

# The Impact of Constructive Feedback on EFL University Students' Performance

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**Abstract:** This descriptive study aimed to investigate the impact of constructive feedback on developing EFL university students' performance. The sample of the study was 100 English-majored students chosen randomly using a stratified technique from the four levels of the department of English at the National University, besides 10 English language lecturers teaching English courses in the same university. To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher used two questionnaires: the first one was for students containing 25 close-ended items, and the other one was for English language lecturers containing 24 close-ended items. The results indicated that students have positive perceptions towards constructive feedback in enhancing their learning and improving their performance. The lecturers also showed moderate delivery of constructive feedback to students, attributing this to some barriers such as the lack of time, interest, students' sensitivity or resistance, and lecturers' skills of providing constructive feedback. The study recommended that university lecturers should pay more attention to students' emotional and mental needs when providing feedback to enable them to show their abilities and skills comfortably, and provide remedial action plans, suggestions, and solutions when needed.

**Keywords:** *Impact, Constructive Feedback, Performance, Perceptions*

## 1. Introduction

Guaranteeing quality education in universities is one of the major international concerns nowadays. In the field of education, constructive feedback is defined as a positive comment on students' performance to motivate them to improve their learning and performance (van de Ridder et al., 2008). It could be an oral or written comment that learners use to make sense of their performance quality in order to improve and develop their learning strategies (Henderson et al., 2019b). It is the most useful factor beyond professional experience. It plays an essential role in reinforcing learning and providing valuable ways for improving language practices (Ferguson, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Ramani, 2012). It is seen as "information provided by an agent ... regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81). Though it is a cost-effective approach to enhancing students' outcomes, it should be applied in all educational situations.

Moreover, constructive feedback is used to narrow the gap between the present and the desired situation of learning. It is used to enhance students' professional growth and development, support skills acquisition, and distinguish the level of students' achievement (Kruglikova et al., 2010). Through constructive feedback, teachers could play a major role in improving the teaching and learning processes and achieving the desired outcomes by checking their teaching and students' learning regularly, identifying areas that need improvement, and adapting their teaching strategies accordingly. According to Eraut (2006, p. 118), "when students enter higher education ... the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning

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futures.” Thus, teachers need to know much more about how students’ learning is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive.

Constructive feedback should strengthen good performance, delineate poor performance, provide remedial action plans, and include two allies (Hamid & Mohammed, 2010). It is supposed to motivate learners, inspire and promote them for learning, and stimulate their growth and professional development in educational settings (Ovando, 2005). It can be used as a successful technique for achieving high quality education, as it influences both students and lecturers positively (Hamid & Mohammed, 2010). Feedback helps students understand what is done and how to improve it. It also helps teachers determine how teaching practice could be improved, and which teaching and learning strategies are more likely to be effective. Thus, this study attempted to show the impact of constructive feedback on developing the performance of EFL university students, hoping to identify criteria for providing constructive feedback that is desired and expected to improve students’ learning and performance, and to reveal the barriers that impede lecturers from providing constructive feedback in classrooms.

## 2. Literature Review

It has been acknowledged that constructive feedback is one of the most essential methods for improving students’ learning process and quality teaching in classrooms, and for providing a bridge between assessment and learning. Providing constructive feedback to students is one of the most valuable policies to help students improve their self-efficacy and self-regulation and raise their motivation to achieve their learning outcomes (Andrade et al., 2009; Panadero & Romero, 2014). Lipnevich and Smith (2009), in an experimental study of 464 university students, revealed that students who were exposed to constructive feedback performed better than students who were given grades or praise. In contrast, Riaz (2015) argued that negative feedback results in undesired consequences, leading to the failure of producing expected outcomes and affecting the learning process negatively.

Moreover, Hattie et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 196 studies and revealed that feedback had a powerful effect on learning outcomes. Black and Wiliam (2010) showed that the pace of students’ learning is increased by at least 50% through constructive feedback, and argued that formative assessment/feedback raises the overall standard of achievement and reduces the gap between current and desired achievements. Black and Wiliam (2009) also suggested five key strategies for formative assessment or feedback: a) clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success; b) engineering classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning; c) providing feedback that moves students forward; d) activating students as instructional resources for one another; and e) activating students as the owners of their own learning.

