Impacts of Instructor Feedback Quality and Timing on Student Perceptions and Learning Outcomes: A Qualitative Study

Student’s Name:

Institution:

Course:

Instructor:

Date:

**Abstract**

The qualitative research addresses the gap in understanding the ideal timing for quality instructor feedback across different levels, contexts, and faculties. This ambiguity hinders the optimization of feedback timing for maximum impact on student learning and improvement. This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach involving 200 teachers and students from selected Mississippi District of Education community colleges. An open-ended questionnaire will be used for data collection, and then a thematic analysis will be conducted. There are limitations, such as the potential need for more generalizability of the findings from community colleges, data ambiguity, and geographical limits. Nevertheless, the study findings will be significant, offering insights to refine feedback timing to enhance its quality and effectiveness in improving students’ engagement and learning.

**Introduction of Study**

Feedback is an essential aspect of education that allows students and instructors to engage in reflection and improvement to improve learning outcomes (Camarata & Slieman, 2020). Similarly, feedback provided valuable insights for effective teaching and learning (Roach, 2023). Feedback may be in the form of praise, correction, cues, or goal setting issued face-to-face or written by an instructor or peer review (Camarata & Slieman, 2020). For instructor feedback, there have been debates about its effectiveness and variables that promote student perceptions and learning. The notable variables include feedback quality and timing (immediate, delayed, or periodic) (Adams & McNab, 2013; Camarata & Slieman, 2020). Feedback given immediately (provided shortly after completion of the task), delayed (given days or weeks later), or periodic (at regular intervals of the semester) have varied impacts on students (Roach, 2023). However, there is a significant gap in knowledge about how students perceive the quality and usefulness of feedback based on its timing. Therefore, this qualitative research investigates how instructor feedback quality and timing influence students’ perceptions and learning improvements.

Key terms: *instructor feedback timing, student perceptions, learning outcomes*.

**Problem Statement**

Different studies have explored the role of instructor feedback in students’ learning outcomes, revealing various factors that influence the value of feedback in performance improvement (Roach, 2023; Cunningham, 2019). Some students perceive feedback primarily as corrective rather than constructive and encounter difficulties grasping the academic discourse (Luhach, 2020). Myriad studies have also explored the determinants of instructor feedback quality (Haughney et al., 2020; Evans, 2013; Baranczy & Best, 2020; Roach, 2023), revealing that quality feedback should be specific, positive, timely, engaging, encouraging students to improve. While most of these variables are clear and understandable, limited knowledge about timeliness makes feedback of a good quality (Haughney et al., 2020; Roach, 2023).

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of timing in determining the quality and effectiveness of instructor feedback, more clarity is needed regarding the ideal timing of feedback across different student performance levels, learning contexts, and learner preferences. This ambiguity hinders the optimization of feedback timing for maximum impact on student learning and improvement. Therefore, the proposed qualitative research aims to bridge this gap by exploring and defining the most suitable timing parameters for delivering quality instructor feedback. This investigation will contribute to understanding how different timing intervals influence the quality, impact, and reception of feedback among students and the subsequent impacts on learning.

**Research Questions**

1. How do community college students perceive the quality of instructor feedback given at different times – immediately, delayed, or periodically?
2. How do community college instructors perceive the quality of instructor feedback given at different times – immediately, delayed, or periodically?
3. What is the best timing for quality instructor feedback that effectively guides students to improve learning and engagement?
4. How do the quality and timing of instructor feedback differ across assessments and faculties?
5. How does feedback timing and quality is different from high school to first year experience in college?

**Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

Research Design

The study applies a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach that seeks to understand the lived experiences of students and instructors about the quality and timing of feedback. The phenomenological framework allows for an in-depth exploration and rich qualitative data for analysis (Larsen & Adu, 2021).

Population and Sampling

The target participants for this study are teachers and students from various Mississippi district community colleges and faculties. Purposeful sampling will be utilized to select 200 participants who meet the specified criteria of being an instructor or student in the community college chosen. Participant recruitment will follow a structured process. The selected college administrations will initially be contacted to explain the study’s objectives and seek their cooperation. Subsequently, informed consent forms will be distributed to teachers and students willing to participate. Flyers or emails may be employed to disseminate information about the study to potential participants.

Data Collection

The study will use questionnaires with four main sections. The first section will gather background data such as age, faculty, and class size. The subsequent sections will contain open-ended questions to collect detailed responses about the participants’ opinions, experiences, and perceptions. The rationale for using a questionnaire is based on its demonstrated accuracy and prior use in studies exploring the student’s role, value, and utilization of instructor feedback in college writing courses (Roach, 2023) and composition classes (Cunningham, 2019). The online questionnaires will be distributed to participants, granting them two weeks to complete via a credible survey website. Following data collection, responses will be examined for missing or erroneous entries, organized, and prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

The study will use thematic analysis - qualitative data analysis involving identifying and analyzing patterns, similarities, and differences within the dataset (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This method entails the initial coding of data segments and grouping related codes into broader themes or categories containing critical information. The process demands scrutiny to ensure that the identified themes accurately represent the data while maintaining coherence and consistency (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researcher then refines and defines the themes to create a comprehensive and clear understanding of the quality and timing of instructor feedback.

**Abbreviated Literature Review**

**Theoretical Framework**

Understanding feedback quality and timing is possible from different theoretical frameworks. Notable frameworks for this study include the feedback intervention theory, mental models, and the Discourse Communities theory. The Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT), conceived by Kluger and DeNisi in 1996, offers a comprehensive framework illuminating feedback’s impact on performance and learning. It emphasizes tailoring feedback to individual goals, traits, and self-regulation and the pivotal role of timing in motivation and self-regulation enhancement. FIT recognizes the nature of feedback processes, asserting immediate feedback’s efficacy in stimulating learning and motivating students, but it also acknowledges the complexity of feedback processes.

