

Feedback on Oral English in the time of COVID-19 crisis: The Bangladesh Chapter

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Abstract

In EFL online education, speaking has been commonly found to be the least developed skill. This research explores the availability, nature, and effectiveness of feedback in online speaking English classes of undergraduate students. Data were collected from teachers and students from private universities in Bangladesh primarily employing interviews and FGDs. Second Generation Activity Theory of Engeström (1987) and three principles of effective feedback by Royce Sadler (1989) have been used to analyze the data. The findings demonstrate that students received both in-class and out-of-classroom feedback. Teachers used Email, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and phone calls to provide feedback. They particularly kept in mind the COVID-19-related mental stress of students in offering such feedback. Students knew the learning objectives before the lessons, but not all teachers compared students' current level with the standard level while providing feedback. However, suggestions were provided to improve students' performance. The findings have important implications for the stakeholders who attend or conduct fully online or blended learning activities.

Keywords: Feedback, COVID-19, Online Teaching-Learning, EFL speaking

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic prompted physical isolation and closure of educational institutions (Salih & Omar, 2021). Bangladeshi private universities started online classes in April 2020 after the closure of educational institutions (Khan et al., 2021). However, according to Hossain and Haque (2022), online education in Bangladesh lacked smooth

interaction between teachers and students. The experience of face to screen online courses was not a common phenomenon for the Bangladeshi education system. Students suffered because of the physically detached nature of the online classes and their anxiety-induced depression and doubt in them (Dhawan, 2020). For example, a teacher from a Bangladeshi private university in a study by Aktar et al. (2022) mentioned that during online classes the students were frequently messaging or trying to contact him to ask different types of questions. Moreover, Bergstrand & Savage (2013) reported that sometimes because of the large online class, teachers faced difficulties in their attempt to provide appropriate feedback and individual support to every student. Aktar et al. (2022) pointed out that in Bangladesh, the existing assessment and feedback system were unsuitable for online classes. At the same time providing feedback was troublesome because of the online nature of the courses. However, the necessity of feedback in students' learning cannot be overemphasized. The practice of structured and useful feedback provision is one of the few steps that teachers can perform to help students overcome their weaknesses. According to Tosuncuoglu (2018), instructors can enhance learning if continuous feedback is provided to the learners. Despite this significance, however, few studies report how feedback was being provided in Bangladeshi universities during Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, there was hardly any research on the practice of online feedback provision in the Bangladeshi educational context. For the purposes of our study, we explored the nature of feedback provision in Bangladeshi context of online education.

This study investigated the following questions:

1. To what extent was feedback provided by the teacher during the online speaking classes of undergraduate private university students during COVID-19 in Bangladesh?
2. How was feedback provided in the online speaking classes of undergraduate private university students during the pandemic?
3. How were the feedback practices of online classes perceived by the students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oral English problems of Bangladeshi University students

Bangladeshi EFL learners can barely talk in English after finishing their university life (Mridha & Muniruzzaman, 2020). The transition from Bangla to English medium instruction is not so easy for students of private universities (Naznin & Hassan, 2016). Moreover, unsuitable classroom settings, improper subject matter, big classroom size, and short duration of classes are some reasons for students' poor performance in English speaking skills (Yousuf, 2018). They also suffer from insufficient rhetorical and lexical resources and experience nervousness (Rahman et al., 2015).

Feedback in Language Learning

From an educational viewpoint, feedback generally indicates the comments and suggestions given to the students based on their performance via instructors or other mediums (Dawson et al., 2018). Guillen et al. (2020) mentioned that when students were online or offline, feedback was given to them through text chat, video, or audio messages. According to Jamalinesari et al. (2015) when the instructor offers an accurate pattern for any mistake, direct feedback happens, while in indirect feedback no rectification is offered. Oral feedback is used when there is more message to communicate and written feedback is applied when learners want to put

aside some information to look at later (Brookhart, 2008). Generally, Instructor feedback is regarded as the most favoured feedback type (Tasdemir, & Arslan, 2018). Instructors can provide self-referenced feedback, norm-referenced feedback, and criterion-referenced feedback (Brookhart, 2008). Moreover, feedback can be negative or positive (Hanh & Tho, 2018).

