

From Assessment To Empowerment: Using Student Feedback To Shape EFL Teaching

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of student feedback in shaping English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction within a university classroom setting. Grounded in action research methodology, the investigation analyzes qualitative data gathered through weekly anonymous feedback forms, reflective teaching journals, and semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal that when student input is systematically integrated into instructional decision-making, it enhances lesson clarity, increases learner engagement, and strengthens student autonomy. Participants reported feeling more empowered and motivated as their feedback led to tangible changes in teaching strategies, such as adjusted lesson pacing and the introduction of more interactive activities. The research also highlights the development of students' feedback literacy and the positive shift in classroom dynamics when learner voice is acknowledged. While challenges such as vague responses and cultural reluctance to critique authority were noted, these were addressed through scaffolding and feedback training. The study concludes that student feedback, when used as a formative practice, can be a powerful tool for creating inclusive, adaptive, and learner-centered EFL environments.

Keywords: English for foreign language, student feedback, EFL teaching

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Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, assessment has long been used as a method to evaluate learner performance, typically through standardized tests, quizzes, and summative evaluations. However, this traditional assessment model often places learners in a passive role, where their voices are minimally considered in shaping instruction. Over the last decade, there has been a pedagogical shift towards more student-centered approaches, in which learners are not only the subject of assessment but active contributors to the teaching and learning process (Black & Wiliam, 2009). One key component of this shift is the integration of student feedback as a formative tool to empower learners and inform instructional practices.

Student feedback offers rich insights into the learning experience from the perspective of the learners themselves. When collected systematically and used meaningfully, feedback can highlight the strengths and weaknesses of classroom instruction, learning materials, teacher communication, and overall engagement strategies (Carless & Boud, 2018). By valuing student perspectives, teachers can make evidence-based adjustments that align more closely with learner needs. This process not only improves learning outcomes but also enhances the relational dynamics in the classroom by establishing a feedback loop that fosters trust and mutual respect (Wiliam, 2011).

Moreover, engaging students in reflective feedback practices supports their feedback literacy—their ability to understand, interpret, and act on feedback. Feedback literacy is increasingly seen as a core competence in 21st-century learning, particularly in language education where students must take responsibility for lifelong improvement (Molloy et al., 2020). When students are invited to give feedback to their teachers, it reinforces their role as active agents and critical thinkers, fostering greater motivation and self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

In EFL contexts, where learners often come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the use of student feedback also serves to democratize the classroom. It allows for adjustments that are more culturally responsive and context-sensitive. Despite its potential, the practice of collecting and implementing student feedback remains underutilized, especially in language learning settings where teacher authority is culturally emphasized (Yu & Liu, 2021). Therefore, this article explores how structured student feedback can be used not only to assess but also to empower learners and inform effective pedagogical decisions in EFL teaching.

This paper investigates how EFL teachers can transform their classrooms by incorporating student feedback as a core practice. It focuses on practical approaches to collecting feedback, strategies for analyzing and implementing it, and the overall impact on student motivation, engagement, and learning ownership. By moving from traditional assessment models to a feedback-driven, empowerment-oriented approach, EFL teachers can create more inclusive and responsive learning environments where both teachers and students thrive.

Literature Review

In recent years, the role of feedback in education has undergone significant transformation—from a teacher-centered mechanism of correction to a student-centered tool for development and empowerment. The literature on formative assessment, feedback literacy, and learner agency strongly supports the view that incorporating student feedback into instructional design is not only beneficial but necessary for responsive and effective EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching.

Historically, assessment in EFL classrooms has been summative, focused on evaluating what learners know at the end of instruction. However, scholars such as Black and Wiliam (1998, 2009) have argued for a shift toward formative assessment, where assessment is integrated into everyday teaching to inform learning and guide improvement. This form of assessment relies on continuous, dialogic interaction between students and teachers, often through feedback mechanisms. In this context, student feedback is not merely a reaction to instruction—it becomes a tool for improving it.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) categorize effective feedback as answering three essential questions: “Where am I going?”, “How am I going?”, and “Where to next?”. While their model was originally framed from a teacher-to-student perspective, more recent studies have adapted this framework to explore feedback flowing from students to teachers. Carless and Boud (2018) emphasize the importance of dialogic feedback—a two-way exchange that promotes reflective teaching and learning. This dialogic process is especially important in EFL settings, where learners often struggle with confidence and need repeated exposure to meaningful communication.

