



Formative Feedback and Learner Autonomy in English Language Teaching: Methodological Conditions for Active Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of formative feedback in developing learner autonomy in English language teaching at the higher education level. The issue is relevant because modern language education requires students not only to complete classroom tasks, but also to understand their own learning process, evaluate progress and make conscious decisions about further improvement. The study is based on the methodological assumption that feedback becomes effective when it does not merely correct errors, but guides learners toward self-regulation, reflection and purposeful language practice. Hattie and Timperley's feedback model is useful here because it treats feedback as information that should clarify learning goals, current performance and the next steps in learning. Learner autonomy is also a key theoretical reference, since Holec's classical work defines it as the learner's capacity to take responsibility for learning decisions. The thesis argues that formative feedback, when systematically organized, can strengthen students' motivation, self-assessment skills and active participation in English language learning.

Key words: English language teaching, formative feedback, learner autonomy, self-regulation, higher education, language teaching methodology.

Introduction

In contemporary English language teaching, the teacher's role is gradually moving from simple knowledge transmission toward learning management, guidance and developmental support. This shift is especially important in higher education, where students are expected to become more independent, reflective and responsible for their own academic progress. Language learning cannot be effective if students only receive marks at the end of a lesson or course. They need continuous information about what they have achieved, what remains weak and how they can improve their performance.

Formative feedback serves this methodological purpose. It differs from final evaluation because its main function is not to judge the learner, but to support learning while the process is still developing. In language classes, this means that feedback should help students notice errors, understand the reason behind them, revise their output and apply the correction in later communicative tasks. Hattie and Timperley stress that feedback may strongly

influence learning, but its effect depends on how it is given and how learners use it. This point is essential for language methodology: feedback should not be reduced to teacher comments such as “good”, “incorrect” or “try again”. It should provide direction.

Learner autonomy gives feedback a deeper methodological meaning. A student who waits only for the teacher’s correction remains dependent on external control. An autonomous learner, by contrast, gradually learns to identify personal difficulties, choose strategies, monitor progress and evaluate results. Holec’s concept of autonomy remains relevant because it connects language learning with the learner’s responsibility for decisions related to learning. In English language teaching, this responsibility may include setting vocabulary goals, revising grammar problems, selecting reading strategies, improving pronunciation, or planning speaking practice outside the classroom.

The connection between feedback and autonomy becomes productive when feedback is organized as a cycle. The teacher first clarifies the expected result of the task. Then students perform the task and receive specific comments on content, accuracy, coherence, vocabulary choice, pronunciation or interactional behaviour. After that, learners revise their work, compare the revised version with the first attempt and reflect on the improvement. Such a cycle turns feedback into a learning mechanism rather than a formal correction procedure.

Self-regulated learning theory supports this approach. Zimmerman describes self-regulated learners as active participants in their own learning process, especially in terms of goal-setting, strategy use and self-monitoring. In English language teaching, these elements can be developed through short reflection sheets, correction logs, peer-review tasks, learning portfolios and individual progress plans. These tools are methodologically useful because they make students observe their own learning behaviour instead of passively waiting for the teacher’s final assessment.

Digital learning environments also create new possibilities for formative feedback. Online platforms, shared documents, recorded speaking tasks and learning management systems allow teachers to provide written, oral or audio-visual comments more regularly. The CEFR framework recognizes online interaction as an important dimension of modern communication, especially because digital spaces involve multimodality and remote interaction. For language teaching methodology, this means that feedback can be extended beyond the classroom and integrated into students’ independent learning practice.

However, formative feedback has limitations if it is used mechanically. Excessive correction may discourage students, while vague praise does not help them improve. Peer feedback may also become superficial if students are not trained to use clear criteria. Therefore, feedback should be criterion-based, respectful, specific and connected with the learning objective. A useful comment should show the learner where the problem is, why it matters and what concrete action should follow.

For the “Language Teaching Methodology” section of the conference, this topic is significant because it focuses on the practical organization of English language teaching. It does not treat feedback as a general pedagogical slogan. It examines feedback as a methodological tool that can improve classroom interaction, learner independence and the quality of language practice. In higher education, where students must prepare for academic, professional and intercultural communication, autonomy is not an optional quality; it is a necessary condition for sustainable language development.

In conclusion, formative feedback can become an effective methodological instrument in English language teaching if it is linked with learner autonomy and self-regulation. Its value lies not in the number of comments given by the teacher, but in the learner’s ability to understand, process and use those comments for further progress. A language class that develops this ability prepares students not only to pass examinations, but also to continue learning beyond the classroom.

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