From 'Plodder' to 'Creative': feedback in teacher education

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This article discusses the case study of four student teachers, examining the ways in which a particular kind of feedback – namely, confirmatory feedback – can act as a catalyst for some of the learning and potential change student teachers in a teaching practice group may experience on an initial teacher education programme. It illustrates how one piece of confirmatory feedback given to the student teacher, Jake, during post-observation feedback sessions has been influential not just for him but also for his peers. The article shows how this kind of feedback can be particularly effective when it is specific and detailed. It also exemplifies confirmatory feedback and considers the implications of such feedback for the field of teacher education.

Introduction

Extract 1 below is taken from a post-observation feedback session during which I (as the teacher educator / researcher) am discussing a lesson that Jake, one of my four student teachers (Jake, Lisa, Marie and Sam)[1] has taught on a teacher training course.

Extract 1

001	Marie	**You're SO natural.**
002	Lisa	Yeah (4.0) I was saying to Marie earlier, that to think about cutting up the, I don't know whether you thought about that yourself or whether it came from a book I don't know.
005	Jake	No, no, it wasn't. I=
006	Lisa	=It wasn't, no, cutting up the telephone numbers, getting them to meet with each other, and then to do a different=
008	Nur+Sam	=Hmm
009	Lisa	**I thought it was just EXcellent.**
010	Nur	**Yes, it's a ↑ LOVEly idea.** The only thing was that it actually took longer than it should have.
012	Jake	YES ((*instant agreement*))
013	Nur	Because of the instructions – it comes down to the instructions as you were saying, whereas **the idea's ↑ wonderful. Very creative.**
015	Marie	**Yes.** You're going to get=
016	Nur	=**You should write a book about classroom management techniques,** ((*laughter from all group*)) **grouping activities. Really. It's lovely yes.**
018	Marie	**Its variance as well.**
019	Nur	That was Claire's activity, but he'd adapted it.
020	Lisa	**EXACTly.**
021	Marie	**It's wonderful.**

Teaching practice (TP) and post-observation feedback form an essential part of many initial teacher training courses. Through observed TP, and tutor and peer feedback, student teachers can be provided with opportunities to develop and progress. This article explores and exemplifies the process of feedback - that is the talk between the teacher educator and the student teachers – (see 'feedback as a process' – Copland 2010). It uses the case study of a group of four student teachers (Jake, Lisa, Marie, and Sam) to examine the ways in which a particular kind of feedback – namely, confirmatory feedback – can act as a catalyst for some of the learning and potential change student teachers in a TP group may experience.

The article adopts Egan's (2002) terminology of confirmatory feedback from the field of counselling. Egan's definition was adapted for the teacher education context and defined as positive feedback in the form of praise, or confirmation, and possibly reassurance that something went well or was effective (see Kurtoglu-Hooton 2008 and 2010). This 'something' is likely to involve a teaching skill, a teacher quality, some teacher behaviour, or even a decision the teacher may have taken during TP. In essence it provides 'a pat on the back'. In Extract 1 above, Jake is praised by his peers, in particular by Lisa and Marie, and also by myself, the teacher educator/ researcher, for being 'natural' in the classroom and for using creative ideas and effective classroom management techniques (highlighted in bold in the extract). They are all examples of confirmatory feedback. The extract also has examples of corrective feedback,[2] in this instance the lengthy instructions and effect these had on the length of an activity. However, corrective feedback is not the focus of this article.

Group feedback sessions on initial teacher training courses (such as the four-week intensive ones that this study was based on) tend to involve group discussion of the TP of three to four teachers who have taught individually and who have had the opportunity to observe one another teach. The feedback

sessions on such courses require the teacher educator to lead the session, ensuring that the individual lesson of each teacher is discussed.

Literature review

There is a lack of analysis of confirmatory feedback in the literature surrounding language teacher education. Studies which can be applied to teacher education contexts come from fields such as counselling and appreciative inquiry.

Heron's (2001) Six Category Intervention Analysis, a framework that can be used by anyone involved in giving advice or feedback to others (Randall and Thornton 2001: 77), provides a useful system for teacher educators. The intervention categories range from prescriptive, informative and confronting (all of which are classified under authoritative intervention) to cathartic, catalytic and supportive (referred to as types of facilitative intervention). Teacher educators can make use of the different intervention categories in their work with student teachers.

