

## Formative Assessment – it is a Must in Web-based Technologies for Language Learning and Teaching

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### Abstract

*The high value of formative assessment in language learning and teaching has been well investigated. Formative assessment is seen as a powerful tool for improving learning. Since technologies are enabling an increase in online learning we need more knowledge of language learning in this context.*

*This paper analyzes formative assessment concerning several course occasions in Beginner Studies in Swedish for International Students. This foreign/second language course is supported and delivered in a virtual learning platform Fronter and lessons are held weekly in Adobe Connect meeting rooms.*

*Among many other communication possibilities like hand-in, storage and learning materials Fronter is used for following students' progress by using different methods of continuous feedback which is the central aspect in qualitative formative assessment. Feedback is also provided by tutor in Adobe Connect seminars and in MSN orally and in written form after the seminars. After the evaluation the effective forms of feedback from the formative assessment will be adopted in the course design and learning outcomes.*

*The main resource is the students' reflections about the product and the learning process with their tutors. Another important moment is providing support that helps keep students motivated. This also helps students develop an awareness of the importance of learner autonomy and ultimately independent learning. To inform students about their progress, development of communicative skills and evaluating mistakes are other methods which possibly promote language learning.*

*The experience shows that formative assessment methods used with e-learning tools improve language learning. The rate of student completion is high in courses where the students follow the course continuously and get continuous feedback. These students have greater chances of passing the course and are satisfied with formal assessment methods. My research points to the conclusion that it is important to further elaborate formative assessment methods using web-based technologies which show a potential for improvements in formative language assessment.*

### Introduction

Feedback is one of the basic elements of formative assessment. Several language researchers point out that feedback still is an area that needs further studies [1, 4, 6, 7] - studies of the effects of feedback in general and of different types [2].

Furthermore, computer- mediated communication (CMC) brings significant changes to the social dimension of learning, and claims have been made that this can empower students and make writing classes more powerful and collaborative [4].

Hyland & Hyland also point out that "a final key area for research must be the potential of ... computer- mediated feedback for improving students' writing and developing their independent writing skills" [4: 96].

## **Purpose**

The main aim of my study is to explore the students' attitudes towards the degree of helpfulness concerning feedback to short written essay- type assignments and oral assignments using web-based technologies.

Results from my study investigating the role of teacher's feedback in web-based technologies for language learning and teaching will be presented. The study is based on data from international students of Dalarna University, Sweden, who were studying web-based courses Beginner Studies in Swedish for International Students.

## **Web- based technologies**

This foreign/second language course is supported and delivered in Fronter where the students have to submit short written and oral assignments continuously every week. Fronter is the main virtual learning platform during the course. Fronter is used for following students' progress by using different methods of *continuous frequent* feedback which is the central aspect in qualitative formative assessment. Feedback is also provided once a week in lessons orally and in written form by a tutor in Adobe Connect seminars. Lessons are held in Adobe Connect meeting rooms. Feedback can also be offered in MSN after the seminars.

## **Questions and feedback classification**

Research questions concerned web-based language course students' evaluation of the tutor's written and oral feedback via web-based technologies. The questions were partly formed by following the feedback classification scheme [7: 236-237] which is related to two broad areas: the product and the learning process.

Feedback that focused on product includes following written language categories: content, organization, language accuracy and presentation. A new category concerning product was the feedback on pronunciation. I have provided written and oral feedback on pronunciation and I wanted to investigate more about the value of feedback on pronunciation from students 'point of view.

Feedback focused on process includes praise/encouragement and reinforcement of learning materials [7: 237]. An additional new category based on experience which had the need evaluation was the awareness of language acquisition.

The third area and a new moment of the investigation was the exploring of the procedure of feedback. The questions were based on experience and concerned different e-learning tools as Fronter (individually and in written form), Adobe Connect seminars (to the group orally and in written form), e-mail (individually in written form at the end of the course) and MSN or Skype (optional individually or in written form).

## **Empirical results**

A method of quantitative data collection and analyses was used to survey eleven international students. Sixteen students who had passed one or two course occasions autumn 2010 were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Eleven students answered and this means that the response rate was 69%.

	Type of feedback	very helpful	helpful	sometimes helpful	not helpful at all
	<b>1. Concerning product</b>				
1	Content	4	5	2	0
2	Organization	4	5	2	0
3	Language accuracy	6	3	2	0
4	Presentation	4	4	3	0
5	Pronunciation	5	4	2	0
	<b>2. Concerning learning process</b>				
6	Praise/encouragement	9	1	1	0
7	Reinforcement of learning materials	8	2	1	0
8	Awareness of language acquisition	6	3	2	0
	<b>3. Concerning the procedure of getting feedback</b>				
9	Individually written, continuous in Fronter	6	4	1	0
10	To the group, orally and written in Adobe Connect seminars	6	3	2	0
11	Individually, written at the end of the course occasion by e- mail	5	5	1	0
12	Individually in MSN, Skype optional,	5	3	2	1

Table1. Empirical result of students' evaluation of feedback variables

**1. The overall empirical results** show that feedback is evaluated as very helpful or helpful by 82- 91 % of students. Category presentation was found very helpful or helpful by 73% of students. Generally all students were positive about the helpfulness of all feedback in Fronter and in Adobe Connect.

**2. Concerning product** four categories (content, organization, language accuracy and pronunciation) were evaluated as very helpful or helpful by 82 % of students. Category presentation was found very helpful and helpful by 73% of students.

