

# Omani Students' Perceptions of Effectiveness of Formative Feedback

Ahmed Yousif Abdelraheem\* and Clifford Omodele Fyle\*

Department of Instructional & Learning Technologies, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which Omani students perceive the effectiveness of formative feedback in relation with student educational level, GPA, instructor experience, and cohort. A questionnaire of twenty-one items to measure students' perceptions was used. A sample of 102 students was used to collect data. Statistical analysis shows no significant differences in students' perceptions due to students' educational levels and due to instructor experiences, but there were significant differences due to students' cohort and due to students' GPA. The study concluded with recommendations to improve the weak areas and revise the procedures and processes to ensure the provision of more effective feedback.

**Keyword:** Feedback, perceptions, Omani students

## 1 Background

Feedback has been recognized in a number of meta-analyses as being of crucial importance in teaching and learning contexts (Hattie, Biggs & Purdie 1996; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998; Shute, 2008). Specifically, such feedback is usually formative and encapsulates directive and facilitative functions (Black & William). Directive feedback provides information to a student about what needs to be revised and facilitative feedback offers students comments and suggestions on enhancing their intellectual orientation and deepening their knowledge about the content of a particular task or assignment.

Formative feedback is also generally perceived by students as being most useful for understanding and completing assignment tasks (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011; Ferguson, 2011; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Poulos & Mahoney, 2008). In this regard, formative feedback can be used to signal to a student how well he or she is performing in a particular task, to reduce the level of cognitive load experienced, and to provide information that facilitates the correction of errors, misconceptions, and ineffectual approaches to task completion (Shute, 2008). Effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction are key indicators cited in the literature by students when revealing their perceptions about formative feedback. Fleckhammer & Wise (2010) indicated that the faster return of grades accompanied by a brief individual comment on the overall quality of the work (rather than more extensive comments embedded as annotations within the assignment document) meets student expectations with respect to feedback.

Effective feedback has been characterized as feedback that is 'appropriate and timely' and 'suited to the needs of the situation' (Poulos & Mahoney, 2008). On the other hand, Sadler (1989) defines feedback as information about the gap between learning that the student has demonstrated and the learning that they ought to achieve. According to Sadler (2013), feedback is often regarded as the most critical element in enabling learning from an assessment event. Hattie and Timperly (2007) emphasizing the provider of the feedback, defined feedback as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. Shute (2008) defined formative feedback as information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning. In a study of undergraduate students at the University of Sydney, Poulos and Mahoney (2008) found that perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback not only included mode of delivery and timeliness

\*Corresponding author e-mail: [ahmedyar@squ.edu.om](mailto:ahmedyar@squ.edu.om), [cfyle@squ.edu.om](mailto:cfyle@squ.edu.om)

but also how credible the lecturer providing the feedback is. Lizzio and Wilson (2008) on the other hand, found when investigating Australian university students perceptions of written feedback that developmental feedback, which meant the extent to which students think they could use or apply the feedback was most closely linked with what they considered to be effective feedback. Feedback can be effective as learners become more discerning, more intuitive, more analytical, and generally more able to create, independently, productions of high quality on demand.

Beaumont et. al. (2011) characterized students' perceptions of quality in terms of timeliness, and the provision of detailed explanatory comments supported by opportunities for discussion. In a study examining student experiences of assessment in school/college and higher education in the United Kingdom, Beaumont and colleagues found that students perceived quality feedback as important for improving their work, strongly expressed their desire for guidance before submitting assignments, and asserted again and again that they made use of provided feedback. Similarly, Ferguson (2011) in a study investigating student perceptions of quality feedback in teacher education found that students perceived quality feedback in terms of timeliness and personalization with respect the assignments that they had worked on. Because students often consider 'feedback' as verbal/written comments and a grade given by an instructor for their performance on an assigned task, Ladyshewsky (2013) reports that teacher immediacy in providing feedback is an important factor in student satisfaction. Arbaugh & Hornik (2006) similarly note prompt feedback as a significant predictor of student-perceived learning and satisfaction. The National Union of Students (NUS; 2008) survey found students were unhappy with the timing of their feedback. Although students want feedback that is constructive, they have a strong preference for feedback that is prompt (Scott, 2006) and timely (Ferguson, 2011). If feedback is received late, it becomes useless to students, as many students have already moved on (Denton et al., 2008). To receive feedback early, it seems electronically delivered feedback gets the majority of student support (Chang et al., 2012). When Bridge and Appleyard (2008) asked students to consider the issue of online feedback, 88% reported that they favored online feedback because they were able to receive it faster than in the more conventional format of hand delivery. In general, students do not like generalized feedback information that is impersonal and does not relate to future assignments.