Teacher educators could also call upon a methodology called appreciative pedagogy (see Yballe and O'Connor 2000: 476). This is a pedagogical adaptation of appreciative inquiry, a philosophy for change which adopts the positive principle of 'the more positive the inquiry the more it endures' (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987: 237-8). Instead of taking a problem-solving approach, appreciative inquiry starts by appreciating and valuing the best of what is. It takes the stance that energy tends to be heightened as well as invested more productively 'when directed toward discovery of what works rather than what does not work – for what works contains the seed that might transform' (Yballe and O'Connor op.cit.: 476). This view can be usefully applied to the teacher education context and, in particular, to the use of confirmatory feedback, which also focuses on what works well and why it

works well. Egan's (op.cit.: 303) advice, too, is in line with such a view: 'Provide positive feedback and make it as specific as corrective feedback', as confirmatory feedback strengthens a person's 'self-efficacy by emphasizing their strengths and reinforcing what they do well' (ibid.).

The research

The study reported here investigated student teachers' views of peer and teacher educator feedback received on their TP. It was conducted during two separate one-month, 100-hour, initial teacher training courses (similar to the CELTA) at a UK university. These courses involved a TP element, during which student teachers were required to teach real language learners who join English classes on a voluntary basis.

The data discussed in this article have been taken from a larger qualitative study which involved 21 student teachers and three teacher educators, and which made use of student teacher diaries, my research diary, observation of the student teachers in class, video recordings of the student teachers' lessons, field notes, audio recordings of feedback sessions (which were all transcribed), teacher educators' written feedback on TP, student teachers' critical incidents' from TP, and also an end-of-course questionnaire.

Method

The research reported in this article used a case-study approach that involves 'the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case' (Stake, 1995: xi). Due to limitations of space, the findings from only the following data sources can be reported here: student teacher diaries, audio-recordings of feedback sessions, end-of-course questionnaire, and post-course emails. For

the same reason, only a limited number of examples can be given from within the case study itself.

During the course, student teachers were encouraged to keep a diary on a daily basis. In my role as teacher educator, I had access to these, collecting them on the Monday of each week and returning them by the Friday of the same week. Keeping a diary encouraged the student teachers to reflect on their learning experiences on the course and provided a dialogue between themselves and the teacher educator.

The end-of-course questionnaire was in several parts. One part was devoted to post observation feedback in particular and invited the candidates to:

> 7c. Think back to all the six teaching practice feedback sessions you have had. Choose one piece of feedback you received (from tutor or peer) that you found significant in some way.
> Comment on why you found it particularly significant and what effect the feedback may have had on you.

The wording that was used in the statement was kept neutral so as not to bias the student teacher to choose a particular kind of piece of feedback. All that was sought was the kind of feedback that had been significant for the student teacher, and s/he was invited to justify her/his choice.

Findings

This section discusses some of the experiences of Jake, Lisa, Marie and Sam who worked together in the TP element of the course. Marie and Sam were recent graduates while Lisa and Jake were older. None of them had any formal teaching experience prior to joining the course.

In Extract 2, Jake's response to question 7c (see above) in the end-of-course questionnaire was:

Extract 2

> **This may seem minor BUT to be told I am 'creative' has had
> enormous effects! This creativeness hasn't obviously just
> happened.** However in the past probably because of others'
> feedback, I would have described myself as a 'bit of a plodder'
> who needed permission to do anything out of the mainstream.
> **To find I am perceived creative by people has been a bit of a
> 'life changer'.**

His choice of vocabulary - phrases such as 'may seem minor BUT' and 'he
has had enormous effects' - is a clear indication that the feedback Jake
received about himself as a person and about the success of his grouping
technique in that particular TP feedback session, seems to have had a
transformative effect on him as evidenced in his final sentence. Regular
correspondence with all the teachers in the group encouraged me to explore
Jake's comments further. When I emailed him after the course to ask about
the ways in which the feedback may have been a 'life changer' for him, this is
what he wrote in response (Extract 3):

Extract 3

> I have always been perceived as a 'Plodder'. 'Want something
> doing?' ask Jake, he'll stick at it, get it done and it will be done in
> the 'correct' way, not quick, because he sticks to 'the rules' is
> probably how I have always been seen. Well that is my
> perception of how I have been seen! **To be suddenly, and it was
> sudden to me! described as 'Creative' not once but a number
> of times, and not by just one person (honest!) changed the
> whole way I think about myself. It has not only restored some
> of my self respect but also given me confidence to actually put
> forward ideas, and opinions, that in the past I would have
> kept to myself.** I would have kept them to myself on the basis
> that I was a 'plodder' and plodders' ideas whilst not worthless are
> never new, inventive, creative […] so not worth airing, who
> would listen anyway! **The 'Creative' comment has also given
> me confidence to try out new ideas, whether I am confident**

> **they will work or not.** Something I would have been loath to do prior to the course.