Furthermore, feedback should clearly focus on predetermined goals and learning tasks or activities to point out students’ progress towards those goals. Altmiller (2016) argued that it is easy for lecturers to provide students with positive feedback, but it is difficult to provide them with constructive feedback, attributing this to their fear of offending their relationship with students, especially when criticizing poor performance (Zehra et al., 2015). Feedback should be positive, show students’ strengths or weaknesses, and suggest further improvements. Moreover, constructive feedback should also be timely, accurate, constructive, specific, relevant, informative, understandable, and focused on supportive, encouraging, and positive outcomes (Toit, 2012). It should reinforce good results, address poor performance, and provide remedial action plans, suggestions, and solutions (Altmiller, 2016; Hamid & Mahmood, 2010).

Hattie and Timperley (2007) revealed that there are three important kinds of feedback: feed up, feedback, and feed forward. While feed up deals with setting a clear goal to achieve (Where am I going?), and feedback deals with commenting on students’ progress towards that goal and suggests actions that might be taken into consideration (How am I going?), feed forward deals with future planning and further improvements of students’ progress (Where to go next?). Feedback could be constructive if it provides clear expectations about students’ performance, motivates them to increase their efforts, and directs them towards future learning. Based on the behaviorist theory, positive feedback is considered “positive reinforcement” and negative feedback is considered “punishment.”

In addition, Tunstall and Gipps (1996) provided two kinds of feedback: “achievement feedback” and “improvement feedback.” While the first one shows what was done and why, the latter shows what

should be done using strategies that lead to its improvement. Hattie and Timperley (2007) also introduced four levels of providing feedback: (1) providing feedback on the task; (2) providing feedback on the processing of the task; (3) providing feedback about self-regulation; and (4) providing feedback on the student as a person. Thus, it is the role of the teacher to adapt and use effective feedback strategies that may help students make progress in the learning process.

Concerning teachers' role in providing feedback, they need to provide opportunities for eliciting students' thinking and understanding of feedback. They should provide valuable insight into students' progress and reveal misunderstandings. They are required to improve their level of pedagogical and content knowledge to enhance their ability to provide useful feedback appropriately (Heitink et al., 2016; Parr & Timperley, 2010). McCutcheon and Duchemin (2020) showed that supervisors encounter four common kinds of barriers when providing feedback: lack of time, fear of damaging rapport, students' resistance, and lack of comfort and interest with feedback delivery.

Brookhart (2008) argued there are some issues to be taken into consideration when providing feedback to achieve good outcomes: timing, amount, mode, and audience. Concerning timing, feedback should be given immediately to help students listen to it and use it while they are still mindful of the topic, assignment, or performance, especially when submitting tests and assignments (Zehra et al., 2015). Feedback should be given in the right amount. Feedback could be delivered in many forms: written or oral, depending on the kind of task and situation. Finally, feedback works better when it has a strong and appropriate sense of the audience. It should not be embarrassing. It should be supportive, focused on behavior rather than personality, provide positive rather than negative comments, and allow students to feel safe during the process of feedback delivery. It can be given individually to avoid embarrassment (Yorke, 2003). In the same vein, Hattie and Timperley (2007) confirmed that some students favor private praise, while others view it as a punishment if the admiration takes place before a peer group that devalues education.

Moreover, to achieve constructive feedback, there must be a collaborative learning environment to create a lecturer–student relationship, mutual trust, and confidence (Hauer & Kogan, 2012). Constructive feedback should focus on information, reaction, and communication to enable students to show their role in the learning process, strengthen their self-regulation, reflect on their performance, and practise self-evaluation (Murdoch-Eaton, 2012). In the words of Hattie (2013, p. 11), “students are engaged by the expert teachers to make them learn and develop self-regulation in them; enhanced self-efficacy; involvement in mastery learning; and self-esteem as learners.” Moreover, Ramani and Krackov (2012) argued that lecturers and students should develop and share the learning goals of a course to work together for achieving good outcomes.

