Learner Feedback as a Tool for Teacher Learning and Continuing Professional Development

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Abstract

Teachers are lifelong learners. While students learn from teachers, teachers too can learn from students. This paper documents how learner feedback can function as an effective tool for teacher learning and subsequent continuing professional development. The paper is based on a 60-hour course, *The Second Language Classroom*, offered to 11 trainee teachers of the MA TESL Programme at the English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad, India. Learner feedback was gathered on three major aspects of teaching: 1) the content. 2) the delivery, and 3) the assessment tools. Feedback was collected at three strategic phases during the course: 1) at the beginning of the course, 2) in the middle of the course, and 3) at the end of the course to appraise overall course effectiveness. Findings reveal that learners rate tasks that trigger problem-solving as effective and consider rapport building as a major contributor to maximizing learning as well as confidence building.

Keywords: teacher learning, learner feedback, continuing professional development.

Introduction

Teachers are lifelong learners. If sound subject matter knowledge (SMK —the what of teaching, i.e. content) is one factor that involves teacher learning, pedagogic content knowledge (PCK—the how of teaching, i.e. delivery) forms the other major aspect. Teachers build their PCK through teaching. Learner feedback can be used as a means to explore

ways of "how best to teach their students" (Johnson, 2006, p. 239) and to adjust teaching to learner needs and expectations. Such accommodation and the subsequent un/relearning on the part of the teachers leads to teacher professional development. This paper attempts to demonstrate how feedback from a set of postgraduate students contributed to the teacher's heightened understanding of everyday teaching and professional growth.

Learner Feedback

Quite often, a way of ensuring that learning goals are achieved is to assess learners. However, although formal assessment tools may indicate success of a teaching course or programme, they may not contribute much to designing robust programmes unless accompanied by some form of learner feedback. Further, feedback need not be reserved to the end of the course. Scrivener (2005) urges teachers to provide opportunities and let the channels for student feedback open throughout. He states, "The essential engine of a richer, more productive learning environment is communication, two-way feedback from learners to teachers and vice versa" (p. 74). Samb (2013) reinforces the effectiveness of learner feedback in the following way: "… I'm able to readjust my teaching after the feedback received from students. I can then change my lesson plans for the future accordingly" (p. 43). Nevertheless, seeking and acting on learner feedback on one's lessons is easier said than done. Teachers may have several reasons to avoid asking learners for feedback. Some of these are:

Figure 1. Teacher concerns about seeking learner feedback (Scrivener, 2005, p.76)

Similarly learners may have several apprehensions about sharing genuine feedback:

Figure 2. Learner apprehensions about offering genuine feedback
(Scrivener, 2005, p.76)

Nevertheless, finding out whether students are satisfied with their learning experience remains "a key concern for most institutions and instructors" (Li et al., 2016, p. 216). In a study conducted in the context of blended and online courses, Li et al. found that learners who are more satisfied with the quality of teaching materials, assessment strategies, and workload are more satisfied with the overall learning experience. Furthermore, long-term goals of learners (i.e. qualifications and relevance of modules with learners' professional careers) are important predictors of learner satisfaction. The present study too explores learner satisfaction regarding course content, delivery and assessment tools.

Teacher Learning

Teacher learning involves making sense of one's own practice. It entails moving beyond acquiring skills and knowledge of a technical nature to understanding what it means to be a teacher. Nemser (2008) conceptualizes learning to teach around four broad themes—learning to *think* like a teacher, learning to *know* like a teacher, learning to *feel* like a teacher and learning to *act* like a teacher. She posits that in addition to "… knowledge *for* teaching which can be learned outside practice, teachers need knowledge *of* teaching which can only be gained in the context

of their work. For example, teachers may anticipate what students will find difficult or confusing, but they cannot know ahead of time how particular students will make sense of what they are learning. This underscores the importance of learning to learn in and from teaching." (Nemser, 2008, p. 699)

Van Eekelen et al. (2006) investigate teachers' "will to learn". Results show three different manifestations: teachers who do not see the need to learn; teachers who wonder how to learn and teachers who are eager to learn. The present paper argues that teacher learning can occur if teachers seek as well as act on learner feedback.

