GIVING IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' WRITING: ANOTHER VIEW ON A FLIPPED CLASSROOM

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Abstract

With competence-based approach establishing in education, new attitudes to teaching and learning are gaining ground, and of paramount importance is becoming the need to change the attitudes and practice of assessment of students' learning outcomes, which are now to embrace the practical skills the students have to master, namely, the individual language mastery in fulfilling the communicative task set. When teaching non-native speakers to write original texts in a foreign language, a teacher faces a major challenge which lies in ensuring that the students effectively develop the required writing skills in order to be able not only to express their ideas correctly grammar- and vocabulary-wise, but to precisely convey the message they intend to convey. To address this challenge, action research was conducted, which was done in response to a new curriculum requirement that the undergraduate students of all specialisms had in their final year to present a synopsis of their graduation project in English both in writing and orally, given that on the whole the instruction in the institution takes place in the Russian language. The background prerequisite for the research was the observation on the part of the teachers of English for academic purposes, whose responsibility was to guarantee that the course participants successfully build the required skills, that no matter how meticulous their grading of the students' work was and how detailed their comments were, there was little progress made by students whose level of mastery of the English language was lower than the desired B2 level.

Looking for new tactics that could improve the situation, the flipped classroom approach was scrutinized and a study was conducted to check the hypothesis that immediate personalized feedback given to students in person in the classroom could improve the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. As the number of contact hours is limited, the theory of academic writing was predominantly provided in the form of reading matter and PowerPoint presentations available for students on-line or sent to them via e-mail, and the contact hours as such were devoted to group discussions of the prepared written work in accordance with criterion-based assessment schemes developed by the teacher followed by peer assessment in small groups and, finally, by the individual student-teacher sessions aimed at the achievements in the particular assignment and defining the areas that needed improvement.

The analysis of the results displayed by the course participants amounting to 60 students at the end of the academic year proved that immediate personalized feedback given to students in the classroom ensures building the desired competence in conveying the background, problem statement, suggested methods and anticipated results of their planned academic project, with failure rates dropping significantly, thus substantiating the correctness of the flipped classroom approach when grading and commenting takes place in the classroom in person. Further research will concentrate on refining the assessment criteria so that make peer and self assessment of the students more instrumental.

Keywords: Competence-based education, flipped classroom, learner-centered approach, English-language teaching and learning, formative assessment, assessing writing skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

With competence-based approach establishing in education, new attitudes to teaching and learning are gaining ground, and of paramount importance is becoming the need to change the outlooks on and practice of assessment of students' learning outcomes, which are now to embrace the practical skills the students have to master – that is, need to be student-centered. In the teaching and learning of a foreign language at a tertiary educational institution, the individual student's language mastery in fulfilling the communicative task set is becoming a priority. When teaching non-native speakers to compose original texts in a foreign language, a teacher faces a major challenge which lies in ensuring that the students effectively develop the required writing skills in order to be able not only to express

their ideas correctly grammar- and vocabulary-wise, but to precisely transfer the message they intend to convey. Several years of teaching the course in Academic writing in English demonstrated that the traditional approach to assessment, i.e. collecting students' accomplished tasks and then returning them with written feedback, did not yield the improvement expected, and the possible reason for that was that the feedback was delayed.

Looking for new tactics that could improve the situation, the flipped classroom approach was scrutinized and a study was conducted to check the hypothesis that **immediate personalized specific constructive feedback given to students in person in the classroom could improve the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.** As the number of contact hours is limited, the theory of academic writing was predominantly provided in the form of reading matter and PowerPoint presentations available for students on-line or sent to them via e-mail, and the contact hours as such were devoted to group discussions of the prepared written work in accordance with criterion-based assessment schemes developed by the teacher, followed by peer assessment in small groups and, finally, by the individual student-teacher sessions aimed at assessing the achievements in a particular assignment and defining the areas that needed improvement in each individual case.

