Shared language of feedback and assessment. Perception of teachers and students in three Icelandic secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the issue of variability of perception of teachers and students regarding feedback; with the primary focus being the exploration of how teachers and students perceive assessment in the Icelandic context. According to prior research feedback is not necessarily received by the student in the same manner as intended by the teacher. A survey was administered to teachers and students from three schools with differing emphases on assessment policy. This study supports previous studies (Havnes et al., 2012), which have reported a substantial gap in how teachers and students experience the manner in which feedback and assessment are practiced. Findings revealed that the stronger the culture around formative assessment, the stronger the dialogue between teachers and students. Some implications are drawn from these findings.

1. Introduction

Carefully selected and precise feedback is one of the most influential factors in students' learning processes (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley,2007). Feedback is defined by Hattie and Timperley (2007) as "information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding that reduces the discrepancy between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood" (p. 86). In this paper, feedback refers both to the information about students' work and their engagement with the feedback information. It is at the centre of formative assessment, mainly located in the dialogue between students and teachers, which Engelsen and Smith call "… the learning dialogue" (2010, p. 416). Sadler (2010) emphasizes the use of feedback as an essential element in enhancing further learning. Yet, for students to consider feedback useful and act on it, it has to be understood and accepted. Despite the importance of how feedback is perceived, relatively little research on the manner in which teachers and student perceive feedback has been carried out (Carvalho, Santos, Conboy, & Martins, 2014; Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Havnes, Smith, Dysthe, & Ludvigsen, 2012; Jonsson, 2013; Rakoczy, Harks, Klieme, Blum, & Hochweber, 2013).

In the past, research has mostly focused on how to give effective feedback in order to enhance learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hattie, 2012). Giving feedback implies that there is a receiver who perceives and decides whether to act on the feedback.

Despite substantial research on how to give feedback, there is still a limited understanding of how feedback relates to learning (Shute, 2008). Wiliam (2013) notes how the literature on feedback has prioritized studying the giving of feedback rather than the receiving of feedback. He claims:

> The question "What kind of feedback is best?" is meaningless, because while a particular kind of feedback might make one student work harder, it might cause another student to give up. There can be no simple recipe for effective feedback; there is just no substitute for the teacher knowing their students (p. 18).

Wiliams' claim is relevant in the context of this research because it underpins the importance of taking students' and teachers' perspectives into consideration. Whereas researchers have different opinions of how feedback works, the importance of feedback perception cannot be ignored (Rakoczy et al., 2013; Strijbos, Narciss, & Dünnebier, 2010; Yorke, 2003).

The theoretical framework is based on a social constructive paradigm on how learners construct their understanding in relation to others. That is to say, students are not seen as passive receivers of knowledge. Instead, they are active in making sense of the world by constructing the meaning of it (Bruner, 1996), and that meaning is constructed in dialogues with others (Bakhtin, 1986). Feedback plays an essential role in knowledge construction through proficient guidance by peers or adults and as an internal process which is part of a

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metacognitive mode of learning (Butler & Winne, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Student involvement in the feedback and assessment process is important so they are not seen only as passive recipients of the work of others (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Black and Wiliam (2009) claim that feedback is one of the key elements in the instructional process, and some researchers go as far as to say that feedback and learning are inseparable (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2010, p. 24). For feedback to be effective, Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that the conceptual framework of feedback consists of three main questions, for students to consider:

– Where am I going? (feed up),
– Where am I? (feed back),
– What am I doing next? (feed forward).

These questions can be embedded as feedback on four different levels: task level, process level, self-regulation level, and the self. Feedback can be effective when used at the first three levels, and less effective when directed at the self (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback on tasks can be about direction and corrections, while feedback on processing is related to the course of action taken to complete, or work on, a task. When students self-regulate, they seek feedback from various sources such as books, teachers, peers etc. All three feedback processes are intended to bridge the gap between students' actual knowledge level and the reference level of understanding (Butler & Winne, 1995; Hattie & Timperley,2007).