Furthermore, constructive feedback should be specific and address certain points of performance (Brown & Cook, 2009). In this regard, Hattie (2013) stated that “feedback needs to include information directly relevant to the assignment or learning process that it fills.” It should also depend on real observation and assessment of students' performance to avoid bias and disagreement between lecturers and students (Kuvaas et al., 2016). It should be descriptive and non-judgmental. It should provide choices for improvement in future tasks to increase its impact and allow students to view it as an opportunity for learning. In sum, feedback should deal with specific performances rather than generalizations; decisions and actions rather than assumed intentions or interpretations, where lecturers and students work as allies and set specific goals to improve students' outcomes, attainment, ability to learn, and ultimately meet students' needs.

### **3. Statement of the Problem**

A large number of studies have been conducted on English language teaching methods and strategies, but few have been done on the strategy of constructive feedback for developing students' performance when learning English language at universities. One of the most important issues in educational practices is the absence of lecturers' awareness of the role of constructive feedback in developing learning-teaching processes (Ruscher et al., 2010). Lecturers tend to score students' work and give them grades without commenting on their work and making sure that the intended learning outcomes were met. This could be an important reason behind not achieving the desired learning outcomes in higher education, in general, and among university students, in particular.

Furthermore, providing constructive feedback is one of the most useful supports and skills lecturers need to master as part of good formative assessment. It helps them know their students' level and formulate new goals and action plans to achieve quality education. On the other hand, it helps students fill the gap between the current and the desired situation of their learning. Bloom (1976) argued that feedback can reveal errors in learning shortly before they are compounded with later errors.

In summary, students should be exposed to the actual situation of their performance and provided with oral and written feedback regarding their learning. On the other hand, teachers should appreciate the significance of motivating students and enhancing their learning. They should do their best to overcome the obstacles of providing feedback, such as large classes and use of traditional teaching practices, and update themselves with modern teaching innovations to achieve successful students' academic performance and quality education. Therefore, this study aims to fill such a gap and reveal the significant role of constructive feedback at the level of educational institutions in general, and at academic levels in particular.

#### 4. Questions of the Study

- What is the impact of constructive feedback on EFL university students' performance from their perceptions?
- To what extent do university lecturers provide constructive feedback to students?
- What are university lecturers' perceptions of the main barriers that may impede constructive feedback delivery in classrooms?

#### 5. Methodology

##### 5.1. Sample of the Study

This study used two types of participants. The first type comprised 100 English-majored students (80 female and 20 male) from the four levels of the department of English at the National University, chosen via stratified random sampling. The second type of participants was 10 English department lecturers (8 males and 2 females) teaching in the same university, regardless of their majors, academic ranks, and years of experience.

##### 5.2. Instrument of the Study

Two questionnaires were used to collect relevant adequate data for the current study. The first one was administered to students containing 25 close-ended items to point out their perceptions towards the impact of constructive feedback on their performance. The other one was administered to 10 lecturers to investigate their rate of providing constructive feedback to students and to point out their perceptions of the barriers that may impede feedback provision. The two questionnaires were developed by the researcher based on the relevant literature, then validated by English language professors at private and public Yemeni universities. They were administered by the researcher as a member of the teaching staff at the University to achieve a high response rate.

Concerning the first questionnaire, the participants' responses were rated on Likert's five-point scale: *Strongly agree* = 5, *Agree* = 4, *Undecided* = 3, *Disagree* = 2, and *Strongly disagree* = 1. With regard to the second questionnaire, the participants' responses to the first part were rated on Likert's five-point scale: *Always* = 5, *Sometimes* = 4, *Often* = 3, *Rarely* = 2, and *Never* = 1. The participants' responses to the second part were rated on Likert's five-point scale: *Strongly agree* = 5, *Agree* = 4, *Undecided* = 3, *Disagree* = 2, and *Strongly disagree* = 1.

## 6. Data Analysis and Discussion

### 6.1. Results Related to Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Constructive Feedback on EFL University Students' Performance

To answer this question, the descriptive statistics represented by mean scores and standard deviations were used to provide adequate data about the measures of central tendency of the variables concerning students' perceptions of the impact of constructive feedback on developing EFL university students' performance. The responses were analyzed at the level of each item and at the level of the questionnaire as a whole based on Likert's rating scale as criterion to discuss the results of this study, where 5–4.20 = very high, 4.19–3.40 = high, 3.39–2.60 = medium, 2.59–1.80 = low, and 1.79–1 = very low.