COVID-19 Online education in the Bangladeshi universities

The recent outbreak of Coronavirus immensely impacted the education sector of Bangladesh. Coronavirus was initially diagnosed in Wuhan, China in 2019 (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Breathing problems, high temperature, and throat pain are some of the signs of the SARS-COVID-2 virus (Singh & Singh, 2020). Some of the approaches for protecting citizens from COVID-19 are wearing masks, cleaning hands, maintaining physical detachment etcetera (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). During COVID-19, education took place online (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Online education refers to any educational program that is communicated to learners who do not exist in the same room (Damayanti & Rachmah, 2020). In synchronous online learning, students get instant feedback, whereas asynchronous online learning is unstructured in nature and content is delivered through different methods after class time (Dhawan, 2020). During COVID-19 Bangladeshi private universities conducted online classes.

Bangladeshi online classes faced a lack of administrative help, sluggish internet connection, unavailability of necessary gadgets, high cost of internet data, absence of technical support, load shedding, and family problems (Hossain, 2021). Moreover, students suffered due to the absence of immediate feedback (Islam et al., 2020).

Feedback during COVID-19 online education

During COVID-19 online classes around the world, apart from synchronous online feedback, learners received feedback asynchronously via private WhatsApp chat or Google Classroom (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). One teacher reported in a study by Mahapatra (2021) that he used recorded audio and video feedback for the students and utilized WhatsApp, Flipgrid, Google form, etcetera for the provision of feedback (Mahapatra, 2021). However, learners did not get feedback immediately all the time (Shifat et al., 2021). Moreover, during the COVID-19 online classes, after the class time, students in some institutions were allowed to contact teachers during office hours or through email for feedback (Salih & Omar, 2021).

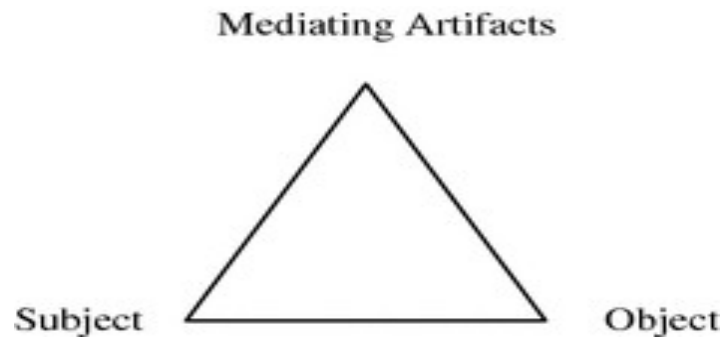
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The second-generation Activity theory model of Yrjö Engeström (1987) and three principles of effective feedback proposed by Royce Sadler (1989) were employed in this research.

Activity Theory

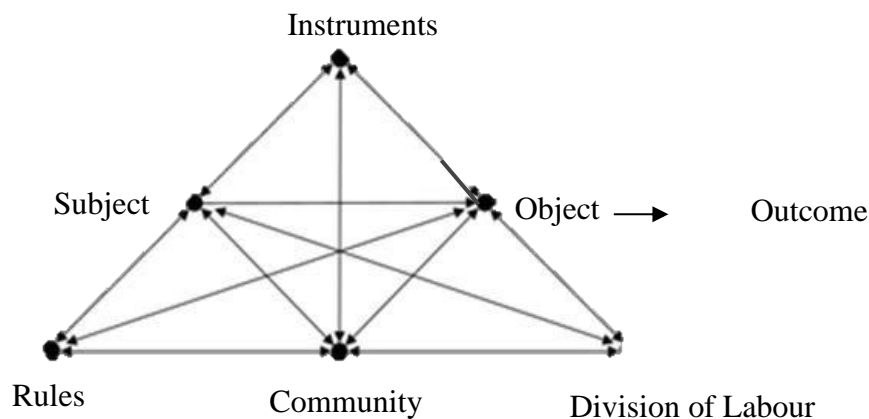
Lev Vygotsky (1978) pioneered the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). He introduced a triangular model, which includes a subject, object, and tool as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Vygotsky's Triangular Model (Vygotsky, 1978)



