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Does Teachers' Feedback Serve its Real Purpose? Examining Teachers' Feedback Practices

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Does Teachers' Feedback Serve its Real Purpose? Examining Teachers' Feedback Practices

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Abstract: *The real essence of formative feedback has been a missing element in teachers' formative assessment practices in the classrooms. This paper analyses the existing practices of teachers' feedback in the context of classrooms in Pakistan. Mainly teachers were found unable to provide quality feedback that could support students' learning outcomes. The teachers' comments include summative judgments, mainly. A number of challenges faced by the teachers was their lack of understanding and skills to provide formative feedback and limited approach to teaching social studies in the classrooms. The study was done in one district of the country but the findings could be used to examine the existing formative assessment practices nationwide. The findings suggest that teachers need to be engaged in professional development activities enhance their professional practices and skills on a regular basis.*

Keywords: Formative assessment, feedback, case study, teaching and learning, continuous professional development.

Introduction

Formative assessment is an ongoing assessment process, and feedback is an integral part of it. This paper examines teachers' feedback practices and their outcomes, whether if the feedback enables students to improve their learning experiences and outcomes. This research was conducted in two public schools in the district Hunza, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. The design of the study employed was a case-study under the qualitative research approach. Two social study teachers of Grade 5 participated in the study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and focus group discussions.

The overall findings of this study indicate that the teachers are aware of some theoretical assumptions about the feedback with regards to its importance in supporting their students' learning. However, the feedback practices were more mechanical rather than reflective and formative. Formative assessment was defined as an approach to checking the students' work and identifying correct or incorrect text/work. Mainly the teachers

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identify procedural mistakes i.e. spellings errors and wrong information, since the learning was viewed as the transformation of factual knowledge from the textbook. Mainly the teachers viewed marks and judgmental comments as feedback to students. For a variety of reasons i.e. teachers' awareness of feedback, skills to provide feedback, and assessment literacy, they were not aware about effective feedback practices and their learning functions.

This paper concludes that teachers should equip themselves with the content and pedagogical knowledge of formative assessment and feedback practice in a classroom context. For this purpose, special continuous professional development courses in the area of formative feedback are required to improve teachers' feedback practices.

Literature Review

Feedback (FB) is considered as the most influential component of effective teaching and learning processes - a scaffolding mechanism that communicate and facilitate learning gaps and suggest ways to address the gaps (Mirzaee & Hasrati, 2014). The literature discusses various ways of giving and receiving feedback including teachers, peer and self-feedback. The global research also provides evidence of supporting role of feedback in improving students' learning experiences and outcomes (Herman, Osmundson, Dai, Ringstaff, & Timms, 2015). The purpose of feedback is to overcome the differences between the existing understanding of students and the understanding that is being expected (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback invites students' involvement in examining own learning and helping them to minimise learning gaps. Since feedback provides an information which encourages students: to admit their mistakes, re-visit it, try to learn from it, and change himself accordingly. The salient feature of feedback is to informs students how they were performed and provide guidance and assistance for better understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Having signifying the learning function of formative feedback, teachers are recognized as assessment leaders, engaged in analyzing learning outcomes and experiences and integrating the findings in supporting their students' learning. Moreover, teachers as assessment leaders believe in active role of students in assessment. The literature also reveals that feedback is the teacher's response to the student to bridge these gaps (Sadler, 2009). To support this idea that "an information about the gap between the actual level and reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way", rather hold on with information and improvement.

Based on the contemporary discussion, the National Education Policy of Pakistan (2009/16) puts a strong emphasis on formative assessment methods while putting a strong emphasis on the provision of feedback from teachers to learners. The core objective of this policy is that assessment must help students in identifying the learning gaps and enhance their reflective and high-order thinking. This approach is in full accordance with the frameworks provided by the National Professional Standards for Teachers in Pakistan (HEC, 2009). As this particular assessment framework is guided by HEC. The standards indicate that teachers must ensure that learners receive constructive and timely feedback, which would enable students to understand their learning achievement and gaps, as well as encourage them to take remedial actions. These documents suggest that constructive

feedback serves multiple purposes i.e. raising student motivation, improving learning skills and attitude thus enriching students' learning experiences and outcomes. This paper discusses teachers' formative feedback practices and their implication for supporting students' learning, in the context of GB. Hence, the findings discussed in this paper unpack the extent to which teacher feedback serves its real purposes.