*Table 1*

*Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Constructive Feedback*

Rank	Item	Mean	Std.
	<b>Constructive feedback:</b>		
1	is useful to determine my future learning.	4.20	0.91
2	changes my learning strategies.	4.00	0.88
3	reinforces my way of learning.	3.90	0.82
4	helps lecturers adjust their way of teaching.	3.80	0.85
5	helps me reflect on my understanding.	3.75	0.74
6	provides me with clear expectations about my learning.	3.70	1.01
7	strengthens my good performance.	3.66	0.86
8	helps the lecturers evaluate my progress.	3.60	1.22
9	helps lecturers acknowledge my achievement.	3.55	1.03
10	identifies areas which need further improvements.	3.51	1.02
11	suggests some techniques to follow for improving my learning.	3.45	0.85
12	builds my self-confidence.	3.39	0.85
13	reduces the gap between my current and desired learning.	3.35	1.01
14	improves my learning experiences.	3.34	1.03
15	improves my language skills.	3.25	1.05
16	makes me self-regulated about my learning.	3.24	1.00
17	motivates me for further improvement.	3.22	1.01
18	delineates my poor performance.	3.20	1.02
19	provides me with remedial action plan for correcting mistakes.	3.20	1.02
20	stimulates my growth and professional development.	3.18	1.15
21	increases my content knowledge.	3.11	1.15
22	improves my self-efficacy of learning.	3.05	1.31
23	improves my learning self-correction.	3.00	1.22
24	increases my awareness of time management skills.	2.95	0.91

Rank	Item	Mean	Std.
25	increases my awareness of communication skills.	2.85	1.02
	<b>Total Average</b>	<b>3.41</b>	<b>0.99</b>

As seen in Table 1 above, the mean scores of the items concerning the impact of constructive feedback are ranged from (4.20–2.85) and the total average of the results is (3.41), indicating students' high perceptions towards the impact of constructive feedback on developing their performance. At the level of each item of the questionnaire, students showed high perception in (11) items ranging from (4.20–3.45) based on Likert's rating scale and medium perceptions in (14) items ranging from (3.39–2.85). The highest rank goes to the first item, "constructive feedback is useful to determine my future learning," with a mean of (4.20). This could be attributed to the role of lecturers and students in setting and sharing predetermined goals of constructive feedback. The lowest rank goes to the last item, "constructive feedback increases my awareness of communication skills," with a mean of (2.85). This could be attributed to the lack of time, which may impede students' participation while receiving feedback.

These findings are consistent with the studies of Andrade et al. (2009), Lipnevich and Smith (2009), Panadero and Romero (2014), and Yorke (2003), which showed that constructive feedback is useful for enhancing students' learning and teachers' teaching, improving students' self-efficacy and self-regulation, and raising their motivation to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

## 6.2. Results Related to the Rate of Lecturers' Provision of Constructive Feedback

To answer this question, the descriptive statistics represented by mean scores and standard deviations were also used to provide data about the measures of central tendency of the variables concerning lecturers' rate of providing constructive feedback in classrooms. The responses were analyzed at the level of each item and at the level of the questionnaire as a whole based on Likert's rating scale.

**Table 2**  
***Descriptive Statistics of Lecturers' Provision of Constructive Feedback***

Rank	Item	Mean	Std.
1	I focus on developing students' behavior rather than the person.	3.75	1.21
2	I always provide students with constructive feedback.	3.60	1.00
3	I provide constructive feedback on time.	3.55	1.05
4	I provide objective constructive feedback.	3.50	1.08
5	I provide regular constructive feedback.	3.46	0.86
6	I provide both oral and written constructive feedback.	3.40	1.11
7	I point out the goals of feedback previously.	3.40	0.85
8	I check students' understanding of feedback.	3.10	1.09
9	I provide fair feedback.	3.00	1.10
10	I address task goals directly.	2.99	1.15
11	I share clear learning goals with students.	2.80	1.03
12	I check constructive feedback application in future tasks.	2.75	1.00
	<b>Total Average</b>	<b>3.28</b>	<b>1.04</b>

As shown in Table 2 above, the means of the items concerning the rate of lecturers' provision of constructive feedback to students in classrooms range from (3.75–2.75) with a total average of (3.28) and a standard deviation of (1.04). This indicates that the lecturers showed medium provision of constructive feedback in classrooms to develop students' performance.