Continuing Professional Development

Continuing Professional Development is "a multi-faceted, lifelong experience" (Hayes, 2014, p. 5). It signifies a constant engagement with "the act of becoming" (Olsen, 2016, p. 33). Sachs (2011) describes CPD through four metaphors: retooling, remodelling and revitalizing and reimagining to indicate the need for teachers themselves to exercise agency in identifying priorities and needs for their own professional learning. Day (1999) describes professional development as a process wherein teachers "… acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice …… throughout each phase of their teaching lives" (p. 4).

CPD is facilitated through reflection practice on teaching experience with an "open mind" (Dewey, 1933). It enables teachers to critique practice in order to improve performance (Borg 2011). Reflection "is modeled from specific events and then reinvested into professional actions in order to respond to a particular situation" (Collin et al., 2013, p. 106). Reflection enables teachers "…to develop new understanding and insights about students, teaching, and themselves as teachers …" (Farrell, 2015, p. 81). Reflective practice thus marks the difference between an expert teacher who is willing to learn and become a better teacher and a teacher who is only more experienced.

Aim

The study explores how learner feedback can contribute to teacher learning leading to continuing professional development. The following

questions are addressed:

1) What are learner perceptions about the content, the delivery and the assessment tools of the course?

2) What opportunities does learner feedback provide for teacher learning?

3) How does teacher learning lead to professional development?

Methodology

The paper is based on a 60-hour course, *The Second Language Classroom*, offered as part of the MATESL Programme at EFL-U. The course content comprised three modules: teacher factors, learner factors and classroom factors. The content was offered through tasks and activities and responses to prompts. Elicitation was used as the main teaching technique; learners were encouraged to participate resulting in enhanced classroom interaction and peer learning. Eleven students—seven female and four male—participated in the study. The students have B2 to C2 level of proficiency in English with no experience in teaching.

Data were collected in three phases using the following tools (see Appendix). At the beginning of the course (after sharing the course description and just after a few classes were held), learner feedback was collected through a short semi-structured questionnaire and a quick in-class oral feedback session. The questionnaire contained six open-ended questions related to learning input, delivery of content, classroom atmosphere, peer and teacher rapport, etc. The aim was to tweak the course content and align the course goals with learner expectations. Midway through the course an application-based test was conducted as part of internal assessment. A structured feedback form was used to garner learner perceptions on assessment which also pointed to the relevance and usefulness of course content. At the end of the course, a feedback sheet with prompts and informal interview were used to appraise overall course effectiveness. It was felt that such informal methods/tools of gathering learner feedback help "obtain deeper and more qualitative perspectives" (Banister, 2018, p. 137).

Data Presentation and Interpretation

The data gathered through the three phases of the course are presented and analysed in three parts:

Phase 1: Feedback collected at the beginning of the course

Phase 2: Feedback collected in the middle of the course

Phase 3: Feedback collected at the end of the course

Phase 1: Feedback Collected at the Beginning of the Course

Two tools were used to collect data in this phase: a semi-structured questionnaire and a quick oral feedback session. The data gathered through the questionnaire revealed that the course content was perceived as adequate by the students. They expressed confidence that the course would enable them to know how to manage the classroom. They were quite clear and vocal about their expectations from the course. The following are some sample responses from students regarding course content, delivery and assessment:

- *People might consider teacher and teaching as easy concepts but for me they are special… I want to go deep into it and learn whatever it takes to be an awesome teacher …who can help students experience the joy of learning.*
- *I really find it so interesting and matching with what I need out of the ELE courses.*
- *I consider this course as a good knowledge base for further studies in ELE.*
- *I want to know … how to use technology. Can we include this in the syllabus?*
- *To learn about how to handle students … decision making on feet.*
- *How can we use a textbook in class? Can you teach us about this?*
- *I'm curious but nervous about the idea of the application-based test; I have never written such tests.*
- *What we're discussing in class now—teacher beliefs—is very interesting, especially the idea of "apprenticeship of observation."*

In the brief oral feedback session conducted in the class, students stated that they were encouraged to participate in class discussions. They were learning as much from their peers as they were from the teacher. For some of them who were used to learning only from the teacher and who were used to being passive recipients of learning input this was a rather novel experience. The transaction of learning woven around

tasks that demanded problem-solving skills made them stretch their cognitive abilities. They were also appreciative of teacher efforts to establish rapport, which led to increased interaction. Some of the quiet and reticent learners stated that the warm and friendly atmosphere in the classroom enables them to muster courage to participate in class discussions. Learner responses thus revealed mixed feelings of anticipation and anxiety, curiosity and trepidation. They were vocal and yet withholding; but what was articulated was quite clear and straightforward. The questionnaire and the feedback session in this phase, in essence, thus served as a needs analysis tool with the learners commenting on what they needed/wanted as prospective teachers.

Phase 2: Feedback Collected in the Middle of the Course

In this phase, learner feedback on the application-based test was collected using a feedback form. The test consisted of seven questions. Students rated each question in terms of three aspects—1) level of challenge, 2) content coverage, and 3) interest quotient on a scale of 3-1 where 3 is the highest and 1 is the lowest. Since there were eleven students, the maximum value that any of the three aspects can get is 33.

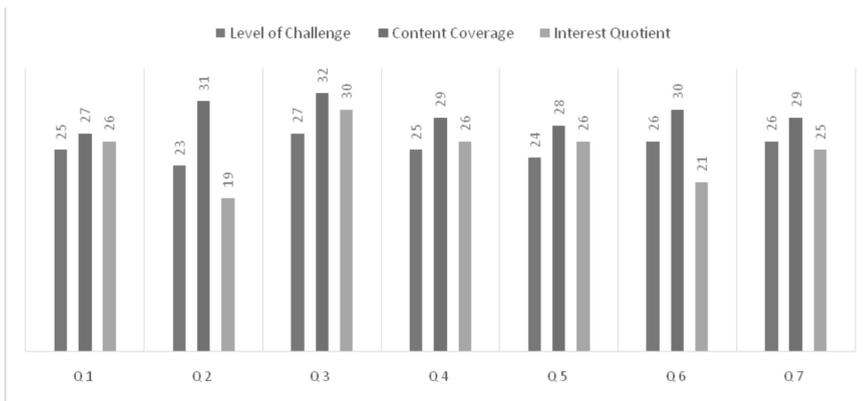*Table 1: Student Perspective on Application-based Test*

Table 1 above shows that in terms of level of challenge students consider question number 3 as most challenging (27/33 points) and question number two as least challenging (23/33 points). However, the difference between the most and least challenging questions is only 4 points. This indicates that almost all the questions offer sufficient level of challenge

for the learners. As regards content coverage (i.e. the depth and breadth of content expected of them), question number 3 is rated as demanding highest content coverage (32/33 points) while question number 1 is perceived as demanding lowest content coverage. Question number 3 is rated as having the highest interest quotient (30/33 points) while question number 2 is rated as least interesting (19/33 points). Learners rate question 3 very high in terms of all three aspects: level of challenge (27/33); content coverage (32/33) and interest quotient (30/33). In this question, students were required to interpret a classroom snapshot (see Appendix). This question demanded a higher level of inference skills, application of content discussed in class and the ability to justify a stance with a rationale. In fact, the course content was offered through a set of tasks that required engagement with higher order thinking skills. Question number 2 demanded extensive content coverage (31/33) but was least challenging (23/33) and least interesting (19/33) for students. A lesson for the teacher from this analysis is to take steps to design test items that are challenging and interesting but at the same time offer value for students' time and effort. The open-ended question in the feedback form too revealed various interesting aspects of the test and the course content as well. Students commented that the overall experience of test taking accorded them a sense of achievement albeit earned with considerable effort.

