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EXPLORING FEEDBACK MECHANISMS TO STRENGTHEN ESL LEARNER ENGAGEMENT AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract:

This study examines how the deliberate use of structured feedback, alongside continuous teacher reflection, contributes to improved learner engagement and academic achievement in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings. Informed by formative assessment frameworks and reflective pedagogy, the research adopted a mixed-methods approach in the Kota Bharu District. Data were collected through a combination of student questionnaires, achievement records, semi-structured teacher interviews, reflective teaching logs, and systematic classroom observations. The results indicate a positive shift in students' learning behaviours, including increased motivation, active participation, and enhanced language development. Insights from qualitative findings highlight the importance of feedback that is purposeful and responsive, as well as reflective practices reinforced through collaborative professional learning. While practical constraints such as class size and instructional time posed challenges, engagement in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) supported ongoing pedagogical improvement. The study underscores the value of integrating feedback and reflection as complementary strategies for strengthening instructional quality and learner outcomes, offering relevant considerations for ESL practitioners and education stakeholders.

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ESL Learner Engagement, Feedback Mechanisms, Professional Learning Communities, Reflective Practice



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Introduction

In the domain of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, the quality of teacher feedback and their engagement in reflective practice are essential components for improving learner outcomes. Feedback functions as a formative tool that helps learners identify strengths and areas for improvement, thereby enhancing motivation and academic achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Concurrently, teachers' reflective practice the process by which educators critically examine their instructional methods and student responses serves as a vital mechanism for ongoing professional growth and instructional refinement (Schön, 1983; Farrell, 2018).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of their importance, many ESL classrooms in contexts such as Kota Bharu District continue to rely on traditional teaching approaches, with limited integration of systematic feedback and reflective practices. Teachers often face challenges including large class sizes, insufficient time, and lack of professional development opportunities, which restrict their ability to deliver consistent, effective feedback and to engage in meaningful reflection on their teaching (Brookhart, 2017; Farrell, 2018). Additionally, cultural and institutional factors can impact teachers' reflective engagement, often limiting the frequency and depth of their professional self-evaluation (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

To address these challenges, this study adopts Lesson Study, a collaborative professional development model that facilitates cycles of joint lesson planning, observation, and reflective dialogue among teachers (Lewis, 2002). Within this framework, ESL teachers collaborate to enhance their feedback strategies and develop reflective habits that inform instructional decisions. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) further support sustained teacher collaboration and shared learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Prior research demonstrates that Lesson Study can effectively foster teacher reflection and improve feedback delivery in ESL settings, leading to better learner engagement and achievement (Yoshida, 2012).

This action research investigates the implementation of structured feedback mechanisms alongside teacher reflective practice within ESL classrooms in Kota Bharu District. It explores how these pedagogical strategies influence learner engagement and academic performance, while identifying barriers teachers face in their application. Grounded in formative assessment theory and reflective teaching models, this mixed-methods study seeks to provide evidence-

based recommendations to support ESL teachers in developing sustainable, impactful feedback and reflection practices through collaborative professional development.

Literature Review

Teacher Feedback Mechanisms in ESL Education

Effective feedback from teachers is fundamental to language learning as it provides learners with crucial information about their performance and guidance for improvement. Hattie and Timperley (2007) highlight feedback as one of the most influential factors affecting student achievement, noting that feedback is most effective when it is timely, specific, and actionable. In the ESL context, feedback must be carefully tailored to address learners' linguistic proficiency and cultural backgrounds to be effective (Carless & Boud, 2018). However, ESL teachers often encounter challenges in consistently delivering high-quality feedback due to factors such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient training (Brookhart, 2017). These barriers can reduce the impact of feedback on learner motivation and progress.

Reflective Practice as Teacher Professional Development

Reflective practice has long been recognised as a core component of teacher professional development, particularly in language education. Donald Schön (1983) conceptualised reflection as a process where educators critically examine their teaching actions to improve future practice. In ESL contexts, this reflective cycle enables teachers to evaluate instructional strategies, classroom interaction, and the effectiveness of feedback provided to learners.

