Oral or Written?
The feedback most preferred by students of EFL
Abstract

Titel: Oral or Written? The feedback most preferred by students of EFL

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Abstract: The aim of this investigation was to find out how students react to and make use of oral and written feedback given to them in class. Another aim was to find out if they preferred one form over the other and whether they make more use of that form. The investigation was conducted at a Swedish upper secondary school and consisted of a questionnaire survey and interviews with groups of students and with their teachers. The interviews with the students focused on clarifying some of the results from the questionnaire. The teacher interviews gave the teachers a chance to give their version of what they thought worked better and why they chose to work that way.

The results showed that students welcome feedback, especially positive feedback used for encouragement. However, they also thought that there was a higher limit to the amount of feedback they could benefit from. Too much of one sort could be ignored or perceived as discouraging. The feedback mostly used in class was oral feedback. This was also what the students thought they benefited from the most since it invited to discussion about their work. Most of the students thought the feedback should be delivered in private because it could be embarrassing to receive feedback in front of their peers. Nevertheless, feedback on pronunciation and smaller errors that could be of use for their peers as well was acceptable in front of the class.

Nyckelord: Feedback, assessment, correction, oral feedback, written feedback, timing of feedback, benefits from feedback
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1. Introduction and aims
The teaching of English as a foreign language involves a lot of creativity on behalf of the teacher. Many learners might not be familiar with all aspects of the target language and could therefore be in need of more help than expected by the teacher. Therefore a teacher’s job is not only to provide the target language to the students through books and other educational aids. It also involves encouraging students to learn and providing them with feedback so they know what they do right and what they need to practice more. Put briefly: It is also a part of the teacher’s job to make students realize their need to learn. One way to give students a positive attitude towards learning is to make them aware of this need. As Race (2005:27) points out: “When learners really want to –and need to –learn, it is very likely that some learning will take place”.

Feedback is a tool used in all kinds of learning and it can be given either orally or in the written form. In some cases oral feedback might be the best choice, in others written feedback is better. Very often it is a matter of individual preference and the preferred form is likely to depend on the situation. Oral feedback is more suitable for immediate response, whereas written feedback is easy to go back to since the student might have saved the assignment. There are positive and negative sides to both ways of giving feedback. What is positive about oral feedback is that it can be given immediately when the situation occurs, while the student has a fresh memory of the task or exercise. The negative side is that it can be a sensitive matter to receive feedback in front of one’s peers. When it comes to written feedback, the good thing is that it is easy for the student to see what the teacher has commented on. The bad thing is that many students are likely to take a glance at only the grade rather than at the feedback written in the assignment. Also, if there are many comments the student might become discouraged and consequently decide to ignore them. Knowing which kind of feedback that is preferable can be difficult, especially since there might be individual and contextual differences.

The aim of this essay is to find out how students react to and make use of oral and written feedback. Do they notice oral feedback when they get it or is written feedback more accessible? A second aim is to find out what kinds of feedback students prefer and whether or not they choose to use one form over the other. In order to find answers to these questions a questionnaire was handed out to all the students of English A at a Swedish upper secondary
school. To back up the results I have also interviewed small groups of students from each class. Additionally, I have also interviewed two teachers to get their view firstly on how students react to different kinds of feedback and secondly on the kind of feedback they find works better in their classrooms. Finally, the results will be compared to what other studies have shown on the subject.

2. Background
In this section I will describe how feedback promotes learning, distinguish between written and oral feedback and give some examples of what previous research has shown.

2.1 Feedback in general
Feedback can be seen as a part of the input a student needs in order to learn (Ellis, 1985:128). This means that feedback is an integrated part, for each person, of learning and not just an extra tool. According to Ellis (1985:128), feedback serves two main purposes: It reinforces correct language and it corrects errors in language. In addition, a main theory about feedback is that it is an important tool for learners when they are testing different hypotheses that they have made about the target language (Ellis, 1985:296).

In the classroom, teachers are often seen as the most important help for students when they learn. An effective teacher has been described as a teacher whose students all learn, a description that puts a lot of pressure on the teacher (Pollock, 2007:2). Looking at the amount of individual attention that has to be given to each student, it becomes apparent how time-consuming this might be for the teacher. But there are ways in which a teacher can help students improve their learning, as well as reduce the amount of time that has to be given to each one. Jane Pollock (2007:3f) identifies some important aspects, referring to them as the “big four”. These include: 1) the words used by the teacher when describing a task; 2) the instructions to the task; 3) the assessment of the task; and 4) how to apply assessment and feedback strategies to improve learning. Out of these four aspects Pollock (2007:4) identifies the feedback strategies as being the essential core of learning. However, in order for feedback to be efficient, Pollock claims that it must involve comments on performance. In her study many teachers stated that they used feedback for example as a tool for classroom management, when asking the students to behave and encouraging them to finish their tasks (Pollock, 2007:5). But since her study also offered ideas on how to improve classroom performance, such as giving students timely feedback during their work processes, most
teachers learned how to make feedback useful for the students by making it more of a tool for development (Pollock, 2007:5). This means that feedback must be used in a way that promotes students’ progress in order for it to work as a useful instrument in the learning process. Also, since there is often task specific vocabulary involved which has to be understood by the students (Race, 2005:110f), it is necessary to explain the vocabulary and how feedback works to the students.

One important thing to remember is that feedback should always be based on criteria established in the curriculum (Pollock, 2007:123). The Swedish curriculum (Lpf 94:11) states that a teacher’s starting point should be the needs, requirements, experiences and thoughts of each individual student. The teacher is also supposed to strengthen every student’s self-confidence as well as their will and ability to learn. The students’ workload should be organized in a way that allows each student to develop according to their requirements and it is emphasized that they should be stimulated into using all of their ability; feel that knowledge is meaningful and progressing; get help with their development in language and communication; and successively get more responsibility in their own learning process. Teachers should also act as guides and support students when they meet difficulties\(^1\) (Skolverket, Lpf 1994:11). All these parts of the teacher’s role include feedback which involves encouraging students to feel good about themselves and providing them with motivation and strategies they need in order to learn (Race, 2005:22).

\[2.1.1 \text{ Feedback and assessment}\]

Pollock (2007:104) points out that it is important for a teacher to know the difference between the act of assessing student work and for students’ work to actually improve. Assessing students’ work does not automatically lead to improvement in students’ proficiency. It is possible to assess students’