

## THE FEEDBACK CORRECTIVE NATURE IN ESSAYS

**Violeta Janusheva**

University "St. Kliment Ohridski", RNM  
violeta.januseva@uklo.edu.mk

**Jove D. Talevski**

University "St. Kliment Ohridski", RNM  
jove.talevski@uklo.edu.mk

**Milena Pejchinovska-Stojkovikj**

University "St. Kliment Ohridski", RNM  
milena.pejcinovska@uklo.edu.mk

### Abstract

Given that the teachers' feedback is among the essential factors that affect students' achievements, the present study examines the teachers' feedback quality in essays in the secondary education of the RNM, regarding its corrective nature, in the teaching subject Macedonian language and literature. Thus, the aim is to obtain a general picture on the feedback quality having in mind the theoretical indications on the way the feedback should be provided to fulfill its main function, i.e. to be corrective and to guide students' toward improvement of their learning and achievements.

The sample consists of 50 students' essays, from first to fourth grade of the secondary education, on which teachers' feedback is written, and the analysis rests upon coding and the inductive-interpretative method, and the comparison, as well.

The research results indicate that there is a gap between the theory and the practice, i.e. the teachers' feedback loses its corrective character. Instead of directing the students to undertake actions for enhancement of the identified shortcomings, the analyzed feedback comes down to the phrase be careful followed by the aspect on which the students should focus on, thus limiting their further steps in learning.

**Key words:** Learning and teaching process, Macedonian language and literature, feedback, essay.

### 1. Introduction

The students' accomplishments assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. According to Lambert & Lines (2004), the students should manifest their understanding of the particular teaching subject in the teaching and learning process, and this is very relevant to estimate whether the educational standards and goals are achieved. They, further, claim that teachers should constantly ask themselves whether there is a way to teach the subject better and to promote more effective learning.

Undoubtedly, one of the main aspects of the teaching – learning process and of the students' successful assessment is the teachers' feedback quality. Ur (1996) says that feedback is "information that is given to the learner on his performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance". Hattie (2009) argues that the feedback influences the students' attainments. According to him, when teachers are open for the students' shortcomings, then the teaching and the learning are synchronized and powerful. He also indicates that the teachers' and the students' feedback make the learning process visible and that through the feedback, the teaching and learning process can be significantly optimized. As Talevski & Janusheva (2015) suggest, on one side, the feedback helps the students to get information regarding their drawbacks or mistakes and directions to upgrade their results, and on the other side, at the same time, from the students' feedback, the teachers get relevant information on many aspects of their teaching. Therefore, as Hattie (2009) says, the feedback has to

impact the teaching and learning process positively and to provide students with tools which enable their independent functioning and their awareness of the learning process.

The teachers' feedback provides the students with information on their performances, regarding the learning outcomes and goals. It should refine the students' learning as well as the teachers' teaching and redirect the students' activity to achieve the goals, harmonizing the efforts, activities and the outcomes. Further, according to Popovski (2005) and Mickovska & Tasevska (2015), the teachers' feedback provides a solid base for development of positive relations between teachers and students. A substantial amount of research agrees on the feedback' form and points to the oral or written form (Brown, 2004; Smith & Gorard, 2005; Popovski, 2005; Talevski & Janusheva, 2015). Each form has its advantages and disadvantages, especially regarding the wording which has to govern students to independently identify their learning deficiency and to manage them in their efforts to improve their achievements. Janusheva & Talevski (2015) provide an example. If the student's essay is graded with 3, and it does not have further comments, the student may be confused because he will not have additional information on which part of his essay the grade 3 refers to. In this particular case, the student will not be able to understand why he gets exactly the grade 3 and not the grade 4 or 2, which are the essay's part which are not good enough, where the weak points are, whether the drawbacks refer to the orthography etc. Therefore, the feedback has to be positive and constructive critique of student's downsides, to encourage his independent thinking and provide instructions for his further activities. According to Pintrich & Schunk (2002), the feedback should inevitably take into consideration the students' efforts to advance their achievements because the students' motivation increases if they believe that the success is a result of their effort.