Some of the comments of the students are given below:

- *We needed to generate more ideas related to the questions, so it needed more time.*
- *Time allotted was too tight for seven questions.*
- *The test was interesting and was an overall assessment of the class teaching.*
- *It was fun solving the paper.*
- *It challenged me to think constantly.*
- *Application-based question is a good one to trigger my concept understanding.*

The analysis of learner feedback on the application-based test thus reflected learner views on the course content in terms of the topics that were challenging/easy, content-heavy and light and interesting/boring.

Phase 3: Feedback Collected at the End of the Course

Learner feedback on the overall experience of learning through the course is garnered through a feedback sheet and informal interviews conducted by the instructor. Learners were vocal and frank in their feedback.

Table 2: Learner Feedback

Feedback Factor	Learner Views
Course syllabus	• Well-planned, comprehensive—I have learnt a lot! • Somewhat heavy • Add the topic of evaluation
Course content	• Interesting—looked forward to the warm-up tasks • Relevant to the course, comprehensible • conducive to interaction and discussion
Tasks carried out in class	• Practical and useful—I have now a useful archive of tasks • Discussion-based • Professionally prepared and presented
Handouts shared	• Informative; they include whatever was discussed in class so I can always go back to them • Helped in reinforcement
Classroom atmosphere	• Friendly and informal—all of us bonded well with each other as well as with ma'am • Active, dynamic, congenial to learning • A great sense of achievement at the end of every class
Contribution of peers to learning	• Valuable and varied—offered a different perspective from mine • Enormous, insightful, enthusiastic
Relationship shared with peers	• Healthy—I had no inhibitions. • Friendly, cooperative

Papers chosen for presentation	• Useful and relevant • Informative and carefully selected • Post discussions were very interesting
Assessment mode	• Fair—students know what actually is expected from them • All encompassing
Any other suggestions/comments	• Better time management! • Sometimes discussions went on endlessly • Overall, happy and pleased with the course. I haven't been able to express myself so much ever before in class!

The in-depth discussions in the informal interviews confirmed and reinforced the data gathered through the questionnaire. Students had several suggestions to offer regarding time management, equal distribution of class time and teacher attention to everyone in class and content load. An issue that emerged from the discussion was not to be ambitious but be realistic in terms of course syllabus. It indeed is a challenge to strike a balance between making the syllabus comprehensive and yet manageable. Another matter that merits mention is time allocation to everyone during class discussion. Discussion gets repetitive and monotonous if every student's views are sought for every question and yet it is important to involve everyone. This again is a matter of striking a balance between providing equal opportunity and maximizing class time for learning. On the positive side, students affirm in one voice that they now realize that immense effort is required to transact learning input. They remarked that the course taught them a few important things about creating positive classrooms, designing learning-oriented assessment tools, sustaining learner attention and interest, teacher preparation and commitment, acknowledging and valuing learner contribution and so on. Overall, the course offered the learners a strong theoretical bases regarding organizing learning in the second language classroom through tasks and activities.

Findings

The following are the findings of the study:

- Learner feedback at the beginning of the course (despite being rather limited) contributes to achieving congruence between

course goals and learner expectations preempting possible conflicts.

- Course syllabus should be balanced against the time allotted (one semester) It may be good to be ambitious but it is important to be realistic.

- The technique of elicitation, coupled with meaningful tasks, helps enhance learner satisfaction with the course and learner sense of achievement.

- Although application-based tests are cognitively demanding, learners appreciate (and even welcome) them if how learners are tested matches with how they are taught in class.