In this extract Jake is comparing his newly found self with how (in his opinion) he had always been perceived to be. His belief is that the consistent reference to his creativity in the post-observation feedback sessions ('not by just one person', i.e. by the teacher educator but also by all his peers, Lisa, Marie and Sam) has helped him regain his self-respect and encouraged him to try new ideas 'whether they will work or not'. His comments are significant in that they signal how he changed the way he perceives himself, how he was able to dismiss focusing on the negative image the word 'Plodder' brings with it, and how instead he was able to adopt a more positive self-image. Jake's newly found confidence has given him the courage to move forwards in a way that involves putting forward new ideas and opinions, which he states he would not have ventured previously.

It was not only Jake who had been influenced by the confirmatory feedback he had received on his TP. The diary entry of Jake's peer, Lisa, happened to use the 'creativity' comment as a starting point for the learning she had been experiencing on the course (see Extract 4), for at the end of the second week of the course, she had written, in her course diary the following about her peer Jake:

Extract 4

> During the feedback sessions, I watch one of my peers teaching and I think to myself 'he is so imaginative'. We had a discussion about this in one of the feedback sessions and **I realised how important it is to be creative as it helps to stimulate the students and helps to reinforce points.** However, I know that I am not a creative person. I am a methodical person and prefer to have things set out and simply follow instructions. Unfortunately, sticking rigidly to the workbooks is not always effective. It is good to be creative and use a variety of activities to keep students interested. Therefore, this is an area I know I will

have to work very hard on as it does not come naturally to
me.

The 'peer' referred to by Lisa in Extract 4 above was easily identifiable by me as being Jake, whose creativity was praised in more than one feedback session. Extract 4 shows that confirmatory feedback Jake had received made Lisa compare her own tendencies and preferences in the classroom with what she observed in her peer's lesson and liked. She reflects on the ways in which the teacher's creativity could benefit the learners and is willing to see whether she can achieve being creative herself no matter how difficult it may be, as it 'does not come naturally for [her]'.

Her reflections show that although there is no shift in behaviour at the point when she had written the comments, there is evidence that her realization and awareness have led to a shift in her cognition; evidence that some learning is likely to have taken place.

The creativity comment that Jake had received was influential for Marie, too. She had written the comment below (Extract 5) in response to the invitation in the end-of-course questionnaire to: 'Comment on what you believe you have learnt from the group feedback session':

Extract 5

> **Jake has been praised for his creativity**. It makes his lessons lively, enjoyable and different. **I have observed how well his creativity works**, and that Nur, as an experienced EFL teacher, agrees. **I will now make a conscious effort to be more creative myself**, as I have discovered how successful it is. If my peers and I take hints and tips from each other, we can all help each other become better teachers.

As can be seen from her reflections, confirmatory feedback given to her peer (Jake) seem to have had an impact on Marie's own learning from feedback events, too. More specifically, the confirmatory feedback Jake received on his

creativity had encouraged Marie to reflect and try to find ways to become creative herself.

During the analysis of the data, I started wondering if the creativity comment had had a long lasting effect so I decided to contact Jake seven months after the course had ended. Contacting him also served as a way of member checking[3] as I invited his comments on a research article I had written which involved him as one of the informants. I wanted to ensure that he had been represented accurately in relation to the creativity comment. Extract 6 shows what he wrote back in terms of his newly found confidence:

Extract 6

> Spooky you should write today. Have just been practising my classroom management skills on a group of hard nosed Border Army Guards. We have been given the task of turning them from soldiers to Police Officers inside three months! With a wave of the hand the […] Government decreed that the borders would be manned by Police and not Army. […] I used pictures of vegetables to divide them up. […] It was great to see the change in attitude once I had attributed the various vegetables [sic.] characteristics to each group (Peppers group, hot stuff, Cool Cucumbers etc.) **I am not showing off, just another example of new found confidence!** 'You did what? Made these hot headed […] blokes with guns get into groups by choosing pictures of vegetables!' Believe you me they loved it!

In these comments Jake is exemplifying his 'new found' confidence by experimenting with ways of grouping his learners (Border Army Guards). The extract clearly shows that he was happy with his grouping technique as the reference he makes to the learners' attitude is a positive remark. Extracts 5 and 6 both show feedback acting as a trigger for positive self-image and as promoting positive self-esteem and a willingness to explore (Hitz and Driscoll, 1989). The feedback Jake had received on his creativity was confirmatory. His experiences of a new-found confidence are no doubt as a result of his improved self-image triggered by confirmatory feedback. Such experience is in keeping with Egan's (op.cit.: 303) belief that this kind of

feedback strengthens the person's 'self-efficacy' as the person's strengths are emphasized and as what s/he does well is reinforced especially 'when feedback is specific' (ibid.).