However, it has to be stressed out that delivering an effective, efficient and corrective feedback, regardless of the form, is not a simple task. This especially refers to the essays which as compositions with extensive answers do not have one and only one correct answer and which give students freedom, i.e. they decide on the data that they will use, on the way they organize them in the coherent whole, on the arguments they employ etc. (McMillan, 1999; McMillan, 2000; Popovski, 2005; Nitko & Brookhart, 2014; Talevski & Janusheva, 2015). Yet, they are hard to assess, specifically if consider that there are no exact and precise criteria and indicators (Talevski & Janusheva, 2011; Janusheva, Pejchinovska-Stojkovicj & Talevski, 2021). Essays are very meaningful in the teaching and learning process because they assess all cognitive processes and, in particular, the higher cognitive processes, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They also enlarge students' competencies to organize ideas, to develop logical arguments and to showcase original and creative thinking.

With the very significant feedback role in the teaching and learning process in mind, this research looks into the teachers' feedback quality in essays in the secondary education in the RNM, in relation to its corrective nature in the teaching subject Macedonian language and literature. It is of utmost importance to see whether the teachers adhere to the theoretical knowledge on the way the feedback should be provided in written form. Thus, 50 students' essays on which teachers' feedback is written are taken into account.

Although the number of the sample units can be seen as one of the limitations of this scrutiny, the research gives general insights on the feedback's nature, in respect of its corrective character.

### **1.1. The feedback and the essays**

As the other forms of feedback, the feedback in the essays leans on the teaching goals, encourages the students' thinking, and provides directions for further advancement which have to rely on students' activities. As said by Janusheva & Pejchinovska (2011) and Talevski & Janusheva (2015), this type of feedback should be positive and yet a constructive critique to the students' weaknesses. In order to supply the students with an effective and relevant feedback, the teachers and students have to be familiar with the criteria used to assess the accomplishments, meaning that the formative assessment should be planned. Otherwise, the feedback significance, quality, and motivational function may be questioned. Further, when providing feedback, the teacher should concentrate on one very relevant aspect in the answer and to have a positive approach. This means that if the teacher gives feedback on the orthographic shortcomings in the essay, he has to be confident that in such activity, the orthographic

mistakes are the most crucial and serious features that have to be commented and that he does not neglect other more important characteristic (Talevski & Janusheva, 2011; Janusheva, Pejchinovska-Stojkovikj & Talevski, 2021). The teacher should also discuss the feedback with the student, to highlight the positive aspects in the answer and help him to further use his strengths as well.

For instance, when assessing an essay, it is not sufficient to write that the general sentence is not adequate and it is harder to write down the components which make this general sentence to be satisfactory, good, or excellent. Therefore, as claimed by Janusheva, Pejchinovska-Stojkovikj & Talevski (2021), due to the complex nature of the written text which includes students' personal beliefs, attitudes, ideas and writing style, the subjective factors, i.e. the teachers' subjective perception of the criteria and indicators have to be considered. As a result, it is very difficult to provide an exact, correct and detailed feedback.

### **1.2. The feedback's corrective nature**

A great body of research points to the feedback's corrective nature (Black & William, 1998; Popovski, 2005; Brookhart, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hattie, 2009; Wiggins, 2012; Ellis, 2020). Brookhart (2008) insists on that the effective feedback should guide the students toward understanding the goals they want to attain. She gives an example for productive feedback: This is good introductory part since it contains all main ideas we have discussed. Can you think of a way to extend some of the ideas? She further signifies that it is essential for the students to understand the feedback. Analyzing the feedback in the nature and society classes, Pejchinovska (2011) also provides examples on effective and corrective feedback. A powerful feedback, as said by Chappuis (2012), does not provide students with more instruction than it is needed because, in this case, the students will not have the need to think. Wiggins (2012) indicates that in order to be corrective, the feedback should not lean on simple phrases and words, such: improve your writing, you can do better, put more effort etc. This type of feedback does not tell the students which way to go in order to upgrade their learning and enhance their outcomes. Further, he argues that the feedback is something different from an advice, and that teachers should be very attentive when providing effective feedback. According to him, the comment that the students' written report needs more examples is not feedback, but an advice which contributes to the students' insecurities. He suggests that it would be more appropriate to ask students whether they have an idea on how to refine particular activity because this leads to autonomy and trust development. Furthermore, he believes that trust is the foundation for the effective feedback. As stated by Essel (2020), teachers often provide short feedback, which may lead to lack of students' interest toward that type of feedback. Chen (2021) also stresses the very significant role of the way the language feedback is given since he discovers that teachers do not pay attention to the language that will improve students' achievements.