Assessment of students' written work, being an integral part of teaching and learning, is both time- and energy- consuming on the part of the teacher, but often proves ineffective as students fail to take on board all the comments that the teacher has given them: they tend either to misinterpret or even ignore those comments and corrections. The assumption aiming at rationalizing this phenomenon was that the students' failure to interiorize corrections made by the teacher took place probably due to the fact that the teacher's feedback was delayed. The format of the flipped classroom was applied to make assessment more effective through establishing conditions for giving and receiving immediate personalized specific constructive feedback in the form of a face-to-face dialogue taking place in the classroom.

1.2 Literature review

The functions of assessment have become an area of dispute and complexity in recent years as pedagogic research is finding more proof that traditional assessment forms may prove counterproductive [1, 2] as they often apply the analytical techniques (identifying the compounds and their qualities) to complex human achievements [3]. Assessment is done for two reasons: to inform teachers' decisions and to motivate students. Researchers agree that assessment influences students' behavior more than the teaching they receive [4]. Understanding of this has led to the development and growing of world-wide adoption of assessment **for** learning and assessment **as** learning approaches that are now taking over the traditional assessment **of** learning; and consequent predominance of formative assessment over summative in everyday pedagogical practice is becoming more evident [5]. Stiggins [6] argues that the assessment's role must be fundamentally reevaluated, redefined, and redesigned. Assessment practices that used to focus on separating the successful from the unsuccessful are now becoming practices that aim to support the learning of all students, helping them master the learning.

As there is growing consensus that assessment as such is more important for students than the teaching they receive as it shapes the experiences of students, helps them develop meaning in their work, and reorients students' thinking [4], **formative assessment** should be focusing on immediate student achievement and "should begin immediately within a learning episode and span its entire duration" [7] . The immense potential of assessment to support student learning must be realized through teachers, who, according to Marzano [7] are most intuitively important variable in the education system, as student effort is modifiable through the their actions.

Scaffolding is best performed through feedback, and Hattie in his meta-analysis of pedagogical research on what factors influence the success in learning [8], argues that **immediate and focused feedback** is of paramount importance: "the most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback". Marzano [7] agrees that feedback from classroom assessment gives students a clear picture of their progress on learning goals and how they might improve: it should also encourage students to improve. Nevertheless, the manner in which feedback is communicated to students greatly affects whether it has a positive or negative effect on the student achievement [7]. Bloxham & Boyd [4], stating that feedback solely in the form of a grade contains no direction for where to aim future attempts at learning, maintain that providing feedback is not about rewards. Feedback is more effective when it provides information on correct rather than incorrect responses, it is about "providing information about the task fulfilment, about how well they are doing against the

requirements of the course, which is evidently connected with the issue of defining the desired learning outcome" [4].

In changing the attitude of the teaching community to the assessment, of paramount importance is that in the post-industrial society the concept of the **learning outcome** relevant beyond the educational system is becoming crucial [9], and the learning outcome has to be student-centred, i.e. describe what a student should be able to demonstrate at a certain stage of learning. The learning outcome is often based on the taxonomy by B. Bloom, further developed by Anderson and Krathwohl [10], which, in the cognitive domain, splits the thinking skills into low-order (knowledge-understanding-application) and high-order (analysis-evaluation-creation). Another taxonomy used in education, is the SOLO (Structure of the observed learning outcome) taxonomy by J.Biggs [11], which classifies learning outcomes in terms of how their complexity grows, and differentiates between pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational and extended abstracted levels of mastering learning.

Learning outcomes defined in terms of qualitative descriptors in accordance of levels of any taxonomy used, are to be aimed at building students' confidence in themselves through scaffolding [12], which in its turn stems from Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development". Those qualitative descriptors formatted as criterion-based scoring scales, serve as signposts for both teachers and students in understanding the achievements represented in students' work and identifying paths for improvement.