This study has vital role in the area of feedback, and it will contribute to different levels. The review literature indicates that research on formative feedback in the western context is wide, but there is a lack of research in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, where we hardly find research on formative feedback. This study opens a new window for the learner in the field of formative assessment with a particular focus on teachers' feedback practices in my context.

Methodology

The qualitative case study design was adapted to address the research on teachers' feedback practices as discussed earlier. The case study method is a systematic inquiry which explores an existing problem within the real-life setting. Furthermore, author emphasizes that the case study method is used to fully address the research question to get the deeper insights into the phenomena of teachers' feedback in the context of their classrooms. The case study allows a researcher to get in-depth understanding by using various data collection methods and multiple perspectives - addressing issues of reliability and validity of data.

The data discussed in this paper comes from semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and documents (i.e. lesson plans, evidence of teachers' written feedback) (Morison & Brown, 2011). Moreover, to examine efficacy of the feedback in supporting learning, focus group discussion with the students were conducted. The thematic analysis helps the researchers to evaluate the teachers' feedback practices and related issues.

The data from various sources was transcribed. For drawing themes the transcribed data was put in the four column table, where data of each individual sequentially under the following heading:

Specimen for codification			
What is the data?	What does the data suggest?	What do the researchers understand from this data?	Possible Theme

The above table helped the researchers in extracting themes from the data.

Findings and Analysis

Assessment as a Product or Process

The finding and discussion reported in this paper draw from the work with two Social Studies teachers of Grade 5 from public schools. Both teachers had tacit assumptions

about learning. Learning mainly was reception and reproduction of knowledge received from a teacher or a text book. Though the teachers pointed out that learning meant students' holistical development their teaching practices mainly emphasized reading from text and learning by heart. Additionally, the teachers' perceptions and practices did not reveal their understanding of formative feedback and its contribution in terms of supporting student learning. The teachers mentioned that they provide their students with written and verbal feedback. The observations and document analysis indicate that the focus of the feedback mainly includes judgmental comments, using remarks like good, excellent, and very well. The weakness was seen in terms of identifying spelling errors.

Since the focus of their teaching was to reproduce the prescribed content, that's why the gaps were seen in terms of a correcting of the recalled material only.

The classroom observation showed that the teachers corrected the students' responses immediately when delivered wrong. Hence, no data was found which could suggest that what were the explicit learning outcomes in a social studies class and how the feedback helps them to achieve or understand the learning outcomes. Observation indicates that teachers were caring and sensitive towards their students' emotions and feelings, and would provide their students with space to share their individual/personal problems, e.g. why did you not complete the homework? Do you have to work hard to pass the examination? While talking about the assessment, teachers said I give them remarks like "good", "very good" and "excellent" for their outstanding work. If they make mistakes, then, I encourage them and then I discuss with them the area where they need improvement. I also use emojis like happy faces and stars. I also use grades like A+, A, B to encourage students. I experienced that these are the tools that create interest and motivation among the students.

The following extract indicates the teachers make effort if students encountered any difficulties, but none of the difficulties were discussed and/or addressed in classrooms. Teachers provide additional time to students to discuss the problems:

For example,	when the teacher asked Maidah (student):
Teacher:	Maidah did you complete the task?
Maidah:	Nodded her head and said no.
Teacher:	was it difficult
Maidah:	Yes, I did not understand
Teacher:	Ok no problem, we will discuss it at recess (break) time
Maidah:	Ok Ma'am

In a nutshell, the given analysis concludes the teachers were frequently practicing FB in their classrooms consciously or unconsciously: written as well as verbal; their understanding of formative assessment remains limited. They are still not aware of the fundamental concept of formative assessment and feedback. Feedback was viewed in terms of identifying spelling mistakes, and their correction through practice and memorisation.

