

Kornél Farkas:

*Margit Reitbauer, Nancy Campbell, Sarah Mercer, Jennifer Schumm Fauster & Renate Vaupetitsch (eds.):
Feedback Matters: Current Feedback Practices in the EFL Classroom
Argumentum 12 (2016), 171-173
Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó*

Recenzió

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in the EFL Classroom**

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013, 199 pp.

There is a Central-European university where teachers and professors of English as a foreign language (EFL) have achieved that their students take just as much part in regulating and maintaining classroom learning as the educators themselves – if not more. How is this possible? The answer lies in *Feedback Matters: Current Feedback Practices in the EFL Classroom*, a jointly written and edited volume in which the academics of the University of Graz demonstrate how learner autonomy can be increased through collaborative feedback practices, and how these practices can be implemented for the benefit of students and teachers alike in a variety of educational contexts. Although not a guidebook in the classical sense, the volume offers a clever mixture of theoretical considerations and documentations of teachers' beliefs, experiences, research projects, materials and effective everyday practices, along with some sound advice from teachers talking to teachers.

The book consists of eleven chapters, many of them written by two or more authors. Although most of the chapters follow the typical “theory then practice” format, the proportions of these elements keep fluctuating throughout the volume, thus evoking a sense of refreshing diversity regarding authorial styles and choices. Accordingly, the topics of the volume also draw a wide spectrum around one central question: how to provide effective and facilitative feedback to EFL learners. Skimming through the overview offered in the first chapter, the reader finds topics such as: learning to praise; corrective feedback in the constructivist classroom; feedback as dialogue in learner-centred teaching; peer reviewing in collaborative teaching and learning; online peer reviewing in academic business writing; student responses to teacher feedback; and feedback on oral presentations and pronunciation.

Having a closer look at the chapters and topics, the reader may notice how swiftly they fit into a carefully planned sequence of interrelated ideas, starting out by setting the general theoretical foundations of the approach (Chapters 1-3) and moving towards more specific details in terms of both theory and practice (Chapters 4-11). Among the central concepts of the introductory chapters Sigott (Chapter 1) draws attention to the internationally relevant frames of reference (e.g.: the CEFR), which serve as the primary bases to giving feedback;

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Mercer and Ryan (Chapter 2) discuss “how the formulation of praise can affect learners’ beliefs about language learning and themselves as learners” (p. 21) and offer practical advice on how to give “good” feedback; while Reitbauer and Vaupetitsch (Chapter 3) reach back to ground-breaking theories about the construction of linguistic knowledge (Piaget 1967; Vygotsky 1978; Krashen 1985; Swain 1985) and connect them to online platforms and discussion forums, through which they open up new channels for teacher-student dialogue and constructive feedback. This kind of smooth interaction between theory and practice is carried throughout the volume, as reflected in the wide use of relevant citations, the precise use of terminology, and the clear flow of ideas.

To get an insight into what the Austrian educators mean by effective feedback practices, it is enough to turn to Chapter 4, in which Campbell and Schumm Fauster report about the aims, steps and results of an action research project based on the dialogue of teachers and students in academic writing courses. In an attempt to increase their students’ engagement in the writing process and also their responsibility for their learning, the authors introduced an approach in which students were required to ask for the feedback they wanted in the form of four to five questions attached to their first drafts (p. 61). They also provided guidelines to their students as to what kind of questions they might ask and where to insert them (endnotes, footnotes, notes on the margin). The gains were double, because students profited a lot from reflecting on their writing in order to be able to ask the right questions, while teachers were able to focus on the aspects that their students identified as difficult and the correction of papers became much quicker. In the chapter they also share the positive results of a student feedback survey about their novel feedback practice, as well as the guidelines they used during the project.

While most chapters are concerned with feedback on student writing, the tripartite framework that Phillips and Scott (Chapter 10) have devised to involve their students in the assessment of oral presentations is also an exemplary piece of effective feedback practices. In what they call the “pre-presentation phase” (pp. 164-167) they teach their students what structural elements, aspects of performance, presentation techniques and language aspects to strive and look for in oral presentations, then prepare students for giving meaningful peer feedback by focusing on one or two aspects at a time during mini-presentations. They also encourage self-evaluation by using video recordings. During the presentation phase students rely on a feedback form with clear criteria and separate rubrics for positive and negative comments (pp. 169-170). Finally, in the “post-presentation phase” (pp. 172-173) the presenters are given written peer- and teacher feedback to save them the stress of discussing their presentations immediately after they finish, and they are asked for a subsequent written piece of self-evaluation.

Apart from the rich collection of ideas and resources that the book offers, the most important aspect that seems to be missing from the chapters is some advice or guidelines about how to transform these feedback practices so that they suit lower educational levels and the needs of less proficient learners of EFL. Although it is claimed in Chapter 1 that the presented approaches to feedback “are applicable to all levels of learners in different learning contexts” (p. 19), the fact that almost each presented study was conducted in Austrian tertiary education leaves some doubts regarding the applicability of these practices outside the university context.

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So what is it altogether that makes this book such an inspiring and beneficial read? Firstly, it is the simple effectiveness of the approach that the authors jointly promote. It is the naturalness by which these educators collaborate with their students and the readiness by which the modelled practices can be copied into any field of tertiary education, regardless of group size, technical equipment, and the language of education. Secondly, it is the way in which the authors communicate their ideas. It is not only the coherence of the chapters and paragraphs, but also the layout and the visual support, including screenshots of online programs, authentic samples of student writing, straightforward tables, and also the extra materials that can be found in the appendices and in the lists of online references. Most importantly, however, it is the emphasis that the book places on respecting learners' needs, interests, and beliefs, and thus generating feedback that matters.

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