
Synthesis

Feedbackⁱ

High Impact for very low cost, based on moderate evidence



+8

Feedback is information given to the learner or teacher about the learner's performance relative to learning goals or outcomes. It should aim towards (and be capable of producing) improvement in students' learning. Feedback redirects or refocuses either the teacher's or the learner's actions to achieve a goal, by aligning effort and activity with an outcome. It can be about the output of the activity, the process of the activity, the student's management of their learning or self-regulation, or them as individuals (which tends to be least effective). This feedback can be verbal or written, or can be given through tests or via digital technology. It can come from a teacher or someone taking a teaching role, or from peers (see Peer tutoring).

How effective is it?

Feedback studies tend to show very high effects on learning. However, it also has a very high range of effects and some studies show that feedback can have negative effects and make things worse. It is therefore important to understand the potential benefits and the possible limitations of feedback as a teaching and learning approach. In general, research-based approaches that explicitly aim to provide feedback to learners, such as Bloom's 'mastery learning', tend to have a positive impact. Feedback has effects across all age groups. Research in schools has focused particularly on its impact on English, mathematics and, to a lesser extent, science.



Feedback studies tend to show very high effects on learning

Latin American Evidenceⁱⁱ

Research conducted in Latin America shows that feedback has, in general, a positive association with learning. Feedback can also impact results beyond learning outcomes. For example, some studies find positive relationships with other dimensions such as, participation, self-confidence or good attitude towards the class.

Using different methods, some studies investigate how students learn a second language. This research shows that corrective feedback can contribute to the development of the language and, particularly, that it can be an effective strategy to improve the grammatical accuracy of a second language. In this line, a study shows that teachers tend to make use of feedback mostly to correct errors, with the review process focused on the final outcome rather than on the process of learning. When feedback was given without highlighting the positive aspects of participation and attitude from students, the process of learning a second language was seriously limited.

Another study, using an ethnographic approach, identifies that the predominant type of communication used by the teacher in the classroom is characterized by a hierarchic structure. When teachers frequently practiced a type of communication based on feedback, they improved the observed participation and collaboration of the students.

The methodologies used for these studies use both, qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, it is important to highlight the limitations of these studies' scope, since they are mainly based on small-scale interventions. Therefore, any generalisation of these results should be done with caution.

How secure is the evidence?

There is a substantial number of reviews and meta-analyses of the effects of feedback. Educational (rather than psychological or theoretical) studies tend to identify positive benefits where the aim of feedback is to improve learning outcomes in reading or mathematics or in recall of information. A recent meta-analysis of studies focusing on formative assessment in schools indicates the gains can be more modest, suggesting that an improvement of about three months' additional progress is achievable in schools or nearer four months when the approach is supported with professional development. However, some areas of the curriculum may benefit more from feedback than others. A recent meta-analysis of the impact of formative assessment on writing indicates gains of 8 months' progress are achievable, which is more consistent with other feedback research.

What are the costs?

The costs of providing more effective feedback are not high. However, it is likely to require sustained professional development to improve practice, and this includes active inquiry and evaluation. Overall, costs are estimated very low.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Providing effective feedback is challenging. These findings from the broader research may help you to implement it well. Effective feedback tends to: be specific, accurate and clear (e.g. “It was good because you...” rather than just “correct”); compare what a learner is doing right now with what they have done wrong before (e.g. “I can see you were focused on improving X as it is much better than last time’s Y...”); encourage and support further effort; be given sparingly so that it is meaningful; provide specific guidance on how to improve and not just tell students when they are wrong; be supported with effective professional development for teachers.
2. Broader research suggests that feedback should be about complex or challenging tasks or goals as this is likely to emphasise the importance of effort and perseverance as well as be more valued by the pupils.
3. Feedback can come from peers as well as adults (see Peer tutoring).
4. Have you considered the challenges of implementing feedback effectively and consistently in your school?
5. What professional development is likely to be necessary for successful implementation of feedback in your school?

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