- Learners can participate more and contribute better to their own learning if teachers check their emotional pulse periodically and make accommodations accordingly. Acknowledging and valuing learner contribution motivates learners to push their boundaries.

Implications

- Students have ideas and opinions on what they need (content) and how it should be given (delivery). It is important to provide a platform/opportunity to students to voice their views.

- This entire experience of teaching, collecting and reflecting on learner feedback can reshape teachers' thinking, restructure their belief system and reorient their personal philosophies of teaching in order to align with learner expectations and curricular goals.

- Teaching is a deeply personal work entailing a lot of emotional investment on the part of the teacher and yet teachers will do well to leave their emotional baggage at the entrance of the classroom in order to be able to focus on teaching goals.

Limitations

- The subjects of the study are tertiary learners who (assumedly) have the cognitive ability to think critically and the language proficiency required to offer meaningful feedback to the teacher. Secondary or primary level learners may not be able to do so.

- The tools are specific to the course taught to the students of this study (e.g. feedback on application-based test). Teachers working

with a different set of students teaching a different course may not find these tools suitable.

- The present study is located in EFLU, where teaching faculty enjoy academic freedom and choice which helps in addressing the issues voiced in student feedback. Teachers with less academic freedom may not be able act on student feedback and hence may not find value in the exercise of collecting student feedback.

Further Research

- A study can be undertaken to investigate learner satisfaction and subsequent (assumed) improved student learning as a result of implementing learner feedback.

- A study can be that examines the impact of learner feedback on the belief formation/modification of experienced teachers may offer interesting insights.

- A collaborative study can be undertaken by a team of teachers to study if and how learner feedback influences the quality of their teaching through thick descriptions.

Conclusion

Learner feedback is an invaluable tool for professional development of teachers. The key to garnering honest and in-depth feedback is to share a mutually respectful and cordial relationship with the learners. Even when not asked explicitly learners are constantly conveying what works for them (and what needs to be modified) in myriad ways. If only teachers are sensitive to these incoming signals, there will be many lessons to learn. And if the aim of feedback is not to seek praise and confirmation of one's established routines, it can lead to reorganizing of curricular inputs in terms of better content, more effective tasks and more learning-oriented assessment measures leading to professional development which is ongoing

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Appendix
Phase 1: How is it Going?

Respond to the following questions.

1. Do you find the course content relevant and adequate? Do you want to add or delete?

2. How is the current topic useful to you as a teacher of a second language classroom?

3. Does the classroom atmosphere encourage you to participate and contribute to class discussion?

4. Have you managed to build a bond with your classmates? Did the teacher help you in this regard?

5. How is the tutor—warm/aloof, well/ill-prepared, etc. What do you expect from her?

6. Do you find the assessment tools relevant and interesting?

Phase 2: Sample Question in the Application-based Test

Look at the snapshot of a class taught by Mr. Lee. Answer the questions.

(2+2+1=5 marks)

(a) Infer at least <u>two</u> teacher beliefs.

(b) State the corresponding teacher behaviour as evidence to justify your answer.

(c) Would you do the same as Lee? Why/why not?

Snapshot

Phase 2: Feedback on Application-based Test

I.   P**lease rate each question regarding the following aspects on a scale of 3-1 where 3 is the highest and 1 is the lowest.**

Question	Level of Challenge	Content Coverage	Interest Quotient
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

II.   What is your overall experience of taking the test? (e. g. the number of questions, marks given to each question, time allotted to write the test, any anxiety you experienced, etc.)

Phase 3: Feedback on the Course

Please record your frank opinions. Feel free to offer suggestions.

1) The syllabus of the course is

2) The content of the course is

3) The tasks that you did in class were

4) The handouts that you received were

5) The classroom atmosphere was

6) The contribution of the peers was

7) Your relationship with your peers was

8) The papers chosen for presentation were

9) The assessment mode is

10) Any other suggestion/comment (e.g. things that could be done differently)

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