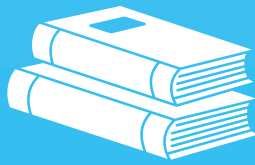
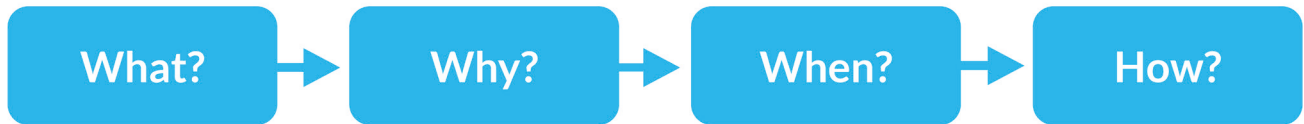


Theory Guide:



Feedback

Feedback: Overview



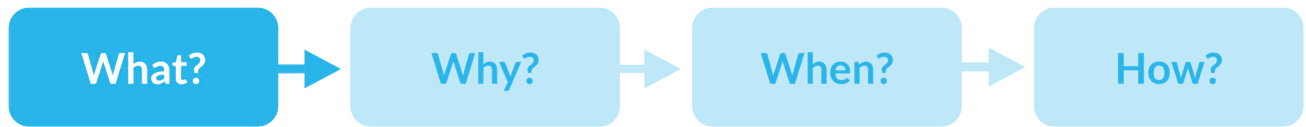
In this theory guide you will understand:

- what feedback is
- why it is so important for teachers to use feedback
- when feedback should be used
- how teachers can give feedback



Feedback:

What is feedback?



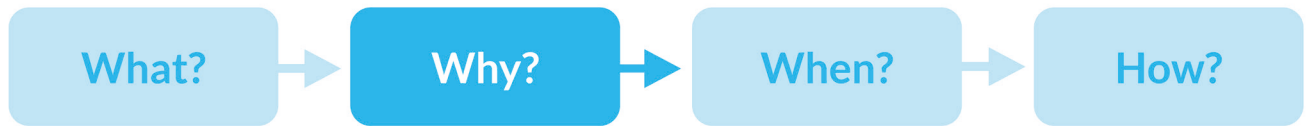
Feedback can be defined as information given to students that aims to improve learning. Often, it aims to help students close the gap between where they are now and a goal that represents improvement. It can be written, verbal, from technology, teachers, peers or the student themselves.

Feedback is intimately connected to the process of learning and formative assessment as a whole: teachers set learning goals, check for understanding, give feedback, adjusting their instruction to meet students' needs. The tasks teachers design for students should elicit the information they need to make inferences about what students understand regarding the important ideas they are teaching. Poorly designed tasks will not allow teachers to give useful feedback. See our [planning theory guide](#) for more on planning effective tasks.

We will focus on feedback that is formative, i.e. something students can act upon to improve. A GCSE grade is summative: it tells students about their performance in comparison to others but does not allow for them to improve upon it. Feedback that contains a grade (even if paired with other information on how to improve) can be problematic. William (2020) suggests using grades sparingly and at the end of a learning sequence.

Feedback:

Why is feedback important?

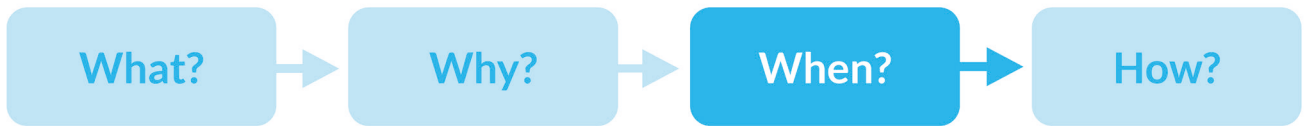


Feedback can have a powerful positive effect on learning. But feedback can actually negatively impact learning (compared to no feedback at all) (Wisniewski et al., 2020). So we need to look at the evidence about what makes feedback effective. This won't guarantee that feedback will benefit learning but it will give teachers the best chance.

Feedback can get students to think hard if it is designed carefully. When students think hard about important ideas, this supports their learning. Wiliam (2016) encourages teachers to “make feedback detective work”. Teachers need to do less of the thinking for their students e.g. by not correcting their errors for them, and design feedback so that students do more of the heavy cognitive lifting. For example, instead of pointing out students' mistakes, put anonymised answers on the board and tell students that three answers need correcting - students discuss which and why. Or a teacher could circulate during student work and highlight areas students should look back on in one colour and things they think are effective or correct in another. Students then need to work out why the teacher has highlighted these aspects of their work. These examples get students to do the thinking. However, you can see that for students to engage purposefully with feedback, they have to be motivated to do so.

Feedback:

When should feedback be used?



To move learning forward

Feedback should be used when it has the capacity to move learning forward (Collin & Quigley, 2021). This means it should help students understand something they can apply to tasks in the future. Whilst feedback should not be so vague that it is not actionable, it must teach students something generalisable so they can learn something useful from it.