## **2. Broader research context**

A great body of research points out to the feedback quality relevance (Carrol & Swain, 1992; Boud, 1995; Black & William, 1998; Popovski, 2005; Lin & Miler, 2005; Brookhart, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Janusheva & Pejchinovska, 2011; Chappuis, 2012; Talevski, Janusheva & Pejchinovska, 2014; Mickovska & Tasevska, 2015; Talevski & Janusheva, 2015; Guinness, Detrich, Keyworth & States, 2020; Kerr, 2020). Carrol & Swain (1992) prove the role of the feedback in English native speakers when learning French, especially when new items are learned and memorized. Black & William (1998) claim that the feedback is the base on which the students become independent to plan their own learning. Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol, Ross & Smith (2004) conclude that the effective and corrective feedback encourages dialog for learning between teachers and students, provides high quality information on students' learning and clarify the preferred results. The effect that feedback has on students' further work in school is proved also by Popovski (2005). He divides the students into three groups and conducts a test. Then, he returns the test back to the students – the first group receives only a grade without any written comment, the second group gets grades as well as some stereotypical comments, such: solid, good, you need more practice etc., and the third group gains grade, and individual comment for each student which content encourages the student to work more on a certain

aspect. His research confirms that later, the students from the third group, who are given written instructions that certain learning aspects should be improved, achieve the highest results. He suggests that in a written assignment, the feedback should concentrate on the positive aspects and then provide a comment which will refer to the students' shortcomings or misunderstandings as well as instruction on how to eliminate them in future, which activities he should take in order not to repeat them etc. Lin & Miler state that the feedback comprises both, the students' cognitive sphere and the motivational factors, i.e. they learn how to upgrade their achievements and to control their learning. According to Brookhart (2008), the feedback is very meaningful in the teaching and largely in the learning process. Janusheva & Pejchinovska (2011) report that giving feedback is very complex and difficult task. According to them, teachers should evaluate the information which they receive from students, and include only the information that will lead toward the refinement of the students' accomplishments. They pose the question: What if, for ex., teachers make a mistake and if the given feedback is irrelevant to students' attainment? What if students lack to comprehend the feedback? These questions clearly point out to the necessity of planning and the teachers' psychological, pedagogical, and professional competence to perceive all the information, to elaborate them and to make genuine judgment. Further, Chappuis (2012) argues that teachers should carefully chose a feedback from which the students will benefit the most and avoid to comment each students' weak point. This is very significant because such teachers' activities can make students less motivated and not interest in further upgrading of their achievements, thus producing a negative effect. In this sense, Boud & Molloy (2013), report that teacher should provide clear and constructive feedback which will be not comprehended as an accusation. They claim that if the feedback is received as an accusation, students lack their motivation and their willingness to make changes. On the other side, according to them, this may produce negative comments on teachers' work. Given that teachers should have solid communication skills, Dignen (2014) states that feedback is the most relevant communication skill. Guinness, Detrich, Keyworth & States (2020) see feedback as a toll for correcting the students' misunderstandings as well as a component of the students' active reaction. As Talevski & Janusheva (2015) mention, if the feedback is given after finishing a particular topic which will not be further elaborated by the teacher, it will lose its function, because the students cannot solve the identified dilemmas or the difficulties. For example, if students wait for the feedback for two months and during waiting, the teachers begin to teach a new topic, the given feedback will not fulfill its aim and the students will not benefit from it. Consequently, it is very worthwhile for the feedback to be given at the right time. Hera & Kulińska (2018), stress that feedback has a great importance and enhance the learning of English as a foreign language. Kerr (2020) lists 10 advices that can improve teachers' feedback wording, stressing out that feedback should concentrate on the positive aspects and that the teacher should be very careful on the feedback's content. He simply suggests that by giving feedback, teachers should attract the students' attention and provide them with clear and relevant feedback.

### 3. Methodology

Bearing in mind the very essence of the feedback as a tool which contributes to the students' success improvement, the present paper investigates the teachers' feedback quality in essays in the secondary education in the RNM, in the teaching subject Macedonian language and literature, in relation to its corrective nature. Thus, the aim is to obtain a general picture on the feedback quality having in mind the theoretical insights on the way the feedback should be provided. The sample consists of 50 students' written assignments from first to fourth class on which teachers' feedback is written. It is a purposeful sample, which is in line with the claim of Lincoln & Guba (1985) that each sample is in a way purposeful because it is gathered for some purpose. Further, this is in correlation with Cheek (2008), Yin (2011) and Gentles et al. (2015) who state various aspects that can be sampled in a research. In an effort to capture the feedback essence, following Crabtree & Miller's (1999) suggestion, a coding protocol is designed and patterns regarding the feedback aspects, wording, praising the positive aspects and directions for improvement are identified. The analysis rests upon the inductive-interpretative method used by Thomas (2006), Kahlke (2014) and Harding & Whitehead (2016) which stresses the inductive thinking which leads to producing ideas from the data.

