

On the Way to Successful Learning and Teaching: Constructive Feedback

Alina Maslova

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University

Oksana Koval

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University

Viktoriia Kotliarova

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University

Maryna Tkach

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University

Yuliia Nadolska

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University

This research studies the perceptions of feedback by University and school teachers, as well as the prevailing type of feedback in the participants' teaching practice. Participants are 90 educators from Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University and teachers of primary and secondary schools of Melitopol and Melitopol region (Ukraine). Feedback is described as information a teacher or another learner gives to learners on how well they are doing. According to the research results, teachers mostly prefer to give oral feedback. The authors come to the conclusion that feedback should be constructive and should be focused on students' achievements. Further perspectives of the research include raising teachers' awareness of feedback through trainings and optional courses in pedagogical Universities, identification of strategies for providing online feedback. The research findings lay the foundation for further research of feedback as an inseparable part of learning and teaching.

Keywords: constructive feedback, teaching, students, feedback types, teacher improvement

INTRODUCTION

One of the current tasks of educational system is to optimize learning outcomes, improve students' knowledge and skills, promote students' reflection and self-efficacy on one hand and encourage the development of professional competencies and potential of a modern teacher on the other hand, thus enhancing the entire quality of education. That is why using feedback for quality education in this context can help to achieve the mentioned above tasks as far as effective feedback transforms students into

independent learners with highly developed academic skills (du Toit, 2012) and improves the quality of teacher's evaluation and instruction (Feeney, 2007).

In academic settings the function of feedback varies depending on its sender and recipient. It is mostly used by educators to inform students about their strengths and weaknesses (du Toit, 2012), encourage and support students, give logical explanation to advantages found, point out corrective measures and further direction (Hamid and Mahmood, 2010), empower students as self-regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane, 2006), help learners to gain new insights without giving direct explanations (Archer, 2010). Students use feedback to get the service and support of their teachers beyond class hours (Binu, 2020), actively engage with the information they receive (du Toit, 2012), make sense of this information and use it to enhance learning strategies (Carless and Boud, 2018). It should be noted that the source of information in this case can be a teacher, peer, book, family member, self, experience or automated computer-based system depending on one's performance or understanding (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Very often students do not notice good learning outcomes if they are not given adequate feedback. In this case they have to use self-assessment to find out their strong and weak points. According to the research results (Shrivastava et al., 2014), students are not always successful in self-assessment, they may even interpret the absence of teacher's feedback as implicit approval of their performance. D. Carless and D. Boud (2018) also emphasize that this happens because of the complexity of feedback processes (they are commonly misunderstood, difficult to carry out effectively and do not meet a high-priority goal – to enhance student learning). It is obvious that this is high time for educators to change the traditional way of giving feedback and re-think the feedback process to improve the students' learning (Mamoon-Al-Bashir et al., 2016). Thus, in order to overcome existing difficulties, it is important to get the right understanding of the term "feedback" and analyze the processes of giving, receiving, interpreting, and using feedback in educational environment. Constructive feedback is a complex phenomenon combining both – students' and teachers' activity. Yet, many studies conducted on this issue admit that very often students fail to compare teacher's feedback with their own performance. Teachers, in this case, face the necessity to evaluate their own assessment and ongoing feedback practices to understand the lack of progress in their students. Thus, some of the researchers claim that feedback often remains an educator-driven, one-way process (Archer, 2010).

It has become clear that modern educators should change their attitude towards feedback and rethink their own feedback practices making the whole process a learner-oriented one. In view of recent changes in education and an urgent shift towards distance learning, teachers have to create newer opportunities to give their feedback effectively in a virtual environment (Kong, 2021; Serhienko et al., 2021). Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore and report the perception of feedback by University and school teachers. The study made an attempt to go beyond the typical focus of the issue to find out how educators define the notion "feedback". The authors also tried to investigate teachers' individual feedback mechanisms (preferable types of feedback and ways of giving constructive feedback online) (Sahaidak et al., 2021).