Later, another triangle was added by Engeström (1987) to depict community, rules, and roles in a collective activity system as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Second Generation Activity Theory Model (Engeström, 1987)



According to Sannino and Engeström (2018), in Figure 2 subject means a person or subgroup whose point of view is taken for interpretation, object indicates the area of concern, instruments change the object into an outcome, community refers to groups who share a similar object, division of labour concerns with the distribution of duties, and rules refer to direct or indirect guidelines, norms and laws. According to Barhoumi (2015), Activity Theory is appropriate for planning and explaining activities in online learning communities. In online teaching-learning, all the teachers and students (subjects) participated in the learning and assessment system with a common goal or objectives (i.e. feedback provision). The association between subjects and objects is negotiated through tools, the connection between subject and community is negotiated through rules, and the association between object and community is negotiated through the division of labour (Said et al., 2014). The teachers and students in online learning can distribute their share of responsibilities and use multiple tools such as computers, laptops, mobiles etcetera.

Royce Sadler's Three Principles of Effective Feedback

Royce Sadler (1989) stated three principles of effective feedback: The learner has to (a) possess a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for, (b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, and (c) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap. (p. 121).

Ahea et al. (2016) state that when a teacher explains the objective of their work and what is considered as best performance, the students will be aware of them and try to accomplish those objectives. The second principle is concerned with learners' knowledge about their performance. According to Sadler (1989), learners must be capable of comparing the level of their acts with those criteria. The third principle discusses the idea of gap closure in performance. According to Reinholz (2016), gap closure can be accomplished by decreasing the differences between the current level of performance and the standard level. Teachers should teach students different techniques for regenerating their ideas (Booth et al, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research was to find out the nature of feedback provision during online speaking classes of Bangladeshi private universities during the Covid-19 pandemic along with the effectiveness of those practices. The study followed a qualitative paradigm, which included the interview of 5 teachers and 5 group discussions of the students from private universities of Dhaka metropolitan city. Semi-structured questions were used for the interview and group discussion.

All participants in this research were from five private universities in Bangladesh. One teacher from each of the five private universities (U1, U2, U3, U4, U5) who took English spoken course, were invited to participate using personal contact. Thus, Total 5 teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5) were interviewed. For the group interviews, 6 students from their online classes were selected randomly because according to Dörnyei (2007, p. 144), “Fewer than 6 people would limit the potential of the ‘Collective wisdom’ whereas too large a size makes it difficult for everyone to participate”. Students were in their first year of university life and attended basic spoken English courses. One group interview from each university was conducted. Therefore, there were 5 group interviews of students (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4, FG5) from five universities.

Interview sessions were arranged with the teachers and group discussions were conducted with the students. All the questions (open-ended) for teachers' interviews (see Appendix-A) and students' group discussions (see Appendix- B) were formed to find the answers to the central research questions. The second researcher used smartphones and online software (Google Meet and Zoom) as instruments for recording. Research questions 1 and 2 were designed based on the second-generation activity theory framework proposed by Engeström (1987) and research question 3 was designed based on the three principles of effective feedback proposed by Sadler (1989).

Data Collection and Analysis

Four out of five teachers chose mobile conversation except one instructor who chose Google Meet software for the semi-structured interviews. Four group discussions with randomly selected students were conducted using Google Meet software call except for one group that chose the Zoom app (University-2). Teachers' interviews and students' discussions were recorded with their permission.