Black and Wiliam (1998) state that instruction can change at critical points which they term "moments of contingency". In other words, the teacher responds to the student in relation to how she/he understands and interprets what the student is thinking beyond mere utterance. Smith, Gamlem, Sandal, and Engelsen (2016) use the term 'responsive pedagogy' for the dialogue taking place between the student and the teacher about goals, competence in achieving those goals, and strategies for getting there. The teacher responds to the student's own assessment and tailors the feedback accordingly. This is based on Harlem and James' (1997) definition of formative assessment, where they emphasize that teachers should know students' current level of understanding as well as possess skills to pinpoint the next steps for further learning. This is important when it comes to giving feedback. For example, when a student's interpretation is flawed, the teacher can use the student's misunderstanding to empower further learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Hermeneutic listening describes a collaborative learning process where the teacher synchronizes his thinking with the students' current understanding, or as Freire (1970) puts it:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow (p. 26).

Dialogue is the core of feedback practice, and the interaction between teacher and student creates a new space which links the separate worlds of the teacher and the student (Smith, 2015). The space between teachers and students will ultimately come down to teachers sharing vocabulary of assessment with students. Sadler (2013) addressed this by claiming that: "Students need a vocabulary for expressing and communicating both what they find and how they judge, at the least for that part of their evaluative knowledge they can express in words" (p. 59). It is not enough for teachers to assume that the students inherit assessment vocabulary without "appropriate evaluative experience" and discussions about what quality looks like.

This would imply that assessment information feeds into the planning of future learning as well as the planning of future teaching. Therefore, it is of great significance that the culture around formative assessment reflects active student involvement in the feedback process

and a mutual dialogue between student and teacher. To create such a culture, the assessment practices and teachers' pedagogical beliefs need to be in correspondence (Shepard, 2000).

However, research shows that feedback is not necessarily received by the student in the same manner as intended by the teacher (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Havnes et al., 2012; Perrenoud, 1998). As Hattie (2012) points out, teachers give a lot of feedback, but much of it is not received by the students. Subsequently, there is an indication of disparity in how teachers and students perceive feedback (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Havnes et al., 2012). For instance, teachers seem to embellish the quality and the usefulness of feedback when compared to students' experience of it (Havnes et al., 2012). Gamlem and Smith (2013) noted that students' notion of feedback usefulness differs from teachers' reports regarding the time and space given for working on feedback. That is not so surprising, in light of teachers' reports on their uncertainty regarding purpose of feedback, for example how it affects students as well as their concerns about student motivation and their competence to act on the feedback (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Havnes et al., 2012). Moreover, Gamlem and Smith (2013) reported that students rarely experienced active verbal dialogue with teachers. That finding is food for thought, bearing in mind the importance of active interaction between teacher and student on learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and the students' appreciation for a dialogue about their learning (Havnes et al., 2012). Research points out that students often lack understanding of teachers' feedback and that teachers have a tendency to provide standardized feedback (to avoid perceived conflict with official standards) in the form of general phrases like "good work"/"excellent" (Engelsen & Smith, 2010). This practice is, according to Perrenoud (1998), like throwing a bottle out to sea and never being sure if the message will one day find a receiver. What the teacher intended when he gave feedback is not necessarily received in the same manner by the student. Indeed, the student can accept, modify or reject the feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Mutual understanding of feedback is necessary for it to have the desired effect on learning. If a student and teacher have a different understanding of feedback in the assessment process, it will probably not enhance student learning. On the contrary, it could create a misunderstanding which confuses the learner. Hayward draws attention to the perplexing challenge in putting formative assessment into practice. Research indicates that teachers lack skills and the necessary support to encompass the many aspects of implementing a culture of formative assessment, where learning is the focal point (Clark, 2011; Hayward, 2015; Shepard, 2000).

Students' and teachers' perception of feedback and assessment in upper-secondary schools in Iceland is an under-researched area and in light of the discussion above, it is important that primary stakeholders in education (students, teachers, principals and other supervisors) develop a shared language of assessment.

1.1. The aim of the study

The aim of this study is to address the issue of variability of perception of teachers and students regarding feedback, with the primary focus being the exploration of how teachers and students perceive assessment in the Icelandic context. Feedback as part of formative assessment in different learning contexts is of particular interest. In this study context refers to schools with diverse practices of formative assessment. Understanding how teachers and students experience feedback will give insight into the dialogue that takes place in the classroom.

Research questions:

– How do teachers and students in secondary schools in Iceland perceive feedback practices?
– How do different assessment cultures affect students' and teachers'