The objectives of the study are the following: to analyze scientific literature on giving and receiving feedback by teachers and students; to identify teachers' understanding of the notion "feedback"; to explore the participants' preferable feedback practices (types, focus, ways of providing feedback online); to find out the participants' opinion on the functions of feedback.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. *What are the perceptions of feedback by University and school teachers?*
2. *What types of feedback prevail in the participants' teaching practice?*
3. *How is the focus of teachers' feedback connected with students' reaction to feedback?*
4. *What measures can be taken to raise teachers' awareness of feedback?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays there is hardly any teacher who is not aware of the concept of feedback. The teachers use the word "feedback" without even thinking about the origin of this word. Initially, the term originated in physical sphere in order to describe closed mechanical systems that regulate flows of energy, fuels, or

fluids. Only in 1940 the term acquired its modern meaning in psychological and human science theory. In educational context, specifically in methodological vocabulary, “feedback” has been used since 1955 in order to describe comments on how well or how badly learner is doing a task (Sanford, 2018).

Since then different authors contribute to defining the term “feedback”. According to Ch. Roebuck (1996), feedback is a response to an action or situation. E. Hesketh and J. Laidlaw (2002) describe it as an educational tool that helps trainees to reach their maximum potential. Y. Hamid and S. Mahmood (2010) understand feedback as “a process which involves a two-way nonjudgmental communication with the purpose providing information about quality of work to enhance one’s ability”. At the same time J. Hattie and H. Timperley (2007) define it as “information provided by teachers to help their students reduce the gap between their current and desired performances”. Some other researchers (Carless and Boud, 2018) compare feedback with “a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies”. In total, the role of feedback is essential because it not only creates new insight, ability and competence in teachers and students but also informs whether learning has taken place or not (Bergil and Atli, 2012).

Thus, feedback is considered to be an important component of successful teaching. If we accumulate the definitions of feedback given above, we can come to the conclusion that feedback defines and exemplifies teachers’ approach to their work: to teach is to provide feedback (Hreilikh and Vydolob, 2021). Feedback is information a teacher or another student, gives to students on how well they are doing, either to help the student improve specific points, or to help plan their learning.

There exist different types of feedback: formal and informal, formative and summative (Hardavella et al., 2017), external and internal (Nicol and Macfarlane, 2006), immediate and delayed, individual and group (Binu, 2020), facilitative and directive (Archer, 2010), self-assessment and peer assessment feedback (Evans, 2013), positive (constructive) and negative (Shrivastava et al., 2014).

Another classification offers to distinguish 1) active constructive feedback as a combination of teacher’s responses and active positive comments both verbal and non-verbal; 2) passive response constructive as a combination of teacher’s responses and positive but passive comments in non-verbal support; 3) active feedback destructive as a combination of teacher’s responses and negative comments and sometimes negative non-verbal behaviors such as frowns or complaints; 4) passive response destructive as teacher’s responses not accompanied by involvement (Rony et al., 2020). For each student group feedback can be different. Its type depends on such factors as characteristics of a skill and a learner (Magill, 1994), assigned task, classroom environment, the majority of students in a group etc. (Masantiah et al., 2020). However, notwithstanding the variety of content and style, role and type, meaning and function, feedback should be given and received effectively. Therefore, in this article we focus on constructive feedback as a tool to successful learning and teaching.

Some of the researchers pay attention to the fact that even the most skillful teachers experience difficulties when giving feedback to students because of the existing mismatch between educators’ and learners’ perceptions of the adequacy and effectiveness of feedback (Ramani and Krackov, 2012). As a result, scholars reflect on the question what an effective feedback is. G. Hardavella’s (2017) research emphasizes that appropriate feedback is always learner-centered as it is aimed at developing learners’ competence and confidence at different stages of their professional growth. This way teachers make students identify the gap between actual performance and desired outcomes and single out the means necessary to narrow this gap and improve personally.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The scientific article consists of three parts. The first part deals with a theoretical background of the study based on the literature review in the field. In the second part we represent the analysis of the online questionnaire data and based on the result obtained we provide the answers to the research questions. The conclusions, recommendations and perspectives for the future research are given in the third part of the paper.