Of course, change may not be immediately observable. When it is, it may manifest itself at different levels, as change can be in behaviour, in conceptions, or in the person herself / himself, i.e. in self-efficacy (see Egan op.cit.). Jake no doubt experienced changes in behaviour and in conceptions as a result of the confirmatory and the corrective feedback he was given during the post-observation feedback sessions. It is, however, the changes he experienced as a person as a result of the confirmatory feedback that are evidenced in the extracts discussed above.

Discussion

The findings from my study illustrate that confirmatory feedback may help facilitate powerful teacher learning and change. There is enough evidence, even in the relatively few extracts provided within the confines of this article, to show that the value of this kind of feedback should not be underestimated and should be part of feedback sessions the same way corrective feedback often seems to be. The data extracts illustrate the way in which confirmatory feedback can actually boost confidence in the student teachers, give them confidence to try out new ideas, provide them with insight into new perspectives, and promote motivation to try alternatives. Indeed it can promote the kind of change I call 'divergent'. Divergent change (Kurtoglu-Hooton 2010) is the kind of growth that, triggered by positive feelings and or positive self-image, motivates a teacher to explore further challenges; it encourages the teacher to push their own boundaries and thus diverge rather than repeat what is already 'good as is'.

The post-observation feedback sessions can make use of Heron's (op.cit.) authoritative and facilitative intervention techniques and also be in keeping with appreciative inquiry and pedagogy. Of course, teacher educators have a responsibility to convey messages that help student teachers in their pursuit to learn. TP very often necessitates the formal evaluation of a teacher and this may mean that a 'pure' approach in appreciative inquiry may not be possible. The philosophy is nevertheless useful, especially if the learning of teaching is viewed as a mystery to be solved and post-observation feedback sessions are seen as the medium for all participants – the student teachers and the teacher educators – to explore common visions of what constitutes effective teaching.

Some Conclusions and Recommendations

Feedback sessions naturally involve the discussion of what went well in a lesson (the confirmatory) as well as what and the way in which it could be improved (the corrective). In the same way, the latter is usually discussed in detail with specific examples from the teacher's lesson, the former, too, needs to be specific and detailed so as not to be 'perfunctory' (Egan op.cit.: 303).

Teacher educators have a responsibility to their profession and, of course, their student teachers, so they will inevitably have to give corrective feedback in order to satisfy summative assessment requirements and to help student teachers develop more generally. However, this should not be at the expense of confirmatory feedback. In other words, confirmatory feedback should not be compromised. It should feature in our teacher educator feedback discourse in a genuine manner. Extract 1 above shows the ways in which confirmatory feedback (the creativity shown by Jake) could feature alongside corrective feedback (time management issues) and that the former, too, can be detailed and specific.

As a teacher educator, I was curious to analyse the feedback data to identify some lexical items that may have signalled confirmatory feedback in the group feedback sessions. The analysis revealed the following examples of utterances:

> *What's quite striking in his lesson is …*
> *Another thing I was very impressed with in the lesson is …*
> *It was good to see …*
> *I have to say I was very impressed. […]*
> *I think it was a good idea to …*
> *A very nice thing came up. […]*
> *So you did the right thing by …*
>
> *[explanation of what was done well] Well done.*
> *… , which I think is wonderful.*

These lexical items signal that the feedback focus will be on something confirmatory and that the confirmatory feedback will be provided with some specific information and / or detail.

But, of course, confirmatory feedback should not be perfunctory and must range beyond these lexical items. It is the specific explanations of the confirmatory feedback that Jake received during the teacher training course that seem to have been a life changer for him, changing his perception of himself from Plodder with a capital P to Creative with a capital C.

Notes

1 All student teacher names are pseudonyms.

2 In this article, 'corrective feedback' describes the kind of feedback to student teachers that applies in situations where there was perhaps a better alternative for some skill that had been exhibited, for some teacher quality that was or was not revealed, or for some decision that did not work particularly well in the classroom context (see Kurtoglu-Hooton 2008).

3 'Member checking' is a procedure that a researcher can use to invite a participant to confirm whether data have been represented correctly when interpreted. The procedure helps strengthen the credibility of the research.

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Appendix

List of transcription conventions used

Bold text : emboldening added by the author/researcher to highlight important points in the extract

UPPER CASE/BOLD TEXT : indicates emphasis used in speech.

 (4.0): indicates the length of pause in seconds.

=: indicates where one utterance overlaps with the next.

⬆ : denotes raised pitch.

((*italic text*)): comment added by the researcher.

 ((***bold italic text***)) : comment added by the researcher (emboldening used for the same purpose as in 'Bold text' above).

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