To enhance learners' perceptions of achievement or satisfaction, Keller (1983) recommended five strategies; three of which involved the use of feedback. These strategies are as follows:

1. "To maintain intrinsic satisfaction with instruction, use verbal praise and informative feedback rather than threats, surveillance, or external performance evaluation" (p. 426).
2. "To maintain quantity of performance, provide formative (corrective) feedback following the response" (p. 427).
3. "To improve the quality of performance, provide formative (corrective) feedback when it will be immediately useful, usually just before the next opportunity to practice" (p. 427).

In a study investigating prior knowledge and feedback type design on achievement and satisfaction in blended introductory university accounting course, Campbell (2013) found that students were more satisfied when they received elaborate feedback; with elaborate feedback being defined as feedback which explains to a learner why a particular response is correct or incorrect (Shute, 2008). Jones and Blankenship (2014) found that 92% indicated they were satisfied with the amount of feedback received, 81% indicated they were not expecting more feedback than was received, and 83% were often or always satisfied with the amount of feedback they received. In a study by van der Kleij, Eggen, Timmers, and Veldkamp (2012), evaluating the effects of feedback timing and learning with respect to computer-based assessment, the authors found that students perceived elaborate feedback as most useful for learning. In yet another study investigating the effects of feedback on student satisfaction and academic performance in an online classroom, Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008) found that personalized feedback provided to students resulted in greater satisfaction and academic achievement than when collective feedback was provided. Chang et al 2013 indicated that It is time for all faculty concerned with effective student learning to understand more about the provision of feedback via the assessment process. Awarding a single grade is not welcomed by students and is not conducive to improving learning

In sum, several studies have examined and found positive associations between provided formative feedback and student perceptions of effectiveness, quality, and satisfaction. However, most of these studies have been conducted in institutions of higher education in Western Europe, North America and Australia. In addition, most of the recent studies related to effects of feedback on student satisfaction have been conducted in online environments. There is a need therefore, for investigations to be conducted with students enrolled in higher education institutions in other parts of the world, particularly where face-to-face instruction is the predominant mode of instruction.

## 2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study therefore is to investigate students' perceptions of formative feedback and satisfaction in a large university in Oman where instruction is carried out in a mainly face-to-face mode. This study came as a result of students rating of instruction of the spring semester of 2013 in which it was observed their low rating of the feedback item of the survey. Students at the College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University get their feedback in different ways orally, written on the assignments sheets, through email and from discussion board of the MOODLE platform. Specifically the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback received from their instructors?
2. Do students' perceptions of effective feedback vary according to student GPA, student cohort, teaching experience of their instructors, and students' educational level?

## 3 Importance of study

The findings of this study can help instructors and university administrators understand how university students perceive feedback, their opinions of such feedback, and also how this will affect their academic achievement. This information will subsequently enable instructors to revise and reflect on the different ways they provide students with effective feedback.

## 4 Instruments

In order to develop the instrument, the researchers surveyed the literature and informally interviewed students and instructors in the College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman to get some preliminary information from them about their use of feedback and its effectiveness. The instrument used was a questionnaire composed of 21 likert-type questions for measuring students' perceptions of feedback (see Appendix 1). The survey was expected to take ten to fifteen minutes to complete. A panel of faculty members reviewed the instrument for face validation and provided suggestions for its improvement. The researchers took these suggestions on board and revised the instrument accordingly. The reliability of the instrument as measured by alpha Cronbach by the use of SPSS were found to be 0.88 for the feedback perception scale. This value is sufficient for the purpose of this study. After the creation and revision of the instrument, it was ready for distribution to the sample of the study to get the needed information. When the data had been collected it was analyzed using SPSS-21 software.

## 5 Procedure

The present study was carried out during the Fall Semester of 2014 in the College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman. The questionnaire was distributed to students who registered in the Fall Semester of 2014. The total number of students who participated in this study was 102. This college has a total student body of approximately 1629. The student gender breakdown of this college is 53.2% female and 46.7% male. The questionnaire was collected from the students and the data was entered in the computer and treated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS-21. The data was analyzed using suitable statistical methods to obtain the answers for the research questions. The following table shows the distribution of the sample.

**Table 1:** Distribution of the sample.

Variable		
Gender	Female	62
	Male	40
GPA	Low	13
	Average	42
	High	47
Cohort	2012	20
	2011	26
	2010	24
	2009	32
Educational level	Undergraduate	56
	Graduate	46
<i>Instructor's experience</i>	Short experience	52
	Long experience	48

## 6 Results and Discussion

To answer the first research question which states, "What are the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback from their instructors?," means and standard deviations were calculated as shown in Table 1.