In order to find out the answers to the research questions we have conducted a small-scale research among the teachers of Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University and teachers of primary and secondary schools of Melitopol and Melitopol region. The aim of the survey was to identify the perceptions of feedback by University and school teachers, as well as the prevailing type of feedback in the participants' teaching practice.

The general number of the respondents was 90 people. It has to be mentioned that this figure included 64.4% of University teachers and 35.6% of primary and secondary school teachers. It is important to add that for our research the subject which the teachers teach isn't so important as it doesn't influence the type and quality of the feedback given. If we talk about the respondents in terms of their age, we need to highlight that the majority of teachers taking part in the survey are at the age of 31-40 (44.4%), then comes the group of teachers who are at the age of 41-50 (27.8%), teachers at the age of 20-30 represent the 14.4% of the whole percentage of respondents, while teachers at the age of 51-60 represent 11.1% out of the sample. The smallest number of respondents (2.3%) are those who are over 60. The question about the gender of the respondents revealed the fact that the greatest number of teachers were female, and it was not a surprise as in our society it was traditionally accepted notion that teaching was a preferable female occupation. Thus, among teachers taking part in our survey there were 91.1% of female and 8.9% – male.

The questionnaire was designed by the authors and consisted of 11 questions. This survey was done with the help of Google forms.

Effective (constructive) feedback should address both capacity and culture. It should be carefully designed taking into account synergistic interaction between a complex of key conditions: 1) learners and educators understand and value feedback; 2) learners are active in the feedback process; 3) educators seek and use evidence to plan and judge effectiveness; 4) learners and educators have access to appropriate space and technology; 5) information provided is usable and learners know how to use it; 6) feedback meets different needs of learners; 7) a variety of sources and modes are used as appropriate; 8) learning outcomes of multiple tasks are aligned; 9) feedback is valued and visible at all levels; 10) feedback is consistent and qualitative; 11) educators ensure continuity of vision and commitment; 12) educators are flexible in using resources to best effect (Henderson et al., 2019). Only under these conditions feedback becomes on-going, open and solution-oriented, in other words, constructive. It can alter students' performance and reduce the gap between their current and desired outcomes (Nyiramana, 2017), promote positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem (Nicol and Macfarlane, 2006).

It should be noted that constructive feedback focuses on both the task and the process. An effective combination of these two components affects students' mental abilities and helps them to develop their academic and self-regulatory skills. As a result, students become more independent learners (du Toit, 2012). Thus, constructive feedback should be relevant, factual, helpful, confidential, respectful, tailored to specific needs, encouraging (Ovando, 1992), delivered immediately and in a sensitive manner (Mandhane et al., 2015). In addition, it can be used as a vehicle for reflection (Quinton and Smallbone, 2010).

By contrast, an insufficient feedback takes place in situations of traditional teaching where awarded marks are provided as a feedback (Hamid and Mahmood, 2010). Here some problems may arise: due to the research results, some learners are giving and receiving feedback easily while the others are facing difficulties and struggling with the process (Harms and Roebuck, 2010). This mostly happens on account of generally low level of student feedback literacy, that implies the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance learning strategies (Carless and Boud, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most essential research questions in our survey was: "How do you understand the notion "Feedback". It was an open-ended question. Here are some of the teachers' responses to this question which are given as a direct speech:

- "Feedback is a form of encouragement for the students. Thanks to it, it is possible to solve some problems. Feedback can show students their mistakes, draws their attention to the areas which