For example, feedback such as “Make your introduction more engaging” is too vague to be useful. But, “Switch those two sentences around” is probably too specific to be generalised (it’s not clear why). Better feedback would elicit or remind the student that short statements can be a punchy start to an argument and get them to look back at their introduction to work out what to do.

Feedback that is personal e.g. “You are really smart at this.” may suggest to the student that doing well in this area is about talent rather than effort. This could dissuade them from striving to improve (Collin & Quigley, 2021).

Immediate or delayed feedback?

There is no one optimal time to give feedback - the research shows that feedback can be effective if it is immediate or delayed. So, how to teachers decide when to give feedback? It will likely depend on three things (Collin & Quigley, 2021):

The task: Sometimes the task provides the feedback, e.g. in P.E. a student recognises that their technique must be poor because their serve is constantly 'out'. Other times feedback is unclear and teachers may want to give it immediately to prevent misconceptions arising.

The students: On particular tasks, some students may benefit from immediate feedback if going too far wrong is likely to confuse them further. However, others may benefit from realising it for themselves. Delayed feedback may cause students to retrieve information from mind, consolidating learning more than if they had immediate feedback.

The class: If a misconception is fundamental and widespread, immediate whole-class feedback could benefit student learning in future.

The frequency of feedback should not be prescribed

It is problematic to create policies that suggest how often (especially when it is very frequent) teachers should provide feedback. We have to think about the opportunity cost to teachers giving feedback: what else could they be doing that might be more impactful for student learning and, their own wellbeing (when it comes to marking)?

Feedback on both errors and successes

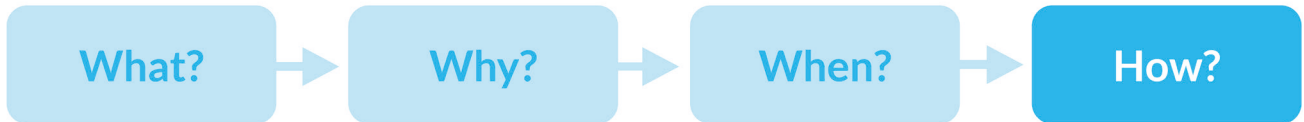
Often feedback is thought of as telling a student how to improve. But feedback should aim to strengthen students' understanding of what they are doing well too (Collin & Quigley, 2021), i.e. help them to learn from success.

When students are ready to hear it and do something with it

The most important thing is what the students do with the feedback. Students need to pay attention to the feedback, hear it as developmental (rather than criticism) and understand how to apply it.

Feedback:

How should teachers give feedback?



Key principles from the research and ideas we have summarised in the previous sections:

Treat feedback as part of the learning process: teachers must know their learning goals and plan activities that elicit the thinking and information they need to make inferences about student learning. They must use techniques that gather this evidence from students - see our theory and technique guides on checking for understanding.

Develop the student: feedback should help the student improve on tasks they haven't been set yet. It shouldn't be personal (about ability).

Specific but generalisable: feedback should be granular because vague feedback is unlikely to be beneficial. Being told 'this could be clearer', does not give insight into how to make it clearer. Too specific though and feedback is only applicable to that one situation. Explaining why can be helpful.

Plan for action: feedback should be actionable. This means that the teacher must plan for when the feedback will be used.

Give feedback on errors and successes: students can learn a lot from focusing on how they did something well and what they did that made it work. This is important in addition to feedback that helps them close gaps.

Prepare students for feedback: explain why and how you will give feedback ahead of time to prepare students, model using the feedback and check students understand the feedback. These may help prepare them.

Any technique will only be effective if it is linked to a well-understood problem. Reflect on and define the problem you are trying to solve or do so with your coach. Then, you can use our decision tool for suggestions as to techniques you can adopt, adapt and test.

Problems related to this area:

- *How do I give feedback that improves students' understanding?*
- *How do I make feedback efficient?*
- *How do I respond to errors and misconceptions?*

Define your problem. What do you think might be the cause? Why?

Feedback:

References and further reading

Collin, J., & Quigley, A. (2021). Teacher Feedback to Improve Pupil Learning. Guidance Report. Education Endowment Foundation. Available [here](#).

Wiliam, D. (April 21, 2020). Effects of feedback [Video]. YouTube. Available [here](#).

Wiliam, D. (April 1, 2016). "The Secret of Effective Feedback". Available [here](#).

Wisniewski, B., Zierer, K., & Hattie, J. (2020). The power of feedback revisited: A meta-analysis of educational feedback research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 487662. Available [here](#).

Decide which strategy you will trial. Now you can practise the strategy and record it and share it with a coach if you are being coached.

If you want to read more about feedback, please click below to visit our Assessment and Feedback theory module.

Find out more