Concerning **learning process** two categories (praise/encouragement and reinforcement of learning materials) were equally found as very helpful or helpful by 91% of students. Awareness of language acquisition was found as very helpful or helpful by 82% of students.

Feedback concerning **procedure** (individual written, continuous feedback in Fronter and individual, written feedback at the end of the course occasion) was found as very helpful or helpful by 91 % of students. Teacher's feedback to the group (orally and written in Adobe Connect seminars) was evaluated as very helpful or helpful by 82% of students.

**3.** In the category **product** the feedback on the **accuracy** was found to be most helpful- 55 % of students found it to be very helpful.

In the category **process praise/encouragement** was found very helpful by 82 % of students and **reinforcement** of learning materials was found very helpful by 73% of students.

In the category **procedure, written individual feedback** in Fronter and **oral/written group-feedback** in Adobe Connect were evaluated very helpful by 55 % of the students.

**4.** The most appreciated type of feedback is concerning two categories in the category concerning learning process: **praise/encouragement** and **reinforcement of learning materials**. More specifically in terms of feedback the learning process **praise/encouragement** and **reinforcement of learning materials** were found to be most helpful - 91 % of students found these categories very helpful or helpful.

## Analysis . Implications

I have been teaching foreign languages in the physical classroom for students/pupils from different countries and in different group constellations (groups from very few up until 80 students) for about twenty years. I have planned, designed, developed, delivered and evaluated web- based Swedish language courses since 2008. I have had eighteen web- based course occasions since 2008. My experience shows that formative assessment methods (feedback) used with e-learning tools improve language learning.

1. The results of my previous study show that the students highly evaluate all kinds of feedback both concerning **the product** and **process**. Hyland [7] has investigated both tutors' and students' perspective on the feedback to distance language learners. She found that there are variations in the type of feedback the students want. My study shows that regarding **the product** the students especially evaluate feedback on **language accuracy** and **pronunciation**. Hyland [7] points out that feedback on language accuracy is a very important aspect from the teachers' point of view. The students also in this study found the feedback on form very useful. This means that the students want to know what kind of mistakes they make so they can explicitly improve their language. Even feedback on organization, content and pronunciation need more attention from the tutors. Comments on students' oral assignments (mostly pronunciation) are also essential in language courses for beginners and needs more attention. **The implication of this analysis is that language accuracy and pronunciation need feedback according to respondents' attitudes.**

2. As the results of this study show, all feedback concerning **the learning process**, most of all praise/encouragement and reinforcement of learning materials are very highly evaluated by the students. Hyland & Hyland say that "we see praise and criticism as not only a crucial feature of the teaching and learning context, but also as helping to constitute this context" [5: 186]. My propositions are to create a supportive learning environment where the praise needs to be credible by offering constructive criticism and the encouragement has to be informative. This kind of feedback helps to keep the students' motivation and self- esteem and encourages good writing in an e-learning environment. As Hyland's study shows, less than 17% of teachers focused on the process of learning [7: 238]. It means that the teachers' awareness about the value of learning process must be better highlighted. Encouragement in Swedish school tradition is a frequent category of feedback. During the seminars and even in written feedback I usually tell to the students about some basic principles of **language acquisition**. **Based on this study I propose to show that students need some basic knowledge of how languages are learned or what elements support effective language learning or how we deal with the mistakes and errors.**

3. **Reinforcement of learning materials** is another very highly evaluated category. As the students mostly study on their own during the course and their opportunities for the interaction are limited, they need clear instructions about where to find solutions to their problems. Hyland found that the students rely on their own resources for dealing with problems, rather than seeking help (ask the tutor, call, ask a fellow student) [7: 243]. The same aspect appears in the previous study- the students following web-based courses need good clear teaching materials, "they are active and not passive recipients of their feedback " [7: 245]. **The implications of this analysis are that there is a need for good learning instructions and other materials which are easy to find in e- learning environment. The proposition of this study is that there is a need for investigation of delivering learning materials in e-learning environment.**

4. The students' attitudes to **the individual feedback** are equally highly evaluated. Even feedback to the group is seen as helpful or very helpful for the students. MSN and Skype as optional tools are

found useful by 73% of students. Since technologies are enabling an increase of number of students in online learning we need more knowledge of the possibilities of using e- tools in language learning. This study shows that all students use some type of social media tools like MSN, Twitter or Facebook. 50 % of the students use social media tools etc. every day, 30 % of the students use them more than once a week and 20 % between twice a week and once a month. **The implication of this study is that the increasing population of "native" users of social media creates a need for new methods. My proposition is to use social media which enables better feedback.**

**5. We need more knowledge about the effects and the advantages of feedback.** Online language courses require high professionalism of the teachers who are aware of the students' needs in both categories- the product and the process of language learning. My research points to the conclusion that it is important to further elaborate formative assessment methods using web-based technologies which show a potential for improvements in formative language assessment inclusive feedback. My experience shows that the rate of student completion is high in courses where the students follow the course continuously and get continuous feedback. These students have greater chances of passing the course and are satisfied with formal assessment methods.

I suppose that every web – based language course has its own character depending on its design, delivery tools, teachers and the students' background. I agree with Guénette who says that "there is no "corrective feedback recipe"" [3:51]. It is important to keep the students' needs in focus and adapt and investigate both tools and methods which will help students by improving their independent language skills.

## References

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