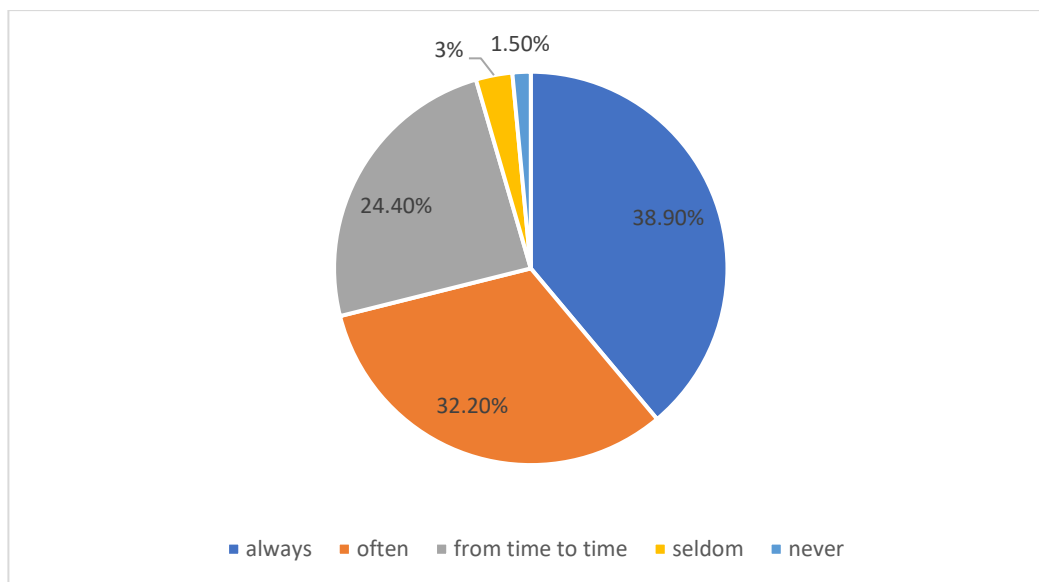
require improvement, offers the solution of a problem, and motivates students to move further in their learning”.

- “Feedback is a kind of the assessment done by me, it involves some comments or corrections of the student's activity if it is necessary”.
- “Feedback is a response to some reaction to an action or event”.
- “Feedback is a critical comment”.
- “In teaching context, I understand feedback as a two-way communication between students and a teacher.”
- “Feedback is a response given to the results of students’ educational activities or informal communication with students.”
- “It is a functioning of any system and its impact on the nature of its further functioning.”
- “Feedback gives students an opportunity to understand how well they have completed a task. You can also get feedback from students by asking certain questions”.
- “It is a flashback, revision, generalization, analysis”.

The majority of teachers perceps feedback in teaching through its direct meaning, preferably as information about their own reactions to student’s performance of a task, which is used as a basis for improvement. While defining the notion of feedback teachers generally use such synonyms as a reaction, comment, response, impact, communication, and question.

Figure 1 below shows the responses of the teachers to the question “How often do you give feedback to your students?”

FIGURE 1
TEACHER’S RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION “HOW OFTEN DO YOU GIVE FEEDBACK TO YOUR STUDENTS?”



As it can be seen from the pie chart, the majority of teachers choses options “always” and “often” – 38.9% and 32.2% respectively. 24.4% of the respondents mentioned that their feedback had a fragmented character and they provided their students with a feedback from time to time. 3% of teachers referred to the option “seldom” and 1.5% of the participants never gave feedback to their students. If we answer the question why those 1.5% of teachers don’t provide feedback at all, there might be several answers. Firstly, those teachers might be unaware of what feedback is and how to provide it. Secondly, they might consider feedback to be ineffective and time-consuming issue.

Figure 2 demonstrates the responses of the teachers to the question “What types of feedback do you know?”

FIGURE 2
RESPONSES OF THE TEACHERS TO THE QUESTION “WHAT TYPES OF FEEDBACK DO YOU KNOW?”