Issues and Challenges

From analyses of the data drawn from teachers indicate that though the teachers are aware of the function and outcomes of positive feedback on students' motivation. However, they

are not able to examine what good feedback constitutes. Since their approach to support students learning was very limited and their feedback remains narrow and judgmental. The teacher remained the main authority of knowledge. Learning was content-oriented, and the only role of feedback was ensuring students correcting information and facts as well as spellings. The analysis indicates that the teachers were merely busy in checking and marking students' homework (answering questions using the textbook content) and tests; they did not recognize their role beyond the delivery. Perhaps, this was an issue of their limited understanding of pedagogy and classroom assessment.

Lack of parents' interest in helping students to correct their work at home was also raised as a main issue. This could be interpreted that parents' involvement is an important factor to enhance students' learning. Our analysis is that with limited understanding of teaching, learning, and assessment, it is unreal to assume the learning function of feedback.

Overall, the findings reveal that feedback practices do exist in public schools. The teachers were aware of some theoretical assumptions about the feedback with regards to its importance in supporting their students' learning. However, the feedback practices were more superficial and mechanical rather than being reflective. It was not evident if the feedback supported learning in a broader sense as discussed in the literature. The main aim of the formative assessment was to check the students' work and identify correct and or incorrect text/work. Even mistakes were seen in terms of spellings, factual knowledge since the tasks were limited in nature.

Discussion

The analysis indicates that teachers' understanding and practices of formative assessment, and providing feedback exists at surface level, and thereby need to be improved. The role of feedback is to identify errors, provide corrections, and/or write brief comments to indicate the level of students' performance. Although the teachers' approach provided their students with the confidence to challenge and/or question the teachers' correction of their work, yet the focus of the learning remained on textbook content. Since teachers' teaching had a limited scope, the feedback was not seen as a tool to enhance students' high-order thinking skills or promote a meaningful learning experience. The findings of the study revealed that teachers use feedback frequently in their classroom context. Their feedback includes words such as; good, very good, excellent, incomplete work, write neat and clean, poor in writing. The teachers also identified mistakes by circling, underlining, and crossing words. In fact, the teachers have used both encouraging and discouraging comments such as 'you did an excellent job, concentrate on your writing, and work hard, etc. however, overall, such comments or feedback is known as general evaluation, which indicates neither what has been achieved nor what steps to take next, or were geared to improving presentation or to merely complete work - thus have limited role in supporting learning outcomes. Due to their limited knowledge of assessment, teachers did not even develop any rubrics, which could define the comments or FB according to the levels and competencies of students learning, because rubrics are

imaginative tools that help teachers to meet the expected learning goals (Vagle, 2014). Perhaps the comments and words used by the teachers for feedback do not provide any clear instruction. Therefore, their solo purpose remained limited to the identification of errors and corrections. With limited teaching perspectives, teachers may not be able to use formative assessment in their classrooms. Therefore, teachers need to broaden their knowledge and perspective of assessment in specific and teaching practices in general.

In the Pakistani context, especially in public schools situated in rural areas, teachers have limited opportunities for their capacity building or personal professional development specifically in pedagogy and content knowledge. The only resource used for teaching is the textbook. Teachers expect students to gain good command by using a textbook in terms of reading, writing, and memorizing. The findings of the study revealed that the teachers have never attended any session or training particularly on formative assessment and the role of feedback in the assessment. In such circumstances, formative assessment was practiced in a traditional way, rather than critical and reflective learning. Moreover, their feedback practices were based on their past experiences and knowledge.