At the level of each item of the first section of the lecturers' questionnaire, it has been found that the lecturers showed high provision of constructive feedback in (7) items ranging from (3.75–3.40) based on Likert's rating scale and medium provision of constructive feedback in (5) items ranging from (3.10–2.75). The highest rank goes to first item, which deals with lecturers' focus on developing students' behavior rather than the person when providing feedback, with a mean of (3.75) and a standard deviation of (1.21). This could be attributed to the nature of constructive feedback. The lowest rank goes to last item, which deals with lecturers' checking of constructive feedback application in future tasks, with a mean of (2.75) and a standard deviation of (1.04). This could be attributed to the lack of time.

The results of this part are in line with the findings of Hattie and Timperley (2007), which showed that feedback should be provided to students effectively, consistently, and fairly, and it should focus on the behavior rather than the person.

### 6.3. 3. Results Related to Lecturers' Perceptions of the Main Barriers that Impede the Provision of Constructive Feedback

*Table 3*  
*Descriptive Statistics of Lecturers' Perceptions of Barriers of Providing Constructive Feedback*

Rank	Item	Mean	Std.
	<b>Constructive feedback is thought to:</b>		
1	need a supportive environment based on trust and respect.	3.90	0.85
2	need some skills from lecturers.	3.84	0.70
3	lead to undesirable consequences for students.	3.77	0.64
4	put lecturers in more effort.	3.65	0.71
5	put teachers in more time.	3.50	0.70
6	need students' interest in receiving feedback.	3.36	1.19
7	damage the rapport between students and lecturers.	3.35	1.02
8	be difficult to apply by students.	3.24	1.03
9	need lecturers' comfort when delivering it.	3.19	1.10
10	need much time.	2.89	0.45
11	put students in time and effort.	2.78	0.85
12	need lecturers' interest in providing feedback.	2.61	1.06
	<b>Total Average</b>	<b>3.34</b>	<b>0.82</b>

As shown in Table 3 above, the means of the items concerning lecturers' perceptions of the barriers impeding the provision of constructive feedback to students in classrooms range from (3.90–2.61) with a total average of (3.34) and a standard deviation of (0.82), indicating that lecturers showed a high perception of the availability of some barriers impeding the provision of constructive feedback to students in classrooms for developing students' performance.

At the level of each item of the second section of the lecturers' questionnaire, it has been found that lecturers showed high perceptions of the barriers that may impede the provision of constructive feedback in (6) items ranging from (3.90–3.50) based on Likert's rating scale and medium perception in (7) items ranging from (3.36–2.61). The highest rank goes to the first item, which deals with the need for creating a supportive environment based on trust and respect when providing constructive feedback, with a mean of (3.90) and a standard deviation of (0.85). The lowest rank goes to the last item, which deals with the need for lecturers' interest in providing feedback, with a mean of (2.61) and a standard deviation of (1.06).

The results of this question are in line with Altmiller (2016) and McCutcheon and Duchemin (2020), who showed that feedback providers such as teachers, supervisors, and lecturers encounter some barriers, such as the lack of time, fear of damaging rapport, students' resistance, and lack of comfort with feedback delivery.

## 7. Conclusion

Providing constructive feedback is an essential factor beyond effective learning and teaching. It helps students improve their learning and teachers update and adapt their teaching methods. To achieve good results from feedback, it must be delivered in a suitable learning environment, convey effective communication and dialogue, set clear learning goals, and be applied using appropriate pedagogic strategies. It should be immediate, specific, relevant, understandable, and non-judgmental. Through constructive feedback, students can come to know their understanding of materials, seek progress, and improve self-regulation and self-evaluation.

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