

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN HE : FEEDBACK PRACTICES FROM UTM POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Formative assessment aids learning by generating feedback information. Feedback has been shown as one of the most potent influences on student learning and achievement. In Higher Education (HE), Assessment Feedback (AFB) enables postgraduate students to restructure understanding, skills and develop more powerful ideas and capabilities to meet HE standard. A focus on AFB practices among the lecturers from postgraduate students' perspective is pertinent in enhancing retention and completion especially on research study. Thus, this prelim study is to investigate mean differences and interactions of AFB practices on three dimensions (Timeliness, Meaningfulness, Specificity) in relation to gender, mode of study (Taught Course, Mixed Mode and Full Research) and Field of Study (Social Science, Science and Technology and Engineering). A sample of 37 postgraduate students who are currently pursuing their research studies in UTM was selected as the respondents. Assessment Feedback Practices Inventory (AFBI) was analyzed using the Rasch Measurement Model for reliability and validity, with a Cronbach Alpha reported of 0.96 for item reliability. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation and Spearman rho correlation coefficient). It was found that AFB practices are at the highest level for Meaningfulness ($M = 4.69$, $SD = .75$) followed by Timeliness ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .53$), and Specificity ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .55$). As for AFB forms practiced among lecturers, it was reported that verbal form ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.27$) practiced more compared to the written form ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .63$). Eighty-one percent prefers the feedback to be in both, verbal and written form. Another 10.8% prefers verbal, whereas a total of 8.1% prefers the feedback to be in written form. However, there are weak relationship between AFB and the independent factors (Gender, Mode of Study, and Field of Study). It is suggested that an assessment feedback standard form should be developed to further assist the students in term of the specificity of assessment feedback.

KEYWORDS: Formative Assessment; Assessment Feedback; Higher Education; Meaningful Feedback; Specific Feedback

INTRODUCTION

Despite of the upsurge education improvement made through Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the education system remains committed to develop students holistically; intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. The blueprint is a review done on Malaysia's education

system in order to improve the system better. The standard of students is set to have impact by encouraging students in shaping their own learning experience. Therefore, the standard of students in higher education is can be achieved by the practice of assessment feedback.

Assessment feedback should play its role in the learning process in order to improve on the teaching and learning process. Assessment feedback can be either formative or summative. Formative feedback is when students use the information to enhance learning and for the lecturers to re-align their teaching. Whereas, summative feedback is used to sum up the final judgment on students work [10]. Assessment feedback also helps students to polish skills like decision-making, critical thinking, and problem-solving. It is inevitably needed for a good teaching and learning process to take place. Hence, it is beneficial to consider the practice of assessment feedback among postgraduate students.

Constructivism extends students beyond content presented to them. In another words, the emphasis shifts from teaching to learning. The term ‘scaffolding’ was developed as a metaphor to describe the type of assistance offered by a lecturer or peer to support learning. In the process of scaffolding, the lecturer helps the student master a task or concept that the student is initially unable to grasp independently [16]. Of great importance is allowing the student to complete as much of the task as possible unassisted. Constructivism is a learning theory which emphasizes on problem-solving and understanding. It requires the use of authentic tasks, experiences, settings, and assessments [3].

Scaffolding refers to the particular kind of help, assistance and support that enables a student to do a task which they cannot quite manage on their own and which brings them closer to a state of competence that will enable them to carry out other similar tasks independently in the future [9]. Scaffolding refers to support that educators provide to the learner during problem solving- in the form of reminders, hints, and encouragement- to ensure successful completion of a task[11].

Assessment feedback is part of scaffolding since it provides information for the improvement and construction of knowledge assessment feedback, an information which comes in various forms with the purpose of motivating the students by informing how well they have done and how to improve. Feedback can be given in the form of verbal or written comment. Verbal comments can be done through personal conversations while written comments are those written on drafts and assignment papers or via e-mails responding to proposals or introductions [14].

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Assessment more often than not is defined as our past practice, but not by what is demanded and needed currently. We always associate assessment with examinations and we don’t really assess whether the students are really learning as in constructing their own knowledge or just merely rote learning. Feedback is a crucial part in the teaching and learning cycle. However, both lecturers and students feel disappointed due to the unclear and sometimes demoralizing assessment feedback. Even though feedback is given, it may lack of guidance on how to improve it[12]. However, it is common that students do not read lecturer’s feedback comment[5].

A research work is appropriate for a Constructivist course as stated that in Constructivism, students have a lot control over their own learning and the opportunity given to negotiate content, assignments, procedures, and deadlines[15]. In the view of sociocultural perspective, scaffolding is a collaborative process and involves negotiation of meaning between teacher and learner about expectations and how best to improve performance[13].

It was stated that only 4% articles' central focus was on individual learning needs, including aspects such as gender, culture, learning styles, and how individuals make sense and use feedback[6]. The literature done through ScienceDirect, MyTO, Taylor, and other related databases show little findings on assessment feedback done quantitatively among postgraduate students and non-specific on language learning.

A recent study by Ministry of Higher Education (SETARA, 2009) [14] shows that students yearn for more and quality feedback but lecturers at the university are often too busy which arises complaints from the students that the lecturers tend to be unapproachable and unconcern. Locally, there was also a case study of feedback in higher education was done with the aim to improve the quality of feedback and thus students' learning[14]

Thus, this research will take into account postgraduate students' perceptions on assessment feedback practice specifically on three dimensions namely timeliness, meaningfulness and specificity. In addition, this study will investigate their perception in relation to age, gender, mode of study(MOS) and field of study (FOS).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

One of the factors which seem to be of great importance in dealing with feedback is that it helps students to reconstruct their knowledge or skill what is desired[8]. It is crucial to look at assessment feedback desired and perceived by the students themselves.