Building on this, Thomas S. C. Farrell (2018) argues that reflective teaching is especially critical in ESL classrooms due to the diversity of learner proficiency, cultural backgrounds, and language needs. Reflection allows teachers to adapt feedback strategies—such as corrective feedback, formative feedback, and peer feedback—to better support learner engagement and language acquisition. This aligns with recent studies which suggest that reflective teachers are more likely to implement adaptive feedback practices that enhance student motivation and participation (Mann & Walsh, 2017; Leijen et al., 2020).

From a feedback perspective, reflection plays a mediating role between teaching practices and learner outcomes. According to John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007), effective feedback is among the most powerful influences on student achievement, but its impact depends heavily on how it is designed and delivered. Reflective practitioners are better positioned to evaluate whether their feedback is timely, specific, and actionable key characteristics that drive learner engagement.

However, the implementation of reflective practice is not without challenges. Neville Hatton and David Smith (1995) highlight that reflection often remains superficial, limited to descriptive accounts rather than critical analysis. In many ESL teaching contexts, particularly in exam-oriented or hierarchical education systems, teachers may face constraints such as limited autonomy, heavy workload, and lack of institutional support, which restrict meaningful reflection (Farrell, 2015; Yuan & Lee, 2014).

Critically, while reflective practice is widely promoted, there is still limited empirical evidence directly linking teacher reflection to measurable ESL learner outcomes. Some scholars argue that reflection alone is insufficient unless it is systematically integrated with feedback mechanisms and supported by professional learning communities (Leijen et al., 2020). Furthermore, over-reliance on self-reflection may introduce bias, as teachers may not accurately assess the effectiveness of their feedback without external input such as peer observation or student feedback (Mann & Walsh, 2017).

In the context of this study, reflective practice is positioned as a foundational process that enables teachers to refine feedback mechanisms, thereby strengthening ESL learner engagement and improving learning outcomes. Future research should therefore explore structured models of reflection that are explicitly linked to feedback practices and student performance metrics.

Collaborative Professional Development: Lesson Study and PLCs

Lesson Study, originally developed in Japan, is a form of collaborative professional learning where teachers collectively plan, observe, and reflect on lessons to improve instructional practice (Lewis, 2002). The collaborative nature of Lesson Study fosters a reflective culture, providing teachers with feedback from peers and opportunities to refine their teaching strategies, including feedback delivery (Yoshida, 2012). When integrated within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Lesson Study supports sustained professional dialogue and shared accountability, which are critical for embedding reflective practices in school culture (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Research indicates that such collaborative models enhance teacher capacity and positively influence learner outcomes, particularly in ESL settings (Liu & Chen, 2019).

Integration of Feedback and Teacher Reflection

Formative assessment theory posits that effective feedback is intricately linked to reflective teaching, as teachers must continuously evaluate the impact of their instructional decisions and feedback strategies on learners (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Reflective practice allows teachers to interpret learner responses to feedback and adjust approaches to meet learner needs more effectively (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In ESL classrooms, this integration promotes a responsive teaching environment where feedback and reflection work synergistically to support learner progress and engagement.

While feedback and reflective practice are individually well-studied, limited research exists on how structured teacher reflection through collaborative models like Lesson Study specifically influences feedback practices in Malaysian ESL contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining the combined effect of professional reflection and feedback mechanisms on teaching quality and learner outcomes in Kota Bharu District.

Analysis of pre and post intervention survey data revealed a statistically significant improvement in ESL learners' engagement levels following the implementation of enhanced feedback mechanisms and reflective teaching strategies.

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Intervention Findings

Engagement Score	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Pre-Intervention	150	3.20	0.50	2.00	4.20
Post-Intervention	150	4.10	0.40	3.00	5.00

Descriptive statistics showed an increase in mean engagement scores from 3.2 (SD = 0.5) before the intervention to 4.1 (SD = 0.4) after the intervention on a 5-point scale.