An emerging theme in the literature is feedback literacy, which refers to students’ ability to understand, generate, and act upon feedback (Molloy, Boud, & Henderson, 2020). Feedback literacy empowers learners to play an active role in the feedback process, not just as recipients but as co-constructors of knowledge. Nicol (2020) argues that learners who understand the purpose and potential of feedback are better equipped to monitor their own progress and communicate their learning needs. In EFL contexts, this contributes to learners’ self-regulated learning skills, which are essential for language acquisition.

The concept of student voice is central to recent pedagogical models that aim to humanize learning and foster agency. Fielding (2004) suggests that listening to student perspectives enhances engagement, improves relationships, and strengthens democratic learning environments. In language classrooms, where the goal is communicative competence, involving students in feedback not only supports instructional relevance but also models the very communicative skills students are

expected to develop. Learner-centered approaches that integrate student feedback help shift power dynamics and promote learner autonomy (Little, 2007).

Despite its benefits, implementing student feedback in EFL classrooms presents several challenges. Cultural factors, particularly in Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, can inhibit students from giving open or critical feedback due to the perception of teacher authority (Yu & Liu, 2021). Teachers may also feel uncertain about how to interpret or act on feedback constructively, especially when it is vague or emotionally charged. Therefore, a structured approach to designing feedback opportunities is crucial—such as using anonymous surveys, guided reflections, or peer-led discussions.

The literature makes clear that when effectively implemented, student feedback can enhance the quality of instruction, foster motivation, and create more inclusive and responsive classrooms. Studies by Gan, Hyland, and Lee (2023) reveal that EFL students who are regularly asked for feedback feel more engaged, more autonomous, and more satisfied with their learning. Furthermore, teachers who reflect on student feedback report increased professional growth and adaptability. This aligns with Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experiential learning, which emphasizes reflection and mutual adaptation as core elements of teaching.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative action research design aimed at exploring how structured student feedback can be utilized to inform and enhance the teaching practices of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Action research was chosen for its reflective and iterative nature, which aligns with the study's focus on using feedback to make real-time instructional adjustments (Burns, 2010). The research was conducted over an eight-week period in an intermediate-level EFL writing class at a private university in Indonesia. The class consisted of 28 undergraduate students (aged 18–22) enrolled in an English Language Education program. All participants had prior experience with writing instruction and were familiar with basic academic writing genres such as descriptive, narrative, and argumentative essays.

To capture student perspectives and evaluate how feedback influenced teaching strategies, the study employed several data collection instruments, including weekly anonymous feedback forms distributed at the end of each week, a reflective teaching journal maintained by the instructor (who also served as the researcher), and end-of-course semi-structured interviews with eight randomly selected and voluntary student participants. The feedback forms contained open-ended questions, such as which part of the lesson was most helpful, what could be improved, and whether the instructions and materials were clear. The reflective journal documented instructional decisions, responses to student feedback, and perceived changes in student engagement. The interviews were conducted in English with clarification in Bahasa Indonesia when needed, lasting 15–20 minutes and covering students' perceptions of feedback practices, emotional responses, and perceived classroom improvements.

In the first week, students were informed about the study's purpose and signed consent forms. During Weeks 2 to 7, the weekly feedback forms were distributed every Friday, reviewed by the instructor over the weekend, and used to make instructional adjustments for the following week, such as modifying the pace of lessons, incorporating peer review sessions, or simplifying rubrics. Teaching journal entries were written weekly to record observations and instructional changes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Week 8, recorded, and transcribed for further analysis.

The data from the feedback forms were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring themes such as clarity of instruction, student engagement, lesson pacing, and the usefulness of feedback. Interview transcripts were also thematically analyzed and compared with the patterns found in the feedback forms. The teaching journal served as a triangulation source to validate student perceptions with the instructor's reflections and classroom observations. This study adhered to ethical research standards by preserving participant anonymity through the use of

pseudonyms, securing all collected data, and ensuring voluntary participation without any academic consequences for students who chose to opt out.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings based on data gathered from weekly student feedback forms, semi-structured interviews, and the instructor's reflective journal. Three major themes emerged: instructional clarity and responsiveness, student engagement and motivation, and development of learner voice and autonomy.