All the data were analyzed using the qualitative method. The responses from the teachers' interviews and students' interviews were transcribed and analyzed based on the theories, principles, and central research questions. All the responses from Research Questions 1 and 2 were explained, based on the components of the second-generation activity theory framework of Engeström (1987). To analyze the responses to the third research question, Sadler's (1989) three principles of effective feedback were employed.

FINDINGS

Availability of feedback in online speaking courses during the COVID-19 pandemic

It was found that all teachers provided in-class and out-of-class feedback in their speaking English classes and their students also supported their claim. However, it was found that the teacher from U-2 provided more feedback than the other teacher participants. For example, students received both oral and written feedback along with generalized and individualized feedback from T2. T2 was more flexible in case of out-of-class feedback as he used more than two software for feedback. T2 and T5 seemed to have more time flexibility. In contrast, T1 and T3 were found to use very limited platforms for communicating with the students.

Nature of feedback provision in online speaking courses

It was found that students received both in-class and out-of-classroom feedback. The statements of the teachers with the statements of their students are represented in Table 1.

It is seen from Table 1 that mostly Google Meet software on a laptop, personal computer and smartphones were used for classes with limited use of smartphones (SG1) and Zoom (T1, SG1). Generalized or individualized feedback was provided based on students' needs or the commonality of the problems (U2, U4, U5). T4 explained, "I prefer to give general feedback for all because whoever understands will understand ". Almost everyone from SG4 said that for common problems teacher gave general feedback. However, one student found individualized feedback more common. Only individualized feedback was found in U1 and U3. T1 and T3 mentioned that they did not provide any general feedback. All the participants stated that their weaknesses were not identified or commented upon. For example, T2 mentioned, "I never say these are your weaknesses rather I say that you should focus on these specific parts or elements". Most of the feedback was provided orally with one exception (U2).

Email, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, cellular phone calls, Google Meet were used for Out-of-class feedback, which seemed to reflect the Second-Generation Activity Theory of Engeström (1987). He mentioned that in an activity system, instruments or tools are used to mediate the relationship between the subject and object. T2 mentioned that students asked for feedback over a private Facebook messenger group and posted speaking videos for feedback but were not flexible with Email. T4 said that sometimes she gave them feedback over WhatsApp by text but if they did not understand, she asked them to call over the phone. Some teachers gave after-class feedback only if they were contacted (T1, T3), and some encouraged or instructed students to call after class as they identified students' insincerity (T2) or to save them from humiliation (T4). Two teachers (T1, T5) mentioned consultation hours using Google Meet but not all the students supported the claim. There were exceptional circumstances such as the teacher did not provide the contact number (T1), only CR could call the teacher (T5), only chosen students were added on messenger (T5), students could call (SG2) for feedback only before the examination, and so on.

Table 1: A summary of the findings on the nature of feedback practices in online classes

Feedback related phenomena	U1		U2		U3		U4		U5	
	T1	SG1	T2	SG2	T3	SG3	T4	SG4	T5	SG5
Types of work	Individual work	Individual work	Group and Individual	Group and Individual	Individual work	Individual work	Group and Individual	Group and Individual	Group and Individual	Group and individual
Types of feedback	Individual feedback	Individual feedback	General and individual feedback	General and Individual feedback	Individual feedback	Individual feedback	General and Individual feedback	General and individual feedback	General and individual feedback	General and individual feedback
Medium of delivery	Oral feedback	Oral feedback	Both oral & Written feedback	Both oral and written feedback	Oral feedback	Oral feedback	Oral feedback	Oral feedback	Oral feedback	Oral feedback
Devices	Laptop and mobile	Laptop and mobile	Laptop and mobile	Mobile-only	Laptop and smartphone	Laptop and smartphone	Laptop and smartphone	Laptop and smartphone	Laptop and mobile	Laptop and mobile
Software	Google Meet and email	Google Meet and email	Zoom (in class) Messenger, WhatsApp, and calls	Zoom (in class) Messenger WhatsApp and calls	Meet, Email, and contact number	Meet, Email, and contact number	Meet, WhatsApp and contact number	Meet, WhatsApp and contact Number	Meet, Email, Messenger, and calls	Meet, Only Email (3) Only Messenger (1) Email & Messenger (2)
Rules & Regulations	Only Mail, any time	Only mail, any time	No calls after 10:00 PM	No time limit	Email first then Calls, till 6:00 pm	Emails first then calls	CR first then WhatsApp, till 7:00 PM	First CR then WhatsApp, no time limit	Text first, till 10:00 PM	Only CR calls, till 10:00 PM
Emotional support	provided	Shared anxiety	Provided	Shared anxiety	provided	Not shared	provided	Shared anxiety	provided	Not shared