Hence, the purpose of the study is to investigate the perception of postgraduate UTM students on assessment feedback. The researcher also seeks to determine the form of assessment feedback practiced among postgraduate and their preferences and also its relationship along the four factors which are gender, age, mode of study and field of study.

The objectives of the study are; 1) to identify the perception UTM postgraduate students towards assessment feedback from three important dimensions in their research study, 2) to investigate the form of assessment feedback practised by postgraduate students' supervisors in the form of verbal, written, or both, 3) to investigate the preference of assessment feedback form among postgraduate students, and 4) to investigate the relationship between the postgraduate students' perceptions factors; Gender, Mode of Study and Field of Study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilized cross-sectional survey design. This design is suitable for a large-scale assessment and appropriate for examining current attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or practices. A set of questionnaire was developed and distributed to 37 respondents[4].

The population for this study consists of 9760 postgraduate students of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai. This research employs the multi-stage cluster sampling method whereby the researcher at first narrowed down the population from 13 faculties according to their field is study namely; Social Science, Engineering, and Science and Technology. The respondents of this study were students who enrolled for their research study or dissertation for Semester 2 2013/2014. They were chosen on the basis that they are engaged with AFB throughout the research study or dissertation completion. The total number of sample for this preliminary study is 37 respondents.

Research Instrument

A set of questionnaire which consists of 37 questions was developed based on the objectives of the study. The research instrument utilizes a 6-points Likert-type Scale with and Frequency Scale to elicit response from the students. The researcher has removed the neutral point which is usually labelled as “unsure”, “uncertain”, or “neither”. Some researchers have suggested including a neutral point has the effect of reducing the percentage of positive responses.

The questionnaire is divided into five sections; 1) Section A: Demographic, 2) Section B: Perception on Assessment Feedback, 3) Section C: Assessment Feedback Practised by Supervisors, 4) Section D: Preferences on Assessment Feedback, and 5) Section E: Types of Assessment Feedback. The researcher consulted panel experts to ensure the content validity. The researcher ran the data obtained from the pilot study with Rasch’s Winstep software for reliability.

MAIN RESULTS

It is reported that the utility of tutors’ feedback comments, the meaning and impact of assessment feedback for students that still remains underresearched, particularly from the students’ perspectives[7]. This prelim study found that AFB practices are at the highest level for Meaningfulness ($M = 4.69$, $SD = .75$) followed by Timeliness ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .53$), and Specificity ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .55$). This finding supports what was reported that feedback must be specifically explained and meaningful in a way that future work is suggested for improvements[7]. In the study done, it was found that most of the university tutors agreed that feedback need to be specific and detailed [1]. Even though, specificity yields the lowest among the three dimensions, it still perceived as high with the mean of 3.88. The results indicated that the students valued AFB as meaningful which assisted them to make improvements

As for AFB forms practiced among lecturers, it was reported that verbal form ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.27$) is practised more compared to the written form ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .63$). This agrees to a study conducted which was due by the observation that students are having problems to understand feedback, discovered that effort-wise, oral feedback is preferred by the teachers since it is less time consuming compared to a detailed written feedback[2].

Then, it was found that 81% prefers the feedback to be in both, verbal and written form. Another 10.8% prefers verbal, whereas a total of 8.1% prefers the feedback to be in written form. While quality feedback is perceived as having both written and verbal provided within the context. All the university tutors agreed that, feedback a continuous dialogue within a cyclical assessment [1]. Referring to the results that shows the written form and verbal is practised almost equally, it is parallel to what they preferred to have as both form of feedback this could be caused by during the consultation sessions, the lecturers provided both form of feedback simultaneously and not in isolation.

However, there is a weak relationship between AFB and the independent factors (Gender, Mode of Study, and Field of Study).

Table 1. Correlation between AFB and Gender, Mode of Study and Field of Study

		Gender	Field of Study	Mode of Study
Spearman's rho	AFBmean	.058	.278	.212
	Sig.	.731	.096	.207

The AFB and Field of Study are weakly correlated as shown in Table 1 which depict, $r(36) = .28$, $p > .05$. Table 1 also shows that the AFB is weakly correlated with Mode of Study, $r(36) = .21$, $p > .05$. This shows that Field of Study and Mode of Study are related to the AFB. This result indicated that there might be a difference in the way that AFB provided among different FOS and MOS. Full research students might experience more meetings with their lecturers compared to the coursework students as the credit weightage differs from one another. Whereas, FOS could yield different form of AFB depending on the students' field.

However, AFB has a very weak relationship with gender, $r(36) = .06$, $p > .05$. This result reported that there is almost the relationship is very weak, almost no relationship indicated. This perhaps depicts no biasness in the AFB provided by the lecturers among gender.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey illustrates UTM postgraduates' perceptions on assessment feedback. From the responds, it can be concluded that the students need meaningful, timely and specific assessment feedback to assist them with the completion of their research work. An assessment feedback with the three dimensions mentioned is committedly agreed by the students as part of a quality feedback. The students also value both written and verbal form of feedback, which is currently employed by their lecturers. It is then discovered that the assessment feedback has relationship with gender, field of stud, and mode of study. This finding can benefit the academicians for improvement as it reveals the valued assessment feedback. It is also suggested that an assessment feedback standard form should be developed to further assist the students especially in terms of the specificity of assessment feedback.

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