The role of instructors' feedback also intersects with mental models - cognitive frameworks influencing how feedback is interpreted and acted upon (Callender et al., 2016). Immediate feedback swiftly adjusts mental models, facilitating the assimilation of new insights (Riddell, 2015). Conversely, delayed feedback triggers reflective processes within mental models, fostering deeper understanding (Jones et al., 2011). Periodic feedback intertwines with the evolution of these mental models as students accumulate experiences and integrate feedback over time. The influence of feedback timing also operates within the context of Discourse communities - the distinct academic and social environments characterized by unique language, practices, and values (Pennell, 2012). Immediate feedback aligns with fast-paced Discourse, crucial for rapid adaptation, while delayed feedback resonates with deliberate reflection.

**Instructor Feedback and Learning**

A study by Haughney et al. (2020) concluded that four primary accepted standards determine instructor feedback quality: the feedback must be specific, positive, and timely and encourage students’ active participation. Effective feedback must give students a timely opportunity to act and the instructor time to assess the students’ changes after implementing the feedback (Haughney et al., 2020). This study further argued that measuring the quality of instructor feedback is not a typical occurrence except for the timing and tone. However, reviewing the quality of instructor feedback using a standard assessment is also challenged by the variations across faculty (Evans, 2013). University faculties disagree on the definition of appropriate assessment feedback, insinuating that the content and context that makes ‘appropriate’ feedback varies (Evans, 2013). While these studies differ on factors defining quality feedback, they both highlight timing as an essential factor. Haughney et al. (2020) consider timeliness as a virtue of quality feedback, and Evans (2013) considers the need for ample time between when feedback is issued, implementation, and reevaluation.

While instructor feedback primarily aims to support learning and improvement, performance changes are not the only determinant of quality feedback (Baranczyk & Best, 2020). The study on 217 students given general and specific feedback revealed that low performers had improved results after feedback, average performers were unaffected, and top performers decreased after receiving specific feedback. On this note, Baranczyk and Best (2020) concluded that students’ initial performance affects the quality and value of instructor feedback on subsequent performances. Specific feedback was detrimental to the top performers and not impactful on average students. Thus, assessing the quality of feedback based solely on the learners’ performance changes may give inaccurate conclusions. Notably, the timing of the feedback remains essential to maximizing the effectiveness and implementation of feedback (Baranczyk & Best (2020).

The timeliness and clarity of feedback also determine how it influences students' learning experiences and outcomes (Adams and McNab, 2013). Boyles (2017) adds to this knowledge by finding that interactive and timely feedback creates a more conducive learning environment for undergraduate students. A study by Callender et al. (2016) also revealed that instructor feedback is pivotal in refining metacognitive accuracy, impacting study behaviors and actual performance. However, while both these studies highlight the importance of timing in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of instructor feedback, they do not clarify the nature of timing. Brod’s (2023) study of middle school teachers implementing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula with at-risk students highlights the significance of teacher support. The study underscores the importance of adequately equipping educators in curriculum implementation, including issuing quality feedback.

The quality of feedback, as expressed in a study by Roach (2023), is based on the outcomes of learners’ engagement and personalized discussions. The study highlights the preference for timely, conversational feedback and suggests further research on students’ feedback attitudes. Meanwhile, Roloson (2023) explores middle school teachers’ views on restorative justice practices, indirectly highlighting the role of positive relationships and constructive feedback in shaping student behavior. While Roach (2023) uses the term “effective” feedback, Roloson (2023) uses the term “constructive” feedback to refer to quality feedback with positive learning outcomes for students. However, both agree that timeliness is a determinant of effective or constructive feedback that engages the students, identifies weaknesses, and suggests ways of improvement (Roach, 2023; Roloson, 2023).

Cunningham (2019) supports this argument by finding that college composition students’ attitudes toward instructor feedback are also influenced by time and personalization of the feedback. The study found that timely and personalized instructor feedback provoked more engagement and motivation for improvement. Hewitt’s (2023) research on challenges in implementing collaborative learning in mathematics classrooms also indirectly underlines the significance of timely, individualized feedback and support in heterogeneous group settings. The study identifies poor timing as a critical challenge in affecting the implementation and effectiveness of instructor feedback. However, these studies leave a significant gap about the appropriate time for quality feedback. Neither students nor instructors have been investigated on what timing constitutes quality feedback – whether it is given instantly, delayed, or periodically.

**Limitations of the Study**

The study has several limitations that could compromise the generalizability and validity of findings. Using population from community colleges in Mississippi could limit the generalizability to higher learning institutions with varied cultural backgrounds, policies, and socioeconomic statuses. Secondly, relying on self-reported data via questionnaires introduces potential biases and inaccuracies, as respondents may need to recall or report their feedback experiences accurately. Moreover, the study overlooks individual student or instructor-based characteristics, such as learning styles and preferences, which could significantly influence perceptions of feedback timing. Additionally, the research needs to explore the impact of different feedback formats.

**Implications of the Study**

The study findings could suggest ways to improve instructor feedback quality and timing to optimize its effectiveness and students' learning. Understanding student preferences and needs for immediate, delayed, or periodic feedback can help instructors tailor feedback strategies to improve education. Incorporating student and instructor perceptions into feedback policies and promoting student feedback literacy are crucial to optimizing feedback practices and effectiveness. Feedback issues at the right time could have optimal quality and impact the performance and learning process.

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