

Post-observation feedback as an instigator of teacher learning and change

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Abstract

This paper investigates an on-going study into the nature of the discourse teacher educators (TEs) and student-teachers (Ts) use during post-observation feedback, and explores the feedback discourse in terms of the impact it may have on teacher learning and change. Two types of feedback, confirmatory and corrective, are briefly discussed, and the former is then made the focus of the paper in its role as a potential instigator of teacher learning and change.

Introduction

Teaching practice and post-observation feedback form an essential part of many initial teacher training courses. Post-observation feedback, which requires many skills and techniques, is a well-researched area (Freeman, 1982; Gebhard, 1984; Edge, 1993/1994; Roberts, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Kurtoglu-Eken, 1999; Randall, 1999; Wallace, 1999; Randall and Thornton, 2001); the connection between feedback and teacher learning and change, however, is yet to be explored.

This study is concerned with the effect any post-observation feedback may have on teachers and draws on work from Korthagen and Russell (1995:191) who maintain that TEs “require knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the field of human development (adult development, social psychology, counselling, and the like).” Particularly useful within the context of giving feedback in teacher education is Egan’s work on counselling and the terms he uses for the different types of feedback: confirmatory and corrective. Confirmatory feedback involves helpers “let[ting] clients know that they are on course – that is,

moving successfully through the steps of their action programs toward their goals” (Egan, 2002: 361). Corrective feedback, on the other hand, is the kind of feedback that involves letting clients know that “they have wandered off course” and what they need to do to get back on track (ibid).

The guiding research paradigm in the study is that of action research. Reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) is used to analyse the data and to shed light into the TP feedback context.

Corrective feedback and teacher change

For assessment purposes, to ensure that each T has fulfilled the aims and objectives of an initial teacher training course, certain behaviours are expected, and therefore feedback is often likely to be corrective. Within this context, corrective feedback is likely to apply to situations where there was perhaps a better answer for something, such as the need to show an awareness of learner errors and being able to correct them sensitively, or ensuring that there is a purpose for using an activity. It might also involve some kind of ‘a gentle telling off’ if the T seems to be repeating the same mistakes without any evidence of moving forward. Corrective feedback requires a period of time for the T to process, digest, reflect upon and come to terms with the ‘criticism’ involved. Change as a result of this type of feedback is likely to be *convergent*, that is to say, the T is required to move closer to some agreed norm or form of practice. The T is encouraged to exhibit what s/he has learnt. In other words, some observable behaviour is needed for there to be some indication of teacher learning – certainly for assessment purposes.

Corrective feedback no doubt provides a powerful

learning medium for Ts. However, Egan (opcit: 303) warns us that corrective feedback is all too often very detailed while confirmatory feedback is “perfunctory”. If confirmatory feedback is detailed in the same way corrective feedback often tends to be, and if it is supported with specific examples from the T’s lesson, there is every reason that this type of feedback, too, would facilitate teacher change. Teacher learning and change do not have to be problem-oriented all the time. They could involve the appreciation of what a T does well. This resonates with Appreciative Inquiry an approach that uses, as a starting point, appreciating and valuing “The Best of ‘What Is’” (Hammond, 1998:24) – an approach based on strengths rather than weaknesses. Confirmatory feedback in my data seems to involve elements of this type of an approach.

Confirmatory feedback and teacher change

Confirmatory feedback during a TP feedback session is likely to be given in the context of praise – in connection with what it is that the T did well. In this context, the confirmatory comments from the TEd or another T are likely to encourage each T to construct his/her own constructive thought patterns. As a result of confirmatory feedback the T may remain as he/she is; or may also be encouraged to try new avenues and to pursue new challenges. If the latter route is taken, elements of a *divergent* change are likely to emerge. It is this kind of change that I would like to explore further with a particular example from my own data.

A 4-week intensive initial teacher training course at a British university forms the context of the study. Data are collected through audio recordings of feedback sessions, feedback to feedback questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, course diaries, an end-of-course questionnaire, and subsequent email correspondence.

During the course, as part of their Teaching Practice (TP), the Ts work in groups of 4, with each member of the group teaching six 45-minute sessions, and observing one another. Feedback is held in groups.