The analysis of the findings reflects that teacher's conventional practice of feedback has its pros and cons because FB has a great impact on students' learning in both aspects: positive and negative. Positive feedback is considered as positive reinforcement and negative feedback refers to negative reinforcement (Thorndike, 1913). According to the teachers, positive feedback promotes learning through encouragement and appreciation, while negative feedback (punishment) discourages students. Farhan the teacher of XYZ Public School indicated that students must be encouraged through reward and award because "encouragement and students learning are interlinked". However, "in general, feedback given as rewards or grades enhances ego rather than task involvement- that is, it leads students to compare themselves with others rather than able them to think about their work and how they can improve it. Therefore, this notion has not at all been effective in terms of encouragement and appreciation. In addition, excessive uses of encouragement have a negative impact on students' learning. Moreover, the context where this research has been conducted is a remote area in terms of its geographical location, where most of the parents are uneducated. Due to lack of parental education, some parents have stereotypes about education. They believe that the responsibility of education totally relies on teachers and school. There is a famous idiom in the Persian language that mostly stereotype parents and teachers used; 'Meher ali ki na boshad zarbeyali' [It means that there are some people who are not used to the language of love and politeness, therefore, they need to be treated harshly or violently to get the desired result]. In such a scenario, negative reinforcement (punishment) works a lot, to incline students toward education forcefully. A study conducted in Khaiber-Pakhtoonkhaw, Pakistan stated that through punishment, teachers can immediately change the bad habits of students. However negative feedback has a bad impact on a student especially when checking homework, teachers cross out the entire work of students or comment words like poor, and rubbish. This kind of FB can put an end on a child's creativity and interest.

The study found that teachers used feedback merely for the identification of errors and making corrections, rather than a reflective and critical understanding of learners. However, the literature indicates that feedback is not a surface-level activity rather it is a

systematic and rigorous process of engaging teachers and students in the learning process (Saliu, 2017). Teachers have a leading role in this whole exercise. It is important to recognize that teachers need support and training in achieving effective feedback practices. Teachers appear to be aware of the importance of feedback in supporting learning but their perceptions about learning remain limited. They do not have a clear understanding of how feedback enhances meaningful learning outcomes. Thus, teachers in GB need to understand and practice the feedback strategies as discussed above.

Conclusion

This research study provides an inclusive and thorough description and characteristics of formative assessment and teachers' feedback practices in contributing students' learning. The findings of the study show that teachers' understanding and beliefs about formative assessment and feedback is not sufficient and their understanding of feedback is just limited to the identification and correction of errors and to give some common remarks. Due to its geographical location and lack of teachers' knowledge and skills, formative assessment is not being practiced with its whole purpose. By reviewing the existing literature, feedback engages in active learning through confirmation, criticism, and constructive remarks. Constructive feedback means giving facilitations and directions to the students in achieving their learning goals. Formative assessment and the role of feedback focused on the development of students' high-order thinking skills and metacognition level (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Johnson, 2012). However, the current teachers' feedback practices in the classroom are insufficient to fulfill the requirement of the real purpose of formative assessment as mentioned in the literature. Therefore, it is concluded that the lack of teachers' knowledge and skills about formative assessment are the hindrances to implementing real feedback practices in the classroom. To achieve and implement effective feedback practices in the school context teachers' training in the field of assessment is vital.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggests that theoretically regular and quality formative feedback has greater impact on student learning. Formative feedback helps students to understand their own learning strategies and involved in self- monitoring. However, teachers need cultural and cognitive support to enhance their formative feedback practices and evaluate its efficacy in terms of student learning. The curriculum should provide framework to teachers to use a broad range of assessments to support student learning. Existing teacher education programme covers classroom assessment but is more theoretical than practical. In order to develop the teachers' capacity, the teacher education courses must provide teachers with opportunities to design and conduct a range of formative assessment techniques to gather evidence of student learning. They need to learn how to use the evidence of learning for supporting learning outcomes. Public school teachers should also be provided with plenty of resources (i.e. rubrics, examples of quality feedback, reflection time) to understand formative assessment in context. School management must

monitor teachers' practices in line with national standards, to improve teachers' practices.

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