Most of the time the instructed time slot was before 10:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. which was not followed properly according to most of the teachers (T2, T4). T2 mentioned, "I mentioned the time limit for calling but they forgot the time ". However, in one case, students were unaware of the time slot (SG2). There was no specific time limit set for SG4. Some other general rules for calling were calling CR at first (SG4, SG5) messaging before calling (SG5) and emailing before calling on the cell phone (SG2).

All the teachers and most of the students agreed they shared COVID-19-related anxiety with the teacher and teachers were caring enough on this issue. T3 mentioned that sometimes students emailed or called and informed us that they had to leave because their father, brother or friends were affected by COVID-19. He also added that he ensured that his feedback did not activate their affective filter of the students. However, one student group (SG3) could not share personal anxiety because their teacher was strictly professional in nature. Another student from the same group said, "It is normal to share anxiety with the teacher if you are comfortable but every teacher is not the same, even if they are good".

The effectiveness of feedback in the online spoken course

Table 2: Responses on the practice of Sadler’s three Principles of effective feedback

Sadler’s Principles	Three	U1	SG1	U2	SG2	U3	SG3	U4	SG4	U5	SG5
Objectives informed		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Comparison with target		No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Little	Little	No	No
Suggestions (individual, general)		General	General	Both	Both	General	General	Both	Both	General	General

It is observable from Table 2 that all the students were aware of their learning objectives. Students from SG1, SG2 and SG3 said that to show them samples, teachers pronounced words for them or provided videos.

However, most of the teachers (T1, T3, T5) did not compare the performance of the students with the standard level. Only one student from SG3 claimed that the teacher did compare but that was very rare. Moreover, T2 thought that it would create unnecessary stress and T1 thought it was their (student's) duty to compare with the standard. A smaller number of teachers (T4, T2) made the comparison with the standard level. T2 said that if he compared with the target level, they might not attend the next class or performance. SG4 claimed teachers’ comparison was mostly generalized. However, T4 said that she could not mention all the criteria, as she could not remember all the mistakes they made. The suggestions for reaching the target level were mostly generalized such as listening, reading, and watching authentic English content. Moreover, teachers gave suggestions like acting out dialogues from authentic content (T3), following IPA symbols and thinking in English rather than Bangla (T1). Students from SG1 and SG5 mentioned that their teachers provided different links for listening to good English content. However, the students SG1,

