stimulation of interest
 2. Clarity
 3. Knowledge of subject matter
 4. Preparation
 5. Enthusiasm
 6. Friendliness
 7. Helpfulness
 8. Openness to others opinions
- (McKeachie 272)

Most of these qualities also appear to be related to student achievement (Morrison and McIntyre 194 - 95). Teachers might do well to take such grades rather seriously.

To improve the class atmosphere through feedback the teacher needs to provide more of what the students find useful or likable. This does not imply the overhaul of the curriculum, but just a tailoring of class activities in response to the students. Questionnaires for this purpose might best be given at the end of each semester.

A questionnaire which did not take very long to administer was used at the end of the first semester with nearly all of my classes last year. The results for Oral IIf are included in the following example. ²

	very useful	quite useful	useful	not very useful	not useful
1. <u>AKL Intermediate</u> ³	4	7	5	2	0
2. Situations	2	10	4	2	0
3. Episodes	2	5	3	8	0
4. Conversations	2	8	7	1	0
5. Pair work	4	7	3	4	0
6. Homework	0	2	4	9	2

	very useful	quite useful	useful	not very useful	not useful
7. Cassette tapes	9	6	1	2	0
8. Communicative activities, games, etc.	2	4	9	1	1
9. <u>Explain Yourself</u> ⁴	3	3	7	5	0
10. Teacher's instructions	6	6	6	0	0
11. Comments:					

At the beginning of the second semester I wrote the results of these questionnaires on the board for class discussion. Class discussion proved to be useful. For example, a number of students in Oral IIf had rated homework as not very useful. The students said it was too easy. I later changed the homework, giving assignments that were more communicative and less mechanical.

A second form of feedback takes a little longer to administer but supplies a lot of information. I have asked the students at the end of the year to write, "things I liked," "things I didn't like," and, "ideas for a better class." I have also listed on the board areas of the course which I am particularly interested in getting feedback about, such as lectures, teacher, textbook, etc. Students have usually responded with comments that are useful for planning the next year's courses. Students, in general, explain and support their opinions fairly well on a free response questionnaire such as this.

For course management, student feedback can determine the curriculum to a much greater extent than for improving

class atmosphere. The following questionnaires might be given at the beginning of a course to collect student ideas for the class.

- Why are you learning English?
 - How do you think English will be useful to you?
 - What do you think is the most difficult thing about learning English? Can you give precise examples?
 - What do you think you need to learn?
 - What do you think is the best way to learn? Why?
- (Littlejohn 1983: 602)

Check the boxes that show your interests for studying English.

	very much	much	some	little	very little
1. grammar study					
2. drama and role play					
3. textbook study					
4. drills					
5. pair conversation					
6. group conversation					
7. class conversation					
8. memorization					
9. talking about _____					
10. (other ideas) _____					
11. _____					
12. _____					

After giving these questionnaires, considerable time could be spent discussing the results with students and letting them decide how to apply the results.

The nature of an educational institution will, to some extent, determine the type of questions asked of students when student feedback is sought for overall improvement of the institution. Some of the questions used by the British Council in Hong Kong would not be suitable for a college or university in Japan. Other questions should be more generally useful, such as:

- (11) The class size at present is
 - 4 too large
 - 3 a bit large
 - 2 just right
 - 1 could be increased slightly

- (12) The physical environment in the classroom is
 - 1 very unpleasant
 - 2 Unpleasant
 - 3 Pleasant
 - 4 very pleasant
 - 5 I have no opinion

- (22) The materials taught in this class are
 - 5 too difficult for me
 - 4 slightly difficult
 - 3 just right for me
 - 2 a bit too easy
 - 1 far too easy

- (23) In general the teacher's preparation for each class session is
 - 5 extremely adequate
 - 4 more than adequate
 - 3 adequate
 - 2 not very adequate
 - 1 inadequate

(The British Council 1985)

Student feedback can be a useful source of input for improving teaching. Written student comments provide information which might not otherwise be determined in or out of class. Other forms of feedback such as tests, assignments, and advice from colleagues need to be balanced with student opinion. My own use of student opinion has been limited. I have used it to try to understand my students and the effectiveness of my instruction. I have also used feedback to try to improve the class atmosphere. I have sometimes felt encouraged, reprimanded, or bewildered but always motivated by what my students have told me. I hope through such motivation that my teaching has improved.

NOTES

1. An example of successful student evaluation can be found in LeBlanc, Raymond, and Gisele Painchaud. 1985. Self-Assessment as a Second Language Placement Instrument. *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (4): 673 - 687. At the University of Ottawa, student self-assessment was accurate enough to replace standardized tests for language placement. Other advantages of self-assessment were savings in time and a smaller percentage of changes after placement.
2. Oral IIf was a second year course emphasizing speaking skills in English. Eighteen out of 26 students were present on the day the questionnaire was administered.
3. O'Neill, Robert, Roy Kingsbury, Tony Yeadon, and Edwin T. Cornelius, Jr. 1978. *American Kernel Lessons: Intermediate*. New York: Longman, Inc. This was the

- main text for the course. Oral IIf used Situations, Episodes, and Conversations from this text.
4. Nicholson, Philip, and Richard Sakuno. 1982. *Explain Yourself*. Pal Ltd. This was a supplementary textbook.

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