The extract chosen here is from TP2 feedback on JM’s lesson. The activity under discussion is

one which involved JM grouping the learners. Each learner had been given a telephone number of a fire station, police station, ambulance, or hospital. The learners were asked to mill around asking one another the question ‘Can I have your phone number please?’ All learners who had the number for a hospital were then grouped together. So were those who all had a number for a police station, etc. This grouping worked well both as a technique in itself and also in terms of its contribution to the overall theme of the lesson which was telephone interactions.

JM receives confirmatory feedback not only from me as his tutor, but also from all his peers. References such as *You’re SO natural* (line 001); and *You should write a book about classroom management techniques* (lines 018-019) refer to JM himself – his teacher persona and what he is perceived as being able to do. JM is also praised on the success of his activity. Comments such as *It was just EXcellent* (line 010); *it’s a LOVELy idea* (line 011); *the idea’s wonderful* (line 016) all refer to JM’s technique of grouping the learners.

001 MF You’re SO natural.

002 LF Yeah. I was saying to MF earlier, that to think about cutting up the, I don’t know whether you thought about that yourself or whether it came from a book I don’t know.

006 JM No, no, it wasn’t. I...

007 LF It wasn’t, no, cutting up the telephone numbers, getting them to meet with each other, and then to do a different

009 Nur+SM Hmm

010 LF I thought it was just eXcellent.

011 Nur Yes, it’s a LOVELy idea. The only thing was that it actually took longer than it should’ve been.

013 JM YES [instant agreement].

014 Nur Because of the instructions – it comes down to the instructions as you were saying, whereas the idea’s wonderful – very creative.

017 MF Yes. You’re going to get

018 Nur You should write a look about classroom management techniques, [laughter from all group] grouping activities. Really. It's lovely yes.

021 MF Its variance as well.

022 Nur [inaudible] That was Claire's activity, but he'd adapted it.

023 LF EXACTly.

024 MF It's wonderful.

This extract may look insignificant at first sight as it involves the type of confirmatory feedback that many Ts may receive in any group feedback session. One is more likely to appreciate its significance when one realises the impact the feedback has had on JM. On the last day of the course, as part of the end-of-course questionnaire, the Ts had been asked to think back to all the 6 TP feedback sessions they had had and to choose one piece of feedback they received from tutor or peer that they found significant in some way. They then commented on why they found this piece of feedback particularly significant and what effect the feedback may have had on them. All the feedback JM receives about himself as a person and about the success of his grouping technique in that particular TP feedback session, seem to have had a transformative effect on him as JM's response shows:

This may seem minor BUT to be told I am 'creative' has had enormous effects! This creativeness hasn't obviously just happened. However in the past probably because of others' feedback, I would have described myself as a "bit of a plodder" who needed permission to do anything out of the mainstream. To find I am perceived creative by people has been a bit of a "life changer".

Regular correspondence with all the Ts in the group encouraged me to explore JM's comments further. When I emailed him to ask about the ways in which the feedback may have been a 'life changer' for him, this is what he wrote:

I have always been perceived as a "Plodder". "Want something doing?" ask JM, he'll stick at it, get it done and it will be done in the "correct" way, not quick, because he sticks to "the rules" is probably how I have always been seen. Well that is my perception of how I have been seen!

To be suddenly, and it was sudden to me! described as "Creative" not once but a number of times, and not by just one person (honest!) changed the whole way I think about myself. It has not only restored some of my self respect but also given me confidence to actually put forward ideas, and opinions, that in the past I would have kept to myself. I would have kept them to myself on the basis that I was a "plodder" and "plodders' ideas whilst not worthless are never new, inventive, creative etc. etc. so not worth airing, who would listen anyway! The "Creative" comment has also given me confidence to try out new ideas, whether I am confident they will work or not. Something I would have been loath to do prior to the course.

His comments are evidence that confirmatory feedback on some of his behaviour in class, for example comments about his creativity, provided opportunities for him to gain in confidence, bringing about changes in him as a person. These changes are likely to have been divergent in nature. As his self-image improved, so did his willingness to try alternative ways of doing something. Change may not be immediately observable. When it is, it may manifest itself at different levels, as change can be in behaviour, in conceptions, or in the person himself. JM no doubt experienced change in behaviour and in conceptions as a result of the confirmatory and the corrective feedback he was given during the post-observation feedback sessions. It is, however, the changes he experienced as a person as a result of the confirmatory feedback that presents a powerful image to us TEDs.