**Table 2:** Means and standard deviations of students' perceptions about the feedback

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
p1	101	3.63	1.07	p8	102	3.41	1.01	p15	102	4.00	1.25
p2	101	3.64	1.08	p9	101	3.45	.99	p16	102	3.36	1.11
p3	102	3.30	1.11	p10	102	3.51	1.04	p17	102	3.32	1.19
p4	101	3.62	.98	p11	102	3.47	1.02	p18	101	3.57	1.02
p5	102	3.46	1.14	p12	102	3.53	1.04	p19	101	3.80	1.13
p6	101	3.40	1.15	p13	102	3.76	1.10	p20	102	3.72	1.11
p7	102	3.34	1.08	p14	102	3.66	1.25	p21	102	3.55	1.19
								total	102	3.55	.81

It is clear from Table 2 that the means are between 3.30 and 4.00 which means that student perceptions fell somewhere between "uncertainty about" and "agreement about" feedback options. Their overall perceptions was 3.55 which means they agree to some extent that the feedback they received was effective. Item P15 (getting feedback on work is important) received the highest means, which means that students perceive this item as important, and item 3 (The feedback I received was not always on time.) received the lowest ranking, which means that students were uncertain about whether they get the feedback on time or not. This result goes well with what Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan. (2010, p. 278) statement in which they said that "Fundamental beliefs about learning and the learning process will strongly influence how individuals see the role of feedback ... the students' ability or willingness to do this [act on feedback] might depend on the emotional impact of feedback ... , a student's pedagogic intelligence or the student's past experiences. This result is consistent with NUS; 2008, Scot 2006, Ferguson, 2011, Denton et al., 2008 in which students were unhappy with the timing of their feedback. Also students have a strong preference for feedback that is prompt and timely.

Concerning the second question of the study which states "Do students' perceptions of effective feedback vary according to students' GPA, students' cohort, the experience of their instructors, and students' educational level?, ANOVA was used for analysis of the GPA variable and cohort variable.

**Table 3:** ANOVA for the GPA variable

GPA	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.315	2	2.658	4.281	.016
Within Groups	61.460	99	.621		
Total	66.776	101			

Table 3 shows a significant difference in means between students' GPA in perceiving the effectiveness of the feedback they received from their instructors. To identify the direction of significant differences, Scheffe's multiple comparison was used as indicated in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Scheffe's pairwise Comparisons for students' GPA variable

(I) gpa	(J) gpa	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low	Average	-.32303	.25007	.437	-.9445	.2985
	High	-.65761*	.24691	.033	-1.2712	-.0440
Average	Low	.32303	.25007	.437	-.2985	.9445
	High	-.33457	.16730	.141	-.7504	.0812
High	Low	.65761*	.24691	.033	.0440	1.2712
	Average	.33457	.16730	.141	-.0812	.7504

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4 indicates that the high GPA students perceive the effectiveness of the feedback better than the low GPA students. This result can be justified by the fact that high GPA students' performance during the study period is usually better than the low GPA students because they exert more efforts in their studies than the low GPA students. These efforts are reflected in their positive perceptions of the feedback. In addition, Table 4 shows no significant differences were found between high GPA and average GPA students. Also, there was no significant difference between average and low GPA students. This finding is consistent with the reports by Chang (2011) and Chang et al. (2012) that the higher GPA the respondents had, the more eager they wished to receive feedback.

Regarding the students cohort variable, ANOVA statistics was used as indicated in Table 4.

**Table 5:** ANOVA for the cohort variable

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8.386	3	2.795	4.672	.004
Within Groups	58.030	97	.598		
Total	66.416	100			

Table 5 shows a significant difference in means between students cohort in perceiving the effectiveness of the feedback they received from their instructors. To identify the direction of significant differences, Scheffe's multiple comparison was used as indicated in Table 5.

**Table 6:** Scheffe's pairwise comparison

(I) cohort	(J) cohort	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
c12	c11	-.57628	.23005	.106	-1.2308	.0783
	c10	-.84855*	.23648	.007	-1.5214	-.1757
	c9	-.64189*	.22047	.043	-1.2692	-.0146
c11	c12	.57628	.23005	.106	-.0783	1.2308
	c10	-.27227	.22141	.680	-.9022	.3577
	c9	-.06561	.20422	.991	-.6466	.5154
c10	c12	.84855*	.23648	.007	.1757	1.5214
	c11	.27227	.22141	.680	-.3577	.9022
	c9	.20666	.21144	.812	-.3949	.8082
c9	c12	.64189*	.22047	.043	.0146	1.2692
	c11	.06561	.20422	.991	-.5154	.6466
	c10	-.20666	.21144	.812	-.8082	.3949