To help students interiorize the comments and corrections on their fulfilled tasks, teachers engage in providing sustainable feedback [3], which has to meet the following requirements: be immediate, personalized, specific and constructive [7]. However, generating feedback and communicating it to students is often associated with complications: on the part of the teachers, preparing feedback is time-consuming, as for the students, anecdotal evidence suggests that even when teachers do provide students with extensive written advice they may see it ignored, or students tend to misunderstand and get dissatisfied with the feedback they receive: its amount, timing, frequency, helpfulness and consistence [4]. Students tend to be not able to cope with the comments made by the teacher that the teacher had made while grading their written work at home. Some tend to ignore the comments paying attention only to the grade given, others struggle with the comments trying to understand what the teacher meant in their comments. Still, undoubtedly, students definitely benefit from a quick return of marked assignments with the accompanying feedback [4], provided it has been offered in the form that enhances learning, not impedes it.

Considering the mechanics of where, when and how assessment takes place, it was assumed in the framework of the presented study that in order to provide sustainable feedback, the format of the flipped classroom where the focus is on the construction of meaning rather than information transmission, could be tried.

Although there is discrepancy between understandings what a flipped classroom is [13, 14], there could be "as many approaches to the flipped classroom as there are researches implementing it" [15] as long as class time is applied to more interactive tasks. What has been done at home, is now done in class – and this could be well applied to the process of assessing students' homework.

In their review of research on the flipped classroom, Bishop & Verleger [12] state that the essential aspect of a flipped classroom is, apart from using blended learning, leaving classtime for interactive learning activities, and thus class becomes the place to work out problems [16]. In a foreign-language class, especially when productive skills are the focus of attention, redesign of the assessment process may lead to improved learning. There is evidence that teacher-learner interaction and face-to-face negotiation reduce misunderstandings [17] within the context of a flipped classroom, thus providing opportunities to offer feedback as a dialogue, which Bloxam & Boyd [4] find essential for deep learning.

By and large, recent research supports the assumption that application of the flipped classroom approach can be interpreted broadly. Still, as little research has been done on influences that providing immediate feedback in foreign language writing learning and teaching, the effects of providing immediate personalised specific constructive feedback should be studied and techniques of effective scaffolding in writing skills development should be developed.

2   METHODOLOGY

When teaching non-native speakers to compose original texts in a foreign language, a teacher faces a major challenge which lies in ensuring that the students effectively develop the required writing skills in

order to be able not only to express their ideas correctly grammar- and vocabulary-wise, but to precisely transfer the message they intend to convey. To address this challenge, action research was conducted, which was done in response to a new curriculum requirement that the undergraduate students of all specialisms in the considered institution of higher learning had in their final year to present a synopsis of their planned graduation project in English, given that on the whole the instruction in the institution takes place in the Russian language. The background prerequisite for the research was the observation on the part of the teachers of English for academic purposes, whose responsibility was to guarantee that the course participants successfully build the required skills, that no matter how meticulous their grading of the students' work was and how detailed their comments were, there was little progress made by students whose actual level of mastery of the English language was lower than the desired B2 level.

The hypothesis to be confirmed is that **immediate personalized specific constructive feedback given to students in person in the flipped classroom could improve the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.**

2.1 Research design

To examine the hypothesis of the current research, a comparative study of the progress and final achievements in academic English language writing of two groups of final year students at the same under-graduate programme was conducted. Two consecutive years were considered. In Year One, no immediate feedback was provided, whereas in Year Two, the feedback on the final paper was provided in the form of individual personal consultations. In both instances, pre-course diagnostics of the actual academic English language mastery level was conducted. The language mastery levels were identified in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference [18] using especially developed criterion-based scoring scales to assess the synopsis of an academic paper from the previous year that the students were asked to prepare. The results of diagnostics are shown in Table 1. The similar language mastery levels and the number of students in the groups made it possible to conduct a comparative study.

Table 1. Initial language mastery levels compared.

	A2	B1	B2	C1	Total
Year One	5	7	13	2	27
Year Two	6	10	15	3	31

The after-course achievements of the intended learning outcomes were compared through the results in developing the final draft of the Project Proposal, which is the required format of the final paper of the course in Academic writing in English in the aforementioned under-graduate programmes.