SG3 and SG5 said that their teachers did not provide individual suggestions. However, (SG2 and SG4) provided individual suggestions for solving individual problems. For example, a student from SG2 said that to reduce shyness his teacher asked him to practice in front of the mirror.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate different aspects of online feedback practices during COVID-19 online speaking classes. Teachers and students use laptops, desktops, and smartphones along with different software like Google Meet, WhatsApp, Email, Facebook Messenger, and so on. The Second-generation activity theory of Engestorm (1987) is visible here where teachers and students play the role of subjects, the object is to provide feedback to the students and laptops, desktops, and different software are the tools, which mediate the relationship between subject and object. Teachers and students along with the technical team of the universities shared responsibilities and worked as a community to achieve the same goal. In this study students received teachers' feedback during online classes which seems to support Nisha's study (2022). However, in this study teachers mentioned that in online classes group or pair work is tough to handle. Similarly, Chowdhury and Zannat (2021) mentioned that Bangladeshi teachers strongly believed that in speaking classes group or pair work is challenging. In this study only one teacher provided both oral and written feedback, which resembled the result of Jurāne-Brēmane (2022), where the teachers found difficulties in providing both written and oral feedback because of the online nature of the courses. However, teachers cared about students' emotional well-being, which opposed the finding of Ahmed et al. (2022) who stated that teachers did not consider the psychological wellness of the students. Some teachers motivated students to call after class, as they knew about students' inattentiveness. Similarly, Chowdhury and Zannat (2021) stated that it is problematic to provide feedback in online classes, as Bangladeshi learners are inattentive. Some teachers asked students to send speaking recordings or videos after class for feedback. Similarly, Islam (2021) mentioned that new technology helped Bangladeshi university instructors to provide feedback. Teachers set rules like contacting CR at first; mail-only option; calling over the phone only before the exam; and texting before direct calls. These rules and regulations resemble Engestorm's (1987) idea that the members of an activity follow or work within certain rules to attain the objective or goal. In this study, unequal treatment was also found as one teacher allowed only 1 or 2 students to contact her on messenger and this could be the result of the online nature of the courses.

Mostly, teachers informed learning objectives orally before the activities. Similarly, Wurth et al. (2022) stated that teachers informed and clarified the learning objectives or criteria of effective speaking before activities. So, the first principle of Sadler's (1989) effective feedback provision was almost fulfilled. However, not all teachers compared students' performance with the target level except two teachers. This finding contradicts the finding of Wurth et al. (2022), who stated that teachers gave feedback compared with the target objectives or speaking criteria. Therefore, this finding of our paper shows that the second principle of Sadler (1989) was not fulfilled because, as he stated, for feedback to be effective, students should continuously be able to check the standard of their production against the target standard.

Most of the teachers' suggestions to reach the target level were general such as having exposure to authentic English content, which agrees with the finding of Wurth et al. (2022) who mentioned that teachers suggested authentic sources like TEDx talks, YouTube videos, news items

etc. However, not all the students got individualized suggestions for improvement. So, the third condition of effective feedback provided by Sadler (1989) was not fulfilled completely.

CONCLUSION

The whole world struggled a lot because of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the education sector suffered a lot because of a lack of face-to-face classes. However, in the case of speaking skills, regular feedback from teachers is a crucial segment of learners' learning cycle (Chowdhury & Zannat, 2021) regardless of the mode of communication between them.

It is apparent from the findings of this study that students received both in-class and out-of-classroom feedback in their online speaking classes. However, the feedback practices were not perceived to be fully effective for the students because of some shortcomings. Based on the findings, it can be said that online feedback practices could be more effective for the learners if teachers modify some of their approaches to feedback provision such as explaining the objectives of their learning, proper comparison with students' current and standard level or providing more options for communication for out of classroom communications. It can be recommended that teachers need to provide more individualized solutions. This research reveals the common feedback practices of online classes. Additionally, this research may be useful as a reference for further studies in the Bangladeshi context. The findings of the paper may also be helpful for the practicing teachers in identifying the pros and cons of adopting different feedback strategies both in fully online classes or in their blended learning practices.

About the Authors

Muhammed Shahriar Haque, Ph.D., has taught at East West University for the last 17 years. He has published over 40 scholarly articles and co-edited three books. He is the editor of the peer-reviewed *East West Journal of Humanities* and the producer and assistant director of the 35-minute documentary film *Life After Grey* (2015). His research interests include film and media studies, critical discourse analysis, teacher education, comic studies and graphic novels and photojournalism.

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