Paired Samples Test	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Engagement – Post-Engagement	12.34	149	< .001

Paired-sample t-tests confirmed this increase was significant ($t(149) = 12.34, p < .001$), indicating that learners felt more motivated and involved in their language learning after teachers adopted more structured feedback and reflection practices.

Academic performance data corroborated these findings. Learners' summative assessment scores improved from an average of 65.4 (SD = 8.7) pre-intervention to 72.9 (SD = 7.5) post-intervention. The paired t-test showed this gain was statistically significant ($t(149) = 10.56, p < .001$), suggesting that the intervention positively impacted learner achievement.

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
<i>Learner Engagement Survey</i>	10	0.87

Reliability analysis of the engagement survey scales yielded Cronbach's alpha values above .85, confirming internal consistency.

Feedback and Reflective Findings

Thematic analysis of teacher interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations uncovered four key themes related to feedback and reflective practice in ESL instruction.

Timely and Specific Feedback Enhances Learner Engagement

Teachers emphasized the critical role of timely, precise feedback in fostering student engagement. One teacher stated:

“When I give feedback immediately after an activity, students are more attentive and eager to improve. It helps them see exactly where they went wrong while it's still fresh.” (Teacher 3, Interview)

Specificity in feedback was equally valued. Another teacher reflected.

“Specific comments like ‘Try to pronounce the ‘th’ sound more softly’ make a big difference compared to just saying ‘Good job.’ Students understand what to work on.”
(Teacher 2, Reflective Journal)

Observations further supported these perceptions, showing increased learner responsiveness during lessons where feedback was integrated promptly and clearly.

Reflective Practice Supports Instructional Improvement

Teachers found reflective practice, including maintaining journals and engaging in Lesson Study discussions, instrumental for professional growth. As one participant shared.

“Maintaining a reflective journal made me think deeply about my feedback style. Sometimes I realized I wasn’t giving enough positive comments, so I adjusted.” (Teacher 4, Reflective Journal)

Another highlighted the collaborative nature of reflection.

“Collaborating with peers to observe and discuss lessons opened my eyes to new ways of encouraging reflection in my students.” (Teacher 1, Interview)

Such reflection enabled teachers to adapt instructional approaches more effectively to student needs.

Challenges in Implementation

Several barriers emerged as significant impediments to effective feedback and reflective teaching. Teachers reported that large class sizes restricted their ability to provide individualized feedback.

“With over 40 students in one class, it’s really difficult to give each learner personalized feedback. Sometimes, I have to write brief comments or none at all because of time.” (Teacher 1, Reflective Journal)

Time constraints further limited teachers’ capacity.

“The curriculum is packed, and we have so many administrative tasks. Finding time to not only give feedback but also to guide students in reflection feels almost impossible.” (Teacher 3, Interview)

In addition, learner reluctance often influenced by cultural factors, affected engagement in reflective activities.

“Some students feel shy or uncomfortable sharing their thoughts in group reflections. I think it’s partly cultural; they don’t want to stand out or seem different.”
(Teacher 5, Interview)

These challenges highlight the contextual difficulties in implementing formative practices in ESL classrooms.

Collaborative Professional Development Enhances Practice

The supportive environment created by Lesson Study workshops and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) was viewed as essential in overcoming challenges and refining teaching practices. A teacher expressed.

“The Lesson Study workshops gave me practical ideas on giving feedback and structured time to reflect on what worked and what didn’t.” (Teacher 2, Interview)

Another participant noted.

“Being part of a PLC made me feel supported. We share challenges openly and learn from each other’s experiences, which has improved my confidence in using feedback effectively.” (Teacher 5, Reflective Journal)

These collaborative professional development structures fostered a culture of continuous improvement and instructional innovation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research substantiates the critical role of effective feedback mechanisms and teacher reflective practice in catalyzing ESL learner engagement and academic achievement. While challenges exist, professional development models grounded in collaboration and reflection offer a promising pathway for enhancing instructional quality. Future studies should further explore scalable strategies for feedback and reflection in diverse ESL settings.

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