2.2 Research procedures

The teaching and learning in both years was in the form of blended learning, though in Year One more classroom time was devoted to developing academic writing micro-skills, and homework was set as both studying the course book and using the on-line Higher School of Economics Self-Access Academic writing resource [19] to produce parts of the Proposal. In Year One, the assessment and grading of the writing assignments was done the traditional way – the teacher collected the students' written work either in hard or soft copy and corrected and graded it out of class. If the work was in hard copy, the teacher had to correct the mistakes in handwriting and give a short holistic comment at the end, if the work was in soft copy, the Review panel of the Word text processor was used to add side-notes to the assessed text. When the students received the commented work, they were supposed to study the comments and make use of them. This in many cases proved counterproductive as the students did not use the received comments as effectively as the teacher had expected them to. Based on the analysis of the Year One course results, which can be seen in Table 2, a decision was made to attempt to use the flipped classroom approach in assessing students' writing assignments.

Table 2. Initial and final language mastery levels in Year One compared.

	A2	B1	B2	C1	Total
Initial	5	7	13	2	27
Final	4	5	16	2	27

A2 level is considered a fail, so although the number of students in this level decreased, still there were students who failed to fulfil the requirements of the course and had to retake it. Using the information to shape future planning of work, the flipped classroom format was chosen to improve the effect of assessment on students' achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

In Year Two, the approach to assessment was changed and it mainly took place in the classroom in the form of individual consultations, as the rest of the class was studying new material from books or on-line, or doing mini-group work on tasks assigned by the teacher. Immediate assessment was in the form of an informal dialogue – discussion with a student of the work provided, when the teacher and the student together reflected on the work through the structure medium of a teacher-designed criterion-based assessment scheme, which had been presented to students and discussed with them before the task was assigned. In the first term, the students had to prepare and submit the review of the sources relevant to their graduation paper topic, which was assessed on the scoring scale presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Scoring scale for assessing the Literature Review.

Criteria	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Choice of sources for review	Irrelevant sources for review chosen at random	Sources for review chosen at random	Attempt to select for review both fundamental and current work	Sufficient number of relevant sources for review, both fundamental and current
Quality of review and referencing **(Harvard style)**	Incoherent descriptive compilation of irrelevant sources. No or wrong referencing	Non-critical descriptive review. Unclear or wrong referencing	Review analyzes authors' contributions to the field of study. Referencing not always proper	Review coherently analyzes authors' contributions to the field of study. Referencing proper on the whole
References	Contain irrelevant sources. In-text and post text references refer to different sources. Post-text referencing incorrect. No sources in English	Not enough relevant sources. In-text and post-text referencing not to format and refer to different sources	Contain relevant contemporary sources, in-text and post-text referencing to format. May be some mismatch btw in-text and post-text references.	Contain relevant contemporary sources, in-text and post-text referencing to format. Full match btw in-text and post-text references.

As a final paper of the course in academic writing in English, students had to present a synopsis of their graduation research paper in the form of a Project Proposal, stating the purpose, methods to be applied and the results anticipated of their planned research project, which they had to defend later in the year after having completed their internship with a company where they had to fulfil the practical part of the research. The Project Proposal is considered a significant part of the graduation paper planning and preparation, and is assessed on the basis of the scoring scale shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Scoring scale for assessing the final writing assignment – Project Proposal.