Conclusion

If confirmatory feedback is likely to have a strong impact on teacher learning and change, we, as TEDs would need to value the contributions this kind of feedback has. JM comments on how much of a "life changer" the feedback on his lessons have been; how much his self-image has improved as a result of the confirmatory feedback.

Further research into the different types of change is needed in order to address the following questions:

- Is it the case that confirmatory feedback leads to divergent change, and corrective feedback to convergent change?
- Does confirmatory feedback have a greater

potential for facilitating transformative change at the personal level?

If both questions deserve a 'yes' answer, then it would be fair to say that confirmatory feedback is no less powerful than corrective feedback.

By adopting an action research cycle not only are we able to inform our practice but also to drive theorisation through questions like the above. As reflective practitioners, in the process of understanding and evaluating our own practice, we become involved in "reflection-on-action" (Schön, 1983), and "a reflective conversation with the situation" (Altrichter and Posch, 1989:28). Appreciative Inquiry as a style of action research could make valuable contributions to our practice. Using this approach we could gain insight into what works well and to further explore the power of confirmatory feedback. We can then be in a better position to answer questions raised above.

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An interview with Barbara Seidlhofer

In 2003 TTEd SIG Committee member Philip Kerr had the opportunity to speak with Barbara Seidlhofer about teacher education, inspiration and controversies.

Could you tell us a little about the teacher education context in which you work?

Well, depending on whether you are an optimist or a pessimist, you could call it a challenging, or a nightmarish one: the English department at the University of Vienna is a huge ‘traditional’ European English department, with about 3000 students and a curriculum that consists of elements of language, literature, linguistics, cultural studies and teaching methodology. And accordingly, the staff forms sub-groups: the ‘lit people’, the ‘ling people’, etc. – the ‘meth people’ group used to be very small and fairly powerless, but is now expanding because our new TEd curriculum has as many hours in it for methodology as it does for ling and lit. This is great because it will allow us to make the course of studies more balanced as a sound basis in teacher education.

How do you rate language teacher education in Austria?

On the whole, excellent – but we are in a precarious situation. For the time being, all secondary school teachers study at the university and get a high-level, substantial education in the fields covered in our curriculum. When they get their MA after a minimum of 4 ½ years (it takes most students longer in fact) they can feel

confident that they really know a lot about the subject they will be teaching, and they are really expert users of English themselves. But now that the fascination with quick fixes and cheap solutions has also invaded the education sector with a vengeance, moves are underway to churn out teachers on a shorter production line, and to prepare them more directly for their future tasks (which, however, cannot be predicted) – in short, ‘effective training’ is to replace ‘education as an investment’. We’ll have to fight to retain teacher education as something deemed worthy of spending time on at a university.

As a teacher educator, whose work (writer or practitioner or both) have you found the most inspirational?

This is an easy one to answer: beyond any doubt, Henry Widdowson. He has been the single most important person in my professional life, a model as a thinker, as a teacher, and as a human being. I first got to know him when I did my MA in Language and Literature in Education at the London Institute of Education in the 1980’s, and was later fortunate to have Henry as the supervisor of my PhD thesis. As a thinker, Henry will be known to many of your readers through his books. I could not do justice to his scholarly achievements in a minute, but I’d like to pick out one quality he has, and that has to do with the ‘crap detector’ we talked about in reference to the *Controversies* book: Henry has this gift of always going straight to the essence of things, to what is the most relevant or problematic question concerning whatever is being discussed. He never seeks to score points - he doesn’t need to. He just makes points, but with a precision that can feel devastating. As a teacher and a human being, he is

the most inspiring and the most generous person I know: he will always, as a matter of course, make time for his students and colleagues. He listens to them very carefully and takes their concerns seriously. He always finds something good and worthwhile in the draft you've written or in the 'silly question' you ask, and he has a way of building on that and so sharing his wisdom in a manner that is maximally helpful in a particular situation. Of course, you might suspect that I am just a little bit biased but other people, I know, feel the same.

Most courses of teacher education (worldwide) concentrate almost exclusively on the theoretical, with very little time devoted to the practicum. What experience have you had of this?

