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Exploring ESL Teachers' Insights on Corrective Oral Feedback in a Malaysian Secondary Education Context

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Abstract

Feedback is one of the most significant elements in the process of teaching and learning. It serves as a tool to enhance students' second language proficiency. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how oral feedback is viewed and how it has been maneuvered to assist second language learner's linguistic competence from the viewpoint of English teachers. Teachers' perception of feedback is very important because it will determine the amount of feedback used in the process of teaching and learning. This is a qualitative study employing case study research design. It was conducted to 10 English language teachers from secondary schools in Malaysia. The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. Data collected from the interview were analyzed using thematic analysis. Several themes have been found during data analysis such as feedback as tool for motivation, oral feedback and learning from mistakes, students' acceptance of teachers' oral feedback and feedback as a medium to develop language proficiency. The result indicated that English teachers in Malaysia generally showed positive perception of oral feedback. Furthermore, teachers also reported to have noticed improvement in students' language competence by listening to teachers' feedback. Therefore, appropriate measure should be taken to ensure that teachers can provide effective oral feedback during teaching and learning.

Keywords: corrective feedback, oral feedback, ESL teachers, thematic analysis

Introduction

Feedback, whether oral or written has long become a focal point in teaching and learning (Baz, 2016). The introduction of Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) calls for an upgrade in English language and feedback certainly plays an important part in this upgrade. Thus, Malaysian teachers ought to reinforce their skills of providing feedback to students. Therefore, it is imperative for them to be well-informed on the basic principles underlying the process of giving feedback. They also need to understand that feedback is very essential to develop second language proficiency (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Moreover, oral feedback also acts as a catalyst to student's language progression. Failure to integrate feedback in teaching and learning might delay student's language progress. This matter should be enlightened to teachers since they are the individual who is responsible to give feedback. Moreover, young and inexperienced teachers should also be taught the most effective methods of giving feedback to ensure the effectiveness. As a result, parents can be assured that teachers are able to provide effective feedback which will benefit their children's language progress.

There are two aspects and main focus of this study. The first aspect is the limited number of studies that focus on teachers' perception of oral feedback in Malaysian context. The second aspect comes from curiosity on how oral feedback help students to improve their language proficiency. Several studies have been conducted on teachers' perception of feedback. However, majority of them derived from international journal and instead of from Malaysia context. Moreover, most journal are focusing on discussing feedback in general without a focus (Baz et al., 2016; Dessi & Sewagegn, 2019; Mendez & Cruz, 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Akter, 2016). There are only two studies found which investigates teachers' perception of feedback in Malaysian context. (Vasu et al., 2016; Mahmood et al., 2020). Furthermore, most of the studies found only focused on students' perception instead of teacher's perception (Ganapathy et al., 2020; Vasu et al., 2016; Saeb, 2016; Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015). Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by investigating Malaysian secondary ESL teachers' perception of oral feedback.

Another reason that motivates this study is to investigate the effectiveness of oral feedback to assist and improve students' English language proficiency. Regarding this matter, several studies have been found that investigates students' language improvement using feedback (Kahraman & Yalvac, 2015; Lee & Song, 2016; Elwood & Bode, 2014; Baz, 2016). However, most of the studies are focusing on written feedback instead of oral feedback. Hence, this study aims to investigate how oral feedback contribute to students' language development. The findings of this study should serve as a foundation to strengthen the principles and theories behind the process of providing oral feedback to students. The findings are also supposed to promote oral feedback as a form of helpful strategies in teaching and learning and when carried out in a large scale nationwide, they may be used to assist policy makers. In conclusion, this study will try to focus on two issues under the topic of oral feedback. The first issue is how Malaysian teachers perceive oral feedback as a tool to help them in teaching and learning. The second issue is to identify how oral feedback can assist students' language development. Thus, this research is geared towards answering two questions notably:

- i. What are Malaysian ESL secondary school teachers' perception of oral feedback?
- ii. How oral feedback can assist and improve students' English language proficiency in the classroom.

Literature Review

Feedback and language learning

Feedback is one of the major factors in developing students' language proficiency (Lyster et al., 2012). It can be in the form of oral or written (Cullen, 2002). During the process of feedback, teachers provide comments to assist their students' learning development (Li, 2013). Race, Brown and Smith (1996, p.5) offers their view of feedback by stating that 'if assessment is the engine that drives learning, then the ways in which we give feedback are important on gearing and lubricating the engine so that maximum effect is achieved'. Besides, students can also improve their communicative skill by listening attentively to feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Any evaluative or corrective information from teachers about events, actions or processes to students can be considered as feedback (London & Sessa, 2006). It is also important to note that the process of providing feedback can be complex as it is affected by several factors. The factors can range from the activities that are being conducted at that time, the stages of the lesson and the type of students' state of mind at that time (Harmer, 2007). Hence, to increase the awareness of feedback, teachers must also understand the basic principles underlying the process of giving an effective feedback.

Feedback should be effective as to improve students' understanding during the process of teaching and learning (Sadler, 2010). Teachers must have positive perception towards the process of oral feedback itself to ensure that effective feedback can be delivered to students. Teacher should also aware that their feedback and comments can impose positive and also negative effect towards students' second language development. Therefore, they should have ample knowledge and skills to provide effective feedback. Some teachers might think that merely providing grades and giving brief comments is enough to be justified as effective feedback (Moss & Brokhart, 2009). In this matter, effective feedback

is more than merely giving grades and comments on students' work. It should have meaningful impact to students and also motivate them to improve their language proficiency. The ability to incorporate all the features mentioned above can lead to the students' second language development (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Therefore, students should always benefit from feedbacks given by their teacher. As a result, it will significantly improve their second language proficiency.

Feedback in Malaysian secondary school

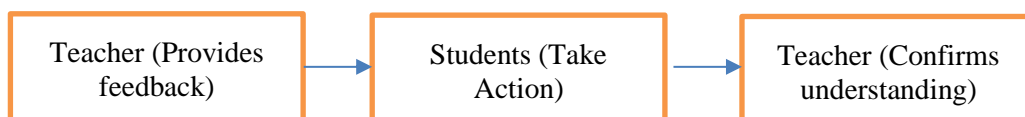
Feedback is one of the important elements in teaching and learning (Vasu and Ling, 2016). This matter is also true for Malaysian education system particularly for secondary schools. Learning experience in a Malaysian classroom should be more learner-centred and feedback can be seen as the solution to this matter. To do so, a mixture between corrective feedback with the help from evaluative and constructive feedback should be suitable for Malaysian students. Corrective feedback can be defined as "information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning" (Shute, 2008, p. 154). Moreover, corrective feedback should be able to assist students in learning by identifying students' way of thinking and their mistakes. Teachers' effort to incorporate these three types of feedback can enable students to improve their second language acquisition (Shute, 2008). As a result, students will be more motivated to continue their learning and are ready to explore new language in depth (Gardner, 1988). This matter is true particularly for Malaysian students. They need all three types of feedback which will keep them interested and motivated to learn the second language.

Apart from the three types of feedback mentioned above, evaluative feedback is another type of feedback that can be utilised in a Malaysian classroom (Noor et al., 2010). Using evaluative feedback, teachers are able to provide motivation and encouragement, together with vital information to assist student to improve their language (Capel et al., 1995). Besides, evaluative feedback can also be used to reaffirm students' accomplishment of answering any questions asked by the teacher. For evaluative feedback, the simple, direct words such as 'good' and 'excellent' can be enticing to students. Therefore, the method of responding to students during any speaking activities will bear significant impact on their progress in other fluency activities in the classroom (Harmer, 2007). In conclusion, the goal behind the implementation of evaluative feedback is to inspire and assist students to be brave to express their opinion and knows how to respond well when being asked any questions.

Principles and functions of corrective oral feedback

Teachers must comprehend the fundamental principle and methods behind the process of providing effective oral feedback. Feedback should benefit students and plays an important and decisive role in learning and development (Ramsden, 2003). In this case, the learning process usually will take place in the classroom. Teacher, as the mentor should always bear in mind to provide constructive oral feedback to students. Students, on the other hand, will feel the need to enhance their academic performance. Thus, they will take necessary actions after receiving feedback from teachers. One of it is by reflecting on all the comments given to them and try not to repeat the mistakes. Furthermore, teachers must also do their part by ensuring that they have clearly clarified the purpose of giving feedback (Ramsden, 2003). This is to guarantee that students can benefit from any oral feedback provided by the teacher. In addition, teachers also need to make sure that all words used when giving feedback are all motivating and encouraging words. Students might feel demotivate if teachers use demotivating and uninspiring words. In conclusion, teachers' ability to provide helpful feedback to students indicates that there is a genuine intention of helping students (Baz, 2016). Diagram 1 below further explains teachers and students' role in the process of providing feedback.

Diagram 1: Feedback process in classroom



Oral corrective feedback strategy

Lyster & Ranta (1997) created their oral corrective feedback (OCF) classification model in their 20 hours classrooms observation in France. In total, there are four classrooms observed by them. Various types of OCF have been observed in these classes. This strategy is a combination of classrooms observations and from other feedback models which had been thoroughly discussed by scholars. They are also looking at the functions of feedback in both first and second language (L2) learning to coin this theory. In the process, they also adjusted some of the data to make it more accurate and it served as a foundation and guideline for common strategies used by teachers for oral corrective feedback. There are six main categories of OCF strategy in their model namely explicit correction, recast, clarification request, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation and repetition.

Figure 1: Corrective feedback strategy

Feedback types	Example
Explicit correction	You mean...
Recast	Teacher reformulation
Clarification	What do you mean?
Metalinguistic feedback	Explanation of error type
Elicitation	Ellipsis
Repetition	Intonation

Source: Lyster and Santa (1997)

Methodology

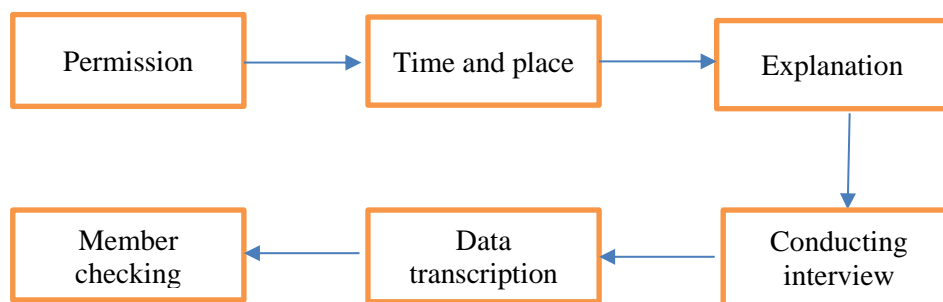
This study employed qualitative research which aims to investigate teachers' perception of oral feedback using case study design (Andrade, 2009). Qualitative research is more suited to this study because the use of semi-structured interview to collect data. Case study design is also pertinent to this study because the researcher aims to present a detailed view of the topic and to study the respondents in their natural setting (Bitektine, 2008). Detailed analysis of the interview will reveal teachers' perception of oral feedback and how it can help students. The qualitative method also is the most suitable research design to answer the second research question of this study which how oral feedback can assist students' language development. Furthermore, by employing qualitative study, the researcher can answer the questions more effectively due to teachers' hands-on experience in the classroom.

This study was conducted on ten Malaysian English teachers. They were divided into two groups of five and the interview took place in two separate sessions. Every participant was interviewed for around 20 minutes. All teachers are TESL graduate and are highly qualified to teach English. Their age ranges from 31 to 33 years old and most of them have taught English for more than five years. They have also attended numerous English courses as per Ministry of Education's requirement to enhance their language skills. They are also active members of the English related activities such as state judges and some of them are experienced SPM markers. To collect data, this study employed semi-structured interview as the instrument. The interview items were adapted from previous studies (Roothoof, 2014; Lee, 2008) and were later modified to suit the context of the study. There are four main sections which are section A, section B, section C and section D. Section A is the demographic section where participants need to provide their full name, age, occupation, etc. In section B, participants were interviewed on their perception of oral feedback and all question will reveal their

perception towards oral feedback. Later in section C, participants were next interviewed on how oral feedback helped and assist students in their language development.

The reliability and validity of the instrument depends on few factors. This will include establishing rapport with the respondents, conducting a pilot study, the wording of interview questions, and the 'power relationship' between the interviewer and the respondent (Breakwell, 2000). All these factors have been carefully thought before conducting the interview. For example, participants have been informed at least one week before the interview. The suitable place and time for the interview have been agreed one week before. Early preparations are important because participants might be busy from online classes and clerical work. It will be convenient for both researcher and participants if everything is prepared earlier. Next, the researcher has also explained the interview items to participants before distributing it. Detailed explanation is vital to ensure the purpose and aim of the interview. Participants were given enough time to answer all the questions thoroughly. It took around 20 to 30 minutes for the interview to be completed. Next the interview was transcribed word by word to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the transcription. Lastly, the transcription went through 'member check' process which can increase the trustworthiness of the data. Member checking, or respondent validation, is a technique use by a researcher to check for the credibility of results. Data or results will be returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Diagram 2 below shows the stages of research procedure for this study:

Diagram 2: Research procedure



This research employs thematic approach for data analysis. Thematic or content analysis method is used by a researcher to identify, analyze and report pattern or themes within data (Crestwell et al., 2007). To cross-check if the interpretation on the interview responses is accurate, the data collected will go through the 'member check' process before being analysed. Next, the collected data will be categorized under larger themes such as 'oral feedback as a tool for motivation' and 'oral feedback as a tool to improve language proficiency'. This method is efficient for qualitative study because of its nature of obtaining rich, detailed and complex data (Boyatzis, 1998). The transcripts from the interview are labelled with informative label. Creswell et al. (2007) stated that "during this process of describing, classifying and interpreting, qualitative researchers develop codes or categories and to sort text or visual images into categories" (p. 152). The interview will be transcribed and labelled into themes according to the research questions and the aim of the study.

Results and Discussion

Oral feedback as a tool to increase confidence and motivation

In terms of providing oral feedback during speaking activities, the participants firmly believed that it is very important to provide oral feedback whenever they are conducting any speaking activities. Among the popular response from the teachers is that the process of giving oral feedback is crucial for the students' speaking development as well as shaping their characters to be more confidence. The followings are some examples of responses given by the participant:

'Students can be more fluent and confidence when speaking. Students can be more grateful and more reflective on the mistakes that they had done' (participant 2)

'I think the process of giving oral feedback during speaking activities can serve as a confidence boost for the students because they know that teacher will correct their mistakes and they will better in that particular language' (participant 4)

From the response, it is apparent that teachers' perception towards the implementation of oral feedback is generally positive. They regard oral feedback as a tool that can enable their students to improve their language skills particularly in speaking skills. Participant 2 and 4 also strongly believed that oral feedback made their students become more confident and motivated to speak during lesson. Motivation and confidence are crucial for students' learning progress as there will be many challenges waiting for them during speaking activities. This matter will definitely help students' language proficiency. The findings are also in line with Dessie and Sewagegn (2019) and Akter (2016) whereby they also agree that oral feedback generally has positive impact to students.

Oral feedback and learning from mistakes

Several participants also mentioned that the implementation of oral feedback during speaking activities can enable students to be aware of their mistakes and learn from that particular mistake in order to become better speakers of English language. Speaking activities are the ideal environment for students to learn from mistakes as the teachers will be focusing on the words uttered by students and any mistakes will be immediately detected and corrected by teachers. Below are some of the examples of responses from participants regarding this matter.

'Students will be aware of what their mistakes are. Students can also learn from mistakes, it can make them more excited to learn and more excited to improve themselves' (participant 1)

'Students can realise and know their mistakes and will strive to improve their speaking abilities in the future' (participant 6)

Based on the response, participant 1 and 6 believed that the oral feedback enables students to identify any mistakes that they made whether intentional or not. These mistakes were pointed out by the teachers during speaking activities or any oral activities. Participant 1 also said that students are even more excited to learn because they like to improve themselves which showed the positive side of the students. This matter is in line with findings by Mendez and Cruz (2012) and Roothoof (2014) whereby they found out that students are able to learn from their mistakes and willing to improve themselves. In conclusion, students are able to improve language proficiency using oral feedback because they can be aware of any mistakes that they made and will try to improve themselves.

Students' acceptance of teachers' oral feedback

Students' acceptance of the oral feedback given to them is also one of the important factors to be considered during the process of giving oral feedback. In this area, most participants believe that students usually accept all the corrections made by teachers. This is because students have accepted teachers as their guidance and the motivator to learn the language. Teachers, on the other hand, will need to ensure that they use appropriate words and sentences when providing oral feedback to students. Below are some of the examples of responses given by teachers regarding this matter:

'Students usually accept the correction, and they would feel motivated to improve in the weak areas' (Participant 6)

'I think my students are willing to accept my feedback since they know that English is a second language, and they would surely need someone to assist them especially in terms of speaking skills' (Participant 3)

Based on the response given, teachers observed that their students are willing to accept and learn from the feedback given by them. The process of learning a new language will require the learner to listen and accept any corrections or enhancement suggested by their teachers or tutors. This is to ensure a consistent language development by the learner. These findings are also in line with Saeb (2017) where the study revealed that students relied heavily on teachers to correct their mistakes and are willing to accept all corrections made by teachers.

Oral feedback as a medium to develop language proficiency

Feedback received from teacher should act as a tool or medium for students to be able to improve their language skills and language command. Improvement is crucial when learning language because it will show that the process of teaching and learning is being done effectively. On this area, some participants believed that students are definitely improving on their language proficiency. Below are some of the examples of responses given by the participants:

'Yes, they are improving in the way they structure their verbal response, the most important thing is they are improving gradually and not afraid to speak up' (Participant 3)

'Some students, I mean the good ones, would actually be positive, they receive the feedback, and they will improve on the area that they need improving' (Participant 8)

It is crucial for students to show some improvement in their language proficiency. Participant 3 felt that her students are improving in the way students structure their verbal response. This matter is important as structuring your response can enable the other person to comprehend and understand the information or message that you are trying to convey to them. Wrong choice of words or sentences can lead to misinformation and also disagreement. Therefore, it is important for students to gradually improving their level of verbal response. Next, we can also see that participant 8 felt that students accepted the correction and are willing to improve on the area that they need improving. In this case, they need to focus because English language consist of complex grammar rules and sentence construction. Students need to identify the area which they are weak at and continue to practice on that area until they become fluent and possess good mastery in that area.

Oral feedback as a medium for grammar learning.

During speaking activities, it is also imperative for teachers to include grammar as one of the factors to be included in the activities. This matter is important particularly during speaking activities whereby students are required to speak in a formal manner. This requires precise and concise grammar knowledge as to ensure the validity of the information uttered. Grammar checking is also important during speaking activities as students are able to reflect their mistakes later during the writing activities. Based on the interview conducted, teachers agree that oral feedback is one of the methods that teachers can utilise to check for their students' grammar. Below are some of the responses provided by the participants regarding this matter:

'Teachers can help students because they can improve on pronunciation, sentence structure and grammar' (Participant 9)

'I can see a very significant difference in the area of syntax, diction and grammar. They are more aware on the elements that they need to use when speaking' (Participant 4)

Participant 4 commented that students are becoming more aware of the elements that they need to use when speaking. This is true particularly if the teacher is correcting students' grammar mistakes in a speaking activity. There are many rules in grammar and to master each one of the rules will consume a

lot of time. The nature of oral feedback which is quick and direct will help students to quickly identify the variety of elements embedded in grammar rules.

Conclusion and Implications

The study managed to answer two questions namely i) What are Malaysian secondary school teachers' perception of oral feedback and ii) How oral feedback can assist and improve students' English language proficiency in the classroom. Qualitative data analysis indicated that the teachers' perception of oral feedback is generally positive, and they regard oral feedback as vital in the process of teaching and learning. It also demonstrates that oral feedback played an important role to assist teaching. Factors such as students' language improvement and increasing students' motivation have influenced their positive perceptions towards oral feedback. Therefore, it is imperative for all teachers to have positive perception of oral feedback to ensure its effectiveness. In the future, it is recommended for the study to diversify the participants by adding more participants and also the inclusion of other subject teachers such as Mathematics and Science teachers.

Moreover, based on the findings of this research, important key players in education should take action to ensure that teachers are up to date with the proper technique of giving feedback. For example, the Ministry of Education should organize and conduct seminars, conference and workshop regularly for teachers on proper practice of oral feedback during speaking activities. This can support the teachers and teach them how to give oral feedback in the most effective way. They should also conduct in house trainings to teach and upgrade the underlying principles of oral feedback practices for all teachers. Furthermore, the school principal should also motivate teachers to put more effort in the classroom rather than enforcing more administrative works. The findings revealed that the participants' oral feedback practices were shaped by their perceptions about students' needs and attitudes. The constraints influence teachers' perception in which creating tensions between theory and actual practices. With these recommendations, the teachers have a better understanding about oral feedback.

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