#### 4. Results, analysis and discussion

In continuance, the research results, their analysis, and the discussion are provided.

All of the written assignments encompass feedback which is supplied at the end of the essays with two to three sentences. The coding results are as follows:

The exact wording of the feedback	Aspect/s of the essay on which the feedback is provided	Praise the positive aspects of the essay	Direction for improvement
Be careful of the	orthographic rules and the word's transfer in a new line;	None	None
Be cautious of the	capital letter use;	None	None
Be alert of the	consonant f orthography;	None	None
Be careful of the	negation, it should be written separately from the verb;	None	None
Be aware of the	verb tense and the use of the 1-form;	None	None
Be careful of the	use of the short pronoun forms;	None	None
Be aware of the	solid/closed compound nouns orthography;	None	None
Be careful of the	sentence construction; verb tense;	None	None
Pay attention to the	punctuation and orthographic marks.	None	None
The pointed idea...	is not clear and understandable.	None	None
Be careful of the...	parts of the essay;	None	None
	words from the stylistic point of view.		
You use the same data all over the essay	essay's content	None	None

Table 1: Feedback's aspects

From the table, it can be seen that there are several particular features which show that the provided feedback on the essays as written assignments is not in line with the theoretical insight of the feedback nature.

First, it is obvious that feedback refers to two, three, or even four aspects of the essay which, according to the teachers, are worth to be commented, implying that teachers are confident that the noticed mistakes/shortcomings are the ones that are the most relevant for the students. This is not in line with the research of Chappuis (2012) and Talevski & Janusheva (2015) who recommend that comments of many students' weak points should be avoid. Supplying feedback on more than one downside decreases the students' motivation and makes them feel confused and discouraged. This may also makes students feel that they have done nothing correct and that their essays are worthless. On the other side, this leads to lose of the interest for advancing their achievement.

Second, apparently, the feedback lacks to focus on aspects in the essays which are done positively and this is not in correlation with Kerr's (2020) advices. The feedback leans on the exact words Wiggins (2012) recommends to be evaded.

Third, it is evident that nearly all the comments relate to the grammar, more precisely to the orthographic and punctuation rules and the organizational essay parts, which is understandable considering that the three essay parts and the orthographic/punctuation mistakes are easy to be noticed and that precise criteria and indicators can be made for them. Only in three cases, the feedback reflects on ideas, style, and content. However, regarding the essay organization, teacher can solely determine that the three main segments of the essay are present, i.e. that the student divides the assignment into



three main parts. Statements referring to the ideas, style, and content demonstrate the student's logical, critical, and creative thinking, capabilities for evaluation, competencies to organize data into a coherent whole and these are, in fact, process skills for which precise and detailed feedback cannot be provided due to the students' and teachers' own beliefs, understanding, opinion and attitudes and due to the complex essays' nature. This is in line with the research of Talevski & Jansuheva (2011), and Janusheva, Pejchnovska-Stojkovikj & Talevski (2021) and proves that subjective factors govern the feedback as well.

Fourth, although the feedback refers to a particular misunderstanding and it seems concrete and precise enough, none has corrective nature, i.e. meaning that none contains further direction which lead the student to undertake actions in order to improve the detected shortcoming. This way, the feedback becomes useless. Even more, there is an example where the feedback offers a solutions for the identified downsides which is strictly what the feedback should not do because the feedback essence is exactly the opposite, i.e. it should give the students directions and guide them toward the actions they have to take in order to enhance their attainments. For instance, instead of directing them, the feedback says that the word svati should be written with f and not with v; or the feedback asks the students to be alert on the sentence structure, but no further comments are given which will tell the students which aspects of the sentence are not good enough and which should be corrected. The students may comprehend that all the sentences are not written well although that may not be the case.

## 5. Conclusion

The research results indisputably showcase that the feedback in the analyzed essays does not fulfill its goals and that it is not in correlation with the theoretical insights on how the feedback should be provided. Bearing in mind that the feedback is the essence of the teaching and learning processes, the research outcomes, by no means, suggest that the teachers simplify the feedback, especially the wording by using the phrase be careful, and concentrate only on the students' shortcomings. That leads to a main conclusion, i.e. the teachers need to have knowledge and skills in order to provide effective feedback which will be corrective and will take into account the improvement of the students' attainments.

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