Well this is exactly the complaint we get from our students as well, although many also tell us, when we meet them years later, that they are glad they had a good academic education, as an investment for their future. Actually, your question gives me the opportunity to bring applied linguistics into this interview: applied linguistics is, after all, claiming to be a mediating force between theory and practice. I think that the problem is not that 'useless' theory takes up time in courses that had better be spent on the practicum (didn't know you used that word in English!). In fact, to me the dichotomy 'theoretical – practical' is a red herring in this context: I think the crucial point is that whatever theory is presented in teacher education courses – be it historical linguistics, phonology or literary criticism – must be made accessible and relevant to whatever the course claims to be an education for. It does not make sense to teach 'theory' for its own sake, in a kind of *l'art pour l'art* fashion (which is, admittedly, what quite a few university teachers do) but it must be made really clear to future teachers in what way knowing about, say, sound systems will be useful to them in their work, how it will enable them to make informed decisions in their teaching, for choosing the materials and techniques, etc that are most appropriate in the very specific conditions in which they are teaching, and which cannot be predicted and prepared for at university. And this making accessible and relevant is precisely what applied linguistics, in my view, is all about.

Of the controversies that you deal with in your book, with which do you feel most personally

engaged?

The one about corpus linguistics and language teaching. This links up most directly with what I've just said about what applied linguistics should ideally do, and it does get me when linguists (some of whom will admit quite happily that they know nothing about language learning and teaching) decree what should go into teaching materials simply on the basis that they now have accurate corpus-based descriptions of how native speakers "really use the language". This makes me cross precisely because corpus linguistics as a branch of linguistics is so utterly fascinating, and has such mind-boggling potential for linguistic description. But rather than approaching the question what might be the best way to draw on this potential in a genuine, bilateral collaboration with experts on language learning and teaching, what has usually happened is that the experts on linguistic description have said, "Right, we've found out how certain words and patterns really work in the language, and therefore you language teachers need to throw out the old stuff and teach according to our findings" – without asking any questions about what might be the best language to learn from in specific settings – which may be a far cry from the exact language used by London taxi drivers or by families in a Swansea kitchen. I could go on about this topic for a long time, but the main point I want to make is that there is linguistic expertise and there is pedagogic expertise, and they should play an equal role in decisions about language teaching. Corpus linguistics is absolutely fantastic for linguistic description, and I use it a lot for finding out about language use – in fact, I am building a corpus myself, of English as it is used as a lingua franca, with the nice acronym VOICE (for Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English). But I would never dream of jumping directly to pedagogic conclusions from my descriptive findings. But that would fill another interview...

Of the controversies that you deal with in your book, which has sparked the most interest in your students?

That varies with the groups of students and with the objective of the course, but on the whole it must be the one about the global spread of English – that was also the one where I spotted them sitting together in a corner in their free time, poring over how the authors got at each other (as

they put it) in the articles that I had asked them to read before I put the book together – and so it was also this controversy, and my students' reaction to it, that gave me the idea for the book. I find it amazing that advanced students in an English department like ours can have been engaged in 'English Studies' for years without ever having given serious critical thought to the rather crucial issues raised by the global hegemony of the so-called Western free market economy, and the language that is most instrumental in helping material greed devastate the planet. Strangely enough, it comes as a revelation to many of them that a topic like this can constitute a legitimate object of study and research, not just 'literature and linguistics proper', and that as future English teachers they need to make up their minds as to where they stand in regard to these matters.

What other controversies would you have liked to include in your book?

You can probably imagine that once you've embarked on such a project a kind of selective perception kicks in, and you notice interesting controversies all the time – but of course I had this very strict criterion that authors must make direct reference to each other, not just disagree on

a particular matter, and that limits the candidates. The area I found offered the richest pickings was second language acquisition research, but for people who are not actually members of this particular scientific community more than what I've got in there would have been too much. I gave a lecture to a summer school for EFL and ESOL teachers in Oxford recently, and the participants there said that what they would like to see next is a book with controversies that are more directly related to teaching. I find this idea very attractive and can already see what might go into it – arguments about task-based language teaching/learning for instance, or the role of grammar, or indeed which kinds of grammar might be most useful, as well as pros and cons of so-called authentic materials and of using the students' mother tongue in ELT. Another area which is proving controversial is one that is the centre of my own research, namely the description of English as it is used as a lingua franca, ie largely by non-native speakers, and the use that should be made of such descriptions when they become available. So plenty of scope there – OUP have already indicated that they'd be willing to talk to me about a sequel.