Instructional Clarity and Responsiveness

One of the most consistent themes in the weekly feedback was the students' appreciation for adjustments made based on their input. In the early weeks, several students commented on the pacing being "too fast," especially during grammar instruction. In response, the instructor slowed down the lessons and added peer support activities. This resulted in fewer complaints in subsequent weeks and increased student satisfaction.

"I liked that the teacher changed the lesson speed when we said it was too fast. It made me feel like my opinion mattered." (Student 5, Week 4 feedback)

This finding supports Carless and Boud's (2018) assertion that student feedback can be a practical tool for formative adaptation in teaching. The ability to respond to learners' needs in real time is a hallmark of responsive pedagogy, which in turn fosters trust and strengthens the teacher-student relationship (Wiliam, 2011).

Student Engagement and Motivation

Students consistently reported feeling more engaged and motivated when their suggestions were acknowledged and implemented. Several responses indicated that having a space to express their needs created a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. Engagement increased notably when interactive elements such as peer feedback and group writing activities were introduced as a result of student suggestions.

"I enjoyed this week more because we did group editing, not only listening to the teacher. It helped me understand better." (Student 9, Week 6 feedback)

This aligns with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) framework, which argues that meaningful feedback enhances self-regulated learning, leading students to take more ownership of their learning process. In this case, the iterative feedback loop led to more dynamic and learner-centered classroom practices.

Development of Learner Voice and Autonomy

The semi-structured interviews revealed that students felt empowered by the feedback process. Several expressed surprise that their teacher had acted on their feedback, which they had not experienced in previous classes. This newfound learner agency encouraged students to reflect more deeply on their own needs and learning preferences.

"I never thought my opinion could change the class. Before, I just followed the teacher. But now, I feel part of the class planning." (Interviewee 3)

This reflects Fielding's (2004) theory on student voice, where feedback mechanisms are not just about improving instruction but also about empowering learners as stakeholders in the learning process. Moreover, this resonates with the cultural challenges discussed by Yu and Liu (2021), who noted that in Asian EFL settings, students are often reluctant to provide feedback due to hierarchical norms. In this study, anonymity and the regularity of feedback collection reduced those barriers.

Challenges and Reflections

Despite positive outcomes, the study revealed some challenges. Some students gave vague or overly positive feedback, possibly due to unfamiliarity with giving constructive criticism.

Additionally, the teacher noted occasional difficulty in balancing all feedback with curriculum goals and time constraints.

To address this, students were given mini-lessons on how to give helpful feedback in Weeks 3 and 4, which improved the specificity and usefulness of their comments. This echoes Molloy et al. (2020), who emphasize that feedback literacy must be developed alongside the practice of giving feedback.

Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Insights
Instructional Clarity	Feedback helped adjust pace and focus, improving comprehension.
Engagement and Motivation	Student-centered activities enhanced motivation and attention.
Learner Voice and Autonomy	Students felt valued and more responsible for their learning journey.
Feedback Challenges	Some students needed support to give clear and critical feedback.

Conclusions

This study highlights the transformative potential of student feedback in shaping effective, responsive EFL teaching practices. By creating structured opportunities for learners to express their experiences, needs, and concerns, teachers can make data-informed decisions that significantly enhance the classroom environment. The incorporation of student feedback was found to promote greater instructional clarity, boost student engagement, and foster a sense of ownership over the learning process. Moreover, the results demonstrate that when students perceive their voices are heard and valued, they become more motivated and participatory. This shift from passive recipients of instruction to active contributors cultivates a learner-centered environment that supports both academic growth and personal development.

For EFL educators, the implications are clear: feedback should not be confined to summative assessments or one-way communication. Rather, it should be integrated as an ongoing, formative practice that encourages dialogue, reflection, and mutual growth. Teachers must also support students in developing feedback literacy—helping them learn how to give, receive, and act upon feedback constructively. Institutionally, schools and universities can foster this approach by providing professional development opportunities in formative assessment and feedback implementation. Establishing a culture of responsiveness and student voice in language education can lead to more inclusive, democratic, and effective teaching environments. Future research may explore longitudinal effects of continuous student feedback across different levels of EFL instruction, as well as its impact on measurable academic outcomes. Nonetheless, the findings of this study support a pedagogical shift: from assessment as judgment to assessment as empowerment.

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