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 6 shows there were significant differences between students perceptions of the effectiveness of the feedback they receive from their instructors between student cohorts 2009 and 2012, in favor of the 2009 cohort; and between students cohorts 2010 and 2012, in favor of the 2010 cohort. In addition, the table shows no significant differences between cohorts 2011 and 2012, cohorts 2011 and 2009, and cohorts 2011 and 2010. The results could be explained by our observation based on the students in cohort 2009 and 2010 and earlier cohorts are more active and interactive in sharing their experiences and knowledge than those who came after them. For cohort 2011 and 2012 they are similar in their attitudes towards feedback.

Concerning the instructor experience variable, a T test statistics for independent sample was used as indicated in Table 7. In order to determine the instructor's experience the researchers wrote the instructor name on the envelope collected from each group.

**Table 7:** T test for the differences in means of instructor experience variable

Instructor experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	sign.
Short	52	3.4853	.78391	98	-1.139	0.258
Long	48	3.6636	.78104			

Table 6 shows no significant differences in the means of students' perception due to instructor experience. This means that students perceive feedback from their instructors in the same way regardless of the teaching experience (short or long) of their instructors. One expects that long experience instructors may provide effective feedback more than the short experience instructors but that was not met in this study.

Regarding students' educational level (postgraduate vs. undergraduate) variable, the T test statistics for independent sample was used as indicated in Table 7.

**Table 8:** T test for the differences in means of educational level variable

Education level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig.
undergraduate	56	3.6838	.73106	100.	1..81	.074
graduate	46	3.3944	.88525			

Table 8 shows no significant differences in means of students' perception due to students' educational level. This means that students perceive feedback in a similar manner whether they are postgraduate or undergraduate students. This can be explained by the fact that these students, in most cases were taught by the same instructors who gave similar feedback to their students.

## 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study attempted to answer the following questions: What are the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback from their instructors? Do students' perceptions of effective feedback vary according to students GPA, students' cohort, the experience of their instructors, and students educational level? The findings of this study show that the overall perception was 3.55 which means they agree to some extent that the feedback they received was effective. No significant differences were observed in the student perceptions due to students' educational level and due to instructor experience. Also, there were no significant differences between the 2011 and 2012 cohorts, between the 2011 and 2009 cohorts, and between the 2011 and 2010 cohorts. This study also reveals that high GPA students perceive the effectiveness of the feedback better than low GPA students, and significant differences between students perceptions of the effectiveness of the feedback they receive from their instructors between student cohorts 2009 and 2012, in favor of cohort 2009 cohort; and between student cohorts 2010 and 2012, in favor of cohort 2010. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Instructors should pay attention to the value and quality of the feedback given to students.
- Feedback given to students can be provided orally or in written format, but must be relevant, reasonable, and on time.

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Appendix 1  
Sultan Qaboos University  
College of education  
Instructional and learning technologies Department

Dear Student,

We are conducting a study on feedback as perceived by students and their satisfaction with it.

Could you please respond to this questionnaire. Your responses will be treated confidentially and will be used only for the research purposes.

**Section One**

**Please put ( √ ) against your option**

Gender: Female Male

GPA: less than 2 between 2 & 3 between 3 & 4

My instructor experience: short exp long exp

Enrolment year: 2009 2010 2011 2012

Education level: undergrad postgrad

**Section two**

**Here are statements about feedback you received during your study. Please put ( √ ) against your option**

Item #	Item statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	The feedback was sufficient.					
2	The feedback focused on my performance, and on my learning.					
3	The feedback I received was not always on time.					
4	The received Feedback was understandable					
5	The marking criteria for the assignment was clear.					
6	The written feedback from the instructor was clear and easy to read.					
7	The amount of received feedback was reasonable.					
8	The feedback returned with my work was fair, useful and balanced.					
9	The feedback gave me enough information on where I went wrong.					
10	The feedback identified aspects of the work where I did well.					
11	The feedback that I received was relevant to my practical report.					
12	The feedback was helpful in improving my future performance.					
13	The feedback depends on the instructor providing it.					
14	Receiving the final marks on assignments I have completed was necessary to me.					
15	Getting feedback on work is important.					
16	There was enough feedback through the semester					
17	Different types of feedback were given for different types of courses.					
18	The feedback shows me what to do when I get it					
19	Knowing where to get feedback if needed is important					
20	One-on-one feedback from the instructor is effective.					
21	Written feedback is better than oral feedback.					