

Assessing & Improving Open Class Feedback

This article for ESL lesson observers looks at some of the issues new teachers have with open class task feedback and ways the lesson can be improved. The article identifies the key issues with task feedback and the difficulties teachers have with more learner-centered approaches.

Traditionally, many new teachers start by conducting post-task feedback with their learners in the following way:

1. Teacher gives input
2. Learners work on a cloze task in pairs, groups, or solo with a time limit.
3. The teacher hovers, monitoring from afar, waiting for learners to finish, perhaps using the time to catch up on admin or set up the next task. The teacher does not engage with the learners unless they are very stuck or have finished before the others and need 'managing' in order to stop them from disturbing other groups. The teacher sees their task as letting learners work independently, getting on with the task.
4. When most learners have finished, the teacher moves to the front of the class and asks in open class, 'what is the answer to number 1?', and then proceeds to check each answer in open class. The teacher acknowledges correct answers and corrects the wrong ones. Sometimes the answers are written on the board for clarity.

The teacher often closes the task by asking who got most/least or some right or wrong. The feedback stage can be longer than the actual task.

In interviews, teachers say that they feel happy and secure with this approach; it is a time during which they feel knowledgeable and safe in their 'expert' role. They have the correct answers from the teacher's book, and the students are either right or wrong. Many new teachers have learned this method from their own schools, and see it as excellent practice, something to aspire to. It is, I sometimes suspect the desired place as it fits with our image of a teacher leading their class, holding the knowledge. For the new teacher, the management appears straightforward, and they feel safe in control.

This approach to task feedback can work; it is sometimes necessary to do feedback in open class. However, there are many issues with it; for example, while the teacher is waiting for the learners to complete the task, they are not necessarily:

- Assessing the precise language difficulties for the group
- Using it as an opportunity to provide individual support, help for weaker learners or extension for stronger ones
- Setting up stronger students to help weaker ones or using learners to spread knowledge across the group
- Feeding in minor points to save later, lengthy whole class explanations

All of the above can work to modify the final open class work, allowing the teacher to abbreviate the feedback, focus only on the parts where help is needed, create an additional practice or reteach some of the input.

There are other issues with the approach that an observer can pick up on;

- The pace can drag in feedback, mainly if the teacher has not accurately assessed the learner issues and gives equal time to what is unknown and known!
- A lack of collegial support, with rather a daunting or over-competitive atmosphere
- Learners focus on task completion rather than learning from the task
- The balance of power being with the teacher, who is a 'distant expert' rather than a more equal collaborator.

The potential for chaos is high. For example:

Teacher *What is the answer to number 1 please?*
Student 1 *'has saw'*
Teacher *No, it is 'has seen'. And the answer to number 2 please Angelina?*
Student 2 *I not know*
Teacher *It is 'has visited.' Please write it down.*

By this point Student 1 has missed the answer to number 2 as he was correcting his answer to number 1. Therefore, he asks his neighbor resulting in them both missing the answer to number 3. By the time the teacher has reached the last answer, it is unlikely that anyone has a complete set of answers. At this point, students might even give up trying to get all the answers right because they know the teacher is not aware of who knows what.

This open class feedback model is a widespread approach with some teachers, some of whom use it for every task. As an observer, you can provide effective alternative approaches that are more learner-centered and arguably a more efficient use of valuable classroom time

Viral Task Feedback – An Alternative Model

'Viral' feedback is based on the idea of spreading ideas and information across a group, from person to person rather than using open class feedback where everything is filtered through the teacher. Viral feedback involves the teacher working in and with the group while they are on-task. The teacher is an active member of the group, listening and checking to assess issues, feeding in some answers, coaching those with the correct answers to teach others, challenging stronger learners, and giving on the spot feedback about what answers are correct or not.

During viral feedback, the teacher may:

- Successfully manage the whole group, bringing them to task completion more or less together
- Support weaker learners by giving individual support
- Challenge stronger learners by identifying which answers are wrong
- Identify areas of tasks that the majority struggle with

- Get peers to help each other

Viral feedback benefits include:

- time for individual learner support and attention
- a more collegial, supportive atmosphere
- efficient use of expensive teacher time – the teacher is on-task and not just waiting for students to complete the work
- more accurate assessment of where learners need support which leads to more focussed input from the teacher
- better pace as more learners are on task
- correct answers being circulated around the group, so there is a greatly reduced need for a final run-through of the answers

- teacher in a more reactive role, responding to actual need, creating a more empowered classroom atmosphere.

Tips for the Lesson Observer

If the teacher is experienced and is used to using viral feedback the lesson feels 'fluid,' relaxed, and productive. However, for teachers newer to the process there are potential issues that teachers struggle with

A key issue is the lack of clarity in staging so that everything becomes 'blurry', not being clear when one stage has finished, and another started. In this case, the teacher probably has assessed that the group has grasped the key points, and it is time to move on but does not make this clear to the group who do not necessarily realize that the task is complete, with some still wanting to check answers or go over other points.

In this case, we suggest a 3-stage task close down:

- I. Teacher steps back, get class attention, and ask if there are any further questions before moving on.
- II. Teacher gives overall task feedback, perhaps to highlight the main point of task or give praise
- III. Teacher explains how the next task is linked to the cloze, perhaps as another practice and moves on.

The teacher has to be prepared to know the answers and be able to answer unplanned questions about exercise. Many teachers will not have done the task themselves beforehand, so we encourage new teachers to do the task themselves and also to explain to the learner why an answer is correct or not.

Some teachers realize that they need to engage while learners are on task, but they are not sure how to do it so they can take over the task and end up micro-teaching each pair, repeating themselves over and over. Often the pace will drop as groups wait for the teacher to make their

way around the room. In this case, we encourage the teacher to help one pair then set up them up to help others.

Other teachers tend to 'drift around,' getting close to the learners but not listening, assessing, or providing support. In this case, we ask them to engage in a low-key manner, demonstrate that they are listening.

Teachers can get stuck with one pair, usually the weaker ones, at the cost of monitoring or supporting the whole group. We encourage them to pull back regularly and 'scope the room' to assess where everyone else is up to and if anyone else needs attention.

Some teachers can manage viral feedback but then still do a lengthy open class report back at the end. In this case, the observer can ask why they feel it is necessary.



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