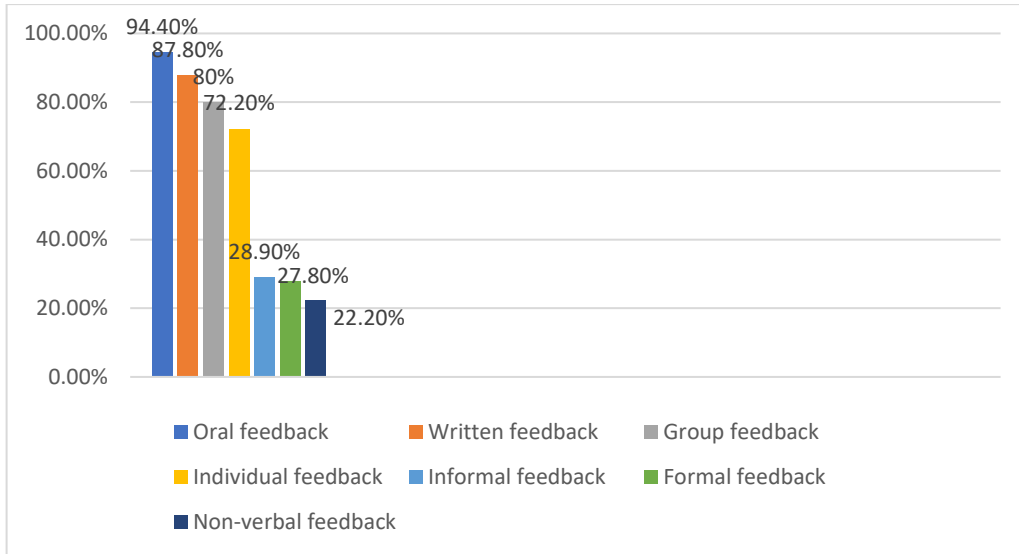
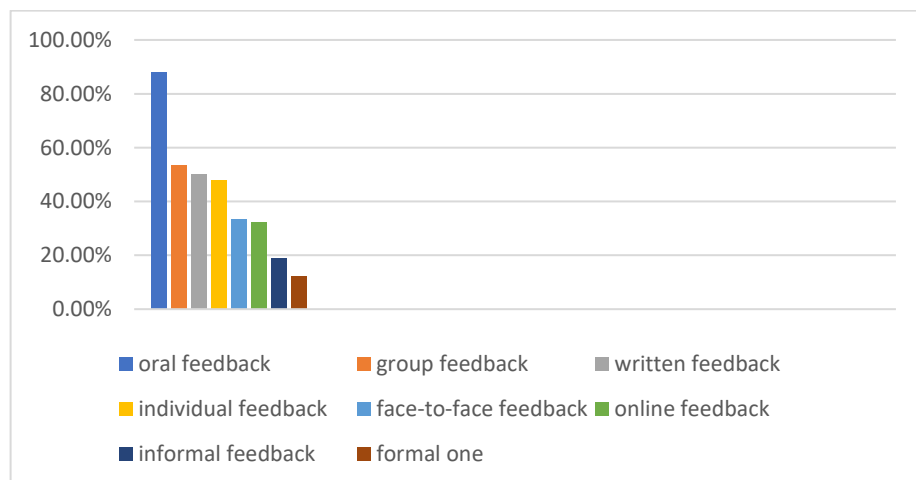


Figure 2 vividly demonstrates that practically all of the teachers are aware of oral and written feedback – 94.4% and 87.8% respectively. Less percentage of teachers are acquainted with group and individual feedback – 80% and 72.2% respectively. Informal (28.9%) and formal (27.8%) types of feedback were also mentioned by the teachers. 22.2% of the respondents know such type of feedback as non-verbal one.

The results shown in the previous bar chart correlate with the responses of the teachers which they gave to the question “What types of feedback do you use in your teaching practice?”. The responses of the teachers can be seen in the Figure 3.

FIGURE 3
TEACHERS’ RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION “WHAT TYPE OF FEEDBACK DO YOU USE IN YOUR TEACHING PRACTICE?”