Criteria	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Realization of communicative task	Focus of planned research\project, plan of action and anticipated results unclear	Focus of planned research\project, plan of action and anticipated results not always clear	Focus of planned research\project, plan of action and anticipated results generally clear	Focus of planned research\project, plan of action and anticipated results clear
Rationale	No rationale	Rationale not logical or evident	Rationale logical enough	Rationale logical
Formulation of purpose and objectives	Overall purpose and specific objectives of planned research\project not formulated	Overall purpose and specific objectives of planned research\project not formulated clearly and logically enough	Overall purpose and specific objectives of planned research\project formulated clearly and logically enough	Overall purpose and specific objectives of planned research\project formulated clearly and logically
Logic of presentation	Objectives, methods and results not aligned	Objectives, methods and results not clearly aligned	Objectives, methods and results not aligned clearly enough	Objectives, methods and results aligned
Relevance of methods	Methods to be used either not described at all, or irrelevant to goals stated	Methods to be used (quantitative and qualitative methods, dealing with primary and secondary information) only partially relevant to goals stated. Research sample unclear.	Methods to be used (quantitative and qualitative methods, dealing with primary and secondary information) mostly relevant to goals stated. Research sample not clear enough.	Methods to be used (quantitative and qualitative methods, dealing with primary and secondary information) relevant to goals stated. Research sample clear enough.
Presentation of results anticipated	No formulation of results anticipated.	Attempt to formulate results anticipated and define ways of presenting findings.	Reasonable attempt to formulate results anticipated and define ways of presenting findings.	Results anticipated proceed from objectives stated. Ways of presenting findings defined clearly enough.
Professional vocabulary and terminology	No evident command of professional vocabulary or terminology.	On the whole, command of professional vocabulary evident, with some misused terms.	Good command of professional vocabulary, with few misused terms.	Fluent command of professional vocabulary, no misused terms.

Using the scoring scales helped the teacher to keep feedback focused and not to overcorrect, whereas the students got clear guide-lines at the stage of task preparation, which made them more confident and thus involved in knowledge acquisition and skills formation. Having a clearly focused scheme, students had less difficulty in receiving and interpreting the feedback. This was demonstrated objectively through the results achieved by the students, and subjectively in the reflection done by the students, where they enthusiastically emphasized the usefulness of the feedback given in personal interaction.

To conclude, the application-based approach in assessment, aimed at instructing not informing the students was meant to make the students-teacher interaction more personalized and instrumental.

3   RESULTS

The results of Year TWO seen in Table 5 definitely prove that **immediate personalized specific constructive feedback given to students in person in the classroom could improve the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.**

Table 5. Initial and final language mastery levels in Year Two compared.

	A2	B1	B2	C1	Total
Initial	6	7	15	3	31
Final	-	8	19	4	31

The findings of this action research show that most change happened in the lowest initial language mastery level A2, and the failure rates decreased significantly with no students failing the final examination. The transitions from level B1 to B2 was also significant, while the number of students improving from B2 to C1 was insignificant, as the transition at higher levels of language mastery requires more time and effort applied. The conditions of the study ensured providing students with immediate, personalized, specific constructive feedback, which helped them identify their difficulties with clear recommendations based on the criterion-based scoring scale to help students overcome the imperfections. Watching students in their learning and providing students with information on their progress, the teacher could evaluate the progress or achievement in the development of a particular skill, which supported the students' learning and skills development.

Assessment took the form of assessment **for** learning as well as the assessment **as** learning, which ensured the successful development of high-order thinking skills and consequent production of an academic text in the English language.

Making feedback the immediate consequence of performance and concentrating on the immediate learning activities of the student in low threat conditions of student-teacher dialogue has been achieved through individual work with a student. This allowed students to comprehend and develop strategies, meeting their needs.

Another important result was that the class became flipped not only for the students, but for the teacher as well, who, instead of spending time preparing written feedback to students, of the effectiveness of which she was not sure, used contact hours with beneficial result for the students.

4   CONCLUSIONS

Assessment provides information to be used as a feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities, and for this information to be used in the most effective manner, approaches to assessing have to be changed.

The analysis of the results displayed by the course participants amounting to 58 students in two academic years conclusively proved that immediate, personalized, specific constructive feedback given to students in the format of the flipped classroom ensures building the desired students' competence in conveying the background, problem statement, suggested methods and anticipated results of their planned final research project, with failure rates dropping significantly, thus substantiating the correctness of the flipped classroom approach when grading and commenting takes place in the classroom in a personalized form by means of a student-teacher dialogue.

Further research will concentrate on refining the assessment criteria so that make peer and self-assessment of the students more involved thus addressing the issue of making student(s)-to-teacher feedback more instrumental.

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