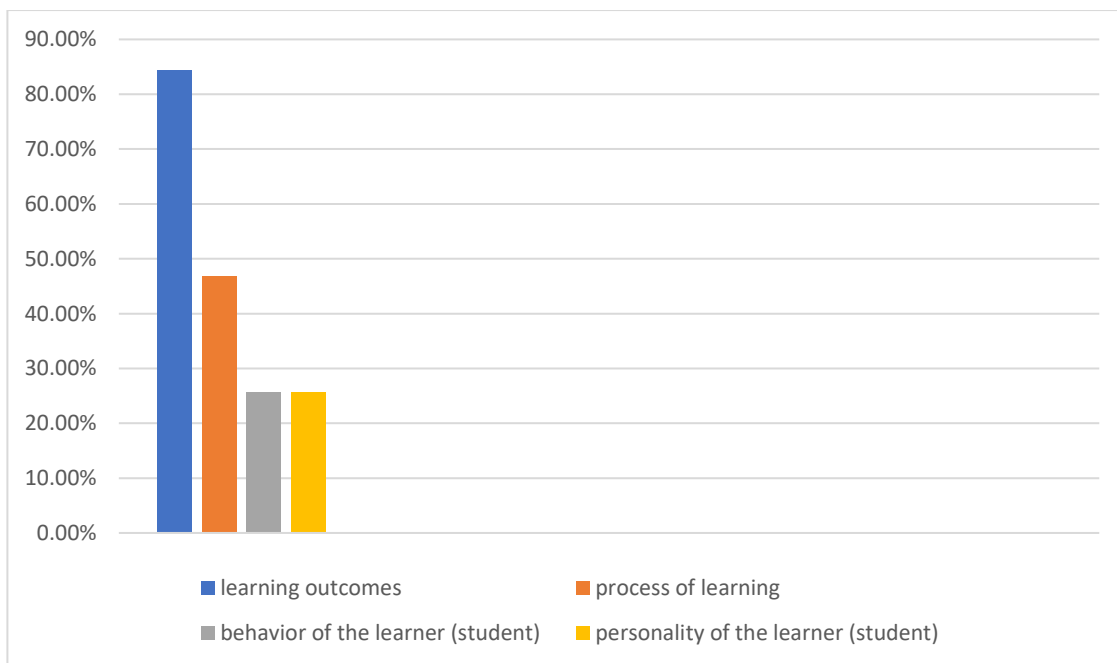


It turns out that teachers prefer to give oral feedback (87.8%). We believe that it happens due to the fact that oral feedback is a thing the teachers used to, it is less time-consuming and doesn't require any additional efforts and resources. 53.3% of teachers give their students group feedback, 50% of the respondents rely on the effectiveness of written feedback. 47.8% of the participants named individual feedback as a prevailing one in their teaching practice. Practically equal percentage of teachers uses face-to-face and online feedback – 33.3% and 32.2% respectively. Informal feedback is given by 18.9% of teachers, while formal one – by 12.2% of the survey participants.

When answering the question “How do your students react to the feedback?” the majority of teachers (58.9%) emphasized that the reaction of the learners (students) to the feedback was mainly positive one. 40% of the respondents were sure that students reacted positively.

One of the questions in the survey dealt with the focus of the feedback the teachers gave to the students. The analysis of the responses to these questions showed that the feedback of 84.4% of teachers was focused on the learning outcomes, while 46.7% of the survey participants chose the process of learning activity as the focus of their feedback. Equal percentage of the teachers said that the focus of their feedback was the behavior of the student (25.6%) and the personality of the student (25.6%). The results are presented below (Figure 4).

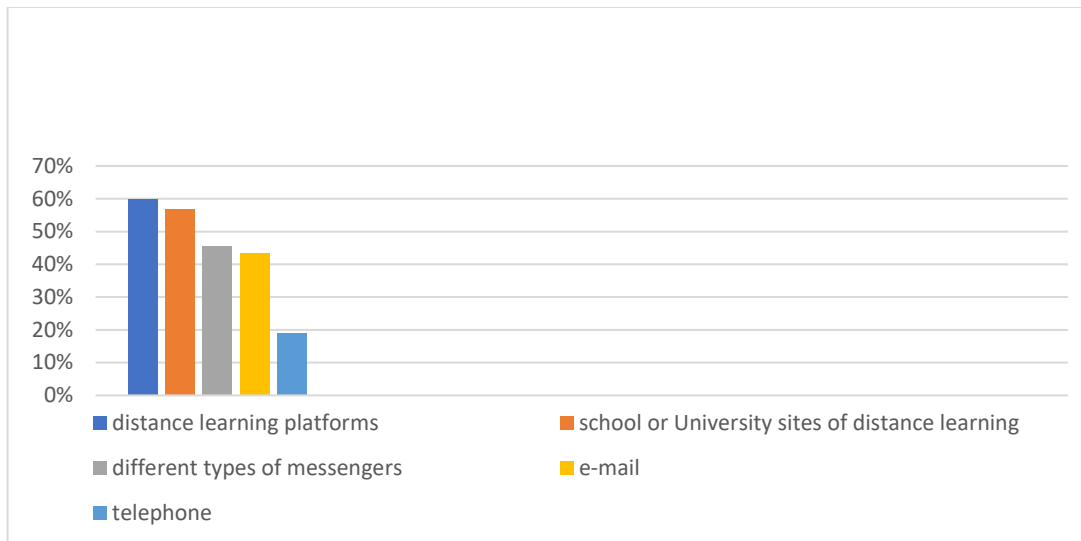
FIGURE 4
TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS “WHAT IS A FOCUS OF YOUR FEEDBACK?”



Such results give us some additional food for thought. It is very important to shift the focus of the feedback from the personality of a student to their activity, performance or learning outcomes. That's why teachers should be aware that feedback on a student as a personality can have harmful consequences in terms of student's mental health and can ruin good relations with a teacher or even become a cause of unfavorable atmosphere in the class.

We also asked a question “What tools do you use in order to give feedback to your students”? Teachers' responses can be seen below (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5
TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS "WHAT TOOLS DO YOU USE IN ORDER TO GIVE FEEDBACK TO YOUR STUDENTS?"



As for the functions of feedback, the teachers were focused on the following: feedback increases the motivation for learning (74.4%), enhances the achievement of learning outcomes (58.9%), creates a favorable atmosphere in class (53.3%), helps learners to fill in the learning “gaps” (1.1%), prompts teacher whether the aim of the lesson is achieved or not (1.1%), establishes the emotional contact between a teacher and a student (1.1%). So, feedback provides a teacher with the information on student's skills and abilities, gives an idea of where they are in the scope of the class, and some ideas about where to go in the long term.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the theoretical analysis of scientific literature proved the following fact – we need to differentiate clearly why feedback is important for learning and teaching. Feedback is a vital thing for learning as it enhances a student's confidence, raises their self-awareness and stimulates motivation for learning. Fulfilling this role in the process of learning feedback becomes an inseparable part of learning itself. On the other hand, a student can benefit only from the effective and constructive feedback, because an insufficient feedback from a teacher or a peer(s) might cause psychological problems and demotivate a student to achieve learning outcomes. Thus, all the teachers should be aware of what feedback is, what the ways and focus of giving effective and constructive feedback are. Constructive feedback should not be focused on learner's personality, but rather on achieved positive results and behaviour which were successful and should be continued. Moreover, the teachers should be able to provide the students with a constructive feedback using appropriate strategies and techniques.

Apart from positive impact of constructive feedback on learning, it also promotes teaching greatly. Feedback gives a teacher a chance to see how teaching practice can be improved, it can influence the teacher's choice of appropriate learning and teaching strategies. Feedback makes the students' “gaps” visible for a teacher and helps to select the effective techniques which address these learning “gaps”. The results of our survey proved the necessity of raising teachers' awareness of feedback, and this work can be done in two ways:

1. Introduction of the optional course in Pedagogical Universities which deals with feedback and the ways of how to give it to the learners effectively. It can be a Module of a Methodological course and even a separate discipline. This is the only one way to raise the future teachers'

awareness of feedback as an effective tool for learning and teaching as well as to train them to give constructive feedback to the learners.

2. Additional trainings for the University and school teachers who are already in the profession. These trainings can be conducted as a part of teachers' continuing professional development.

This study can have important practical implications for researchers, University and school teachers, curriculum designers. Further perspectives of the research may highlight what types of feedback are the most effective in a teaching practice. Due to COVID-19 pandemic which stimulated the distance learning greatly it is vital to pay attention to the online feedback. Nowadays it is important to identify what strategies can be used to make online feedback constructive. These ideas lay the foundation for further research of feedback as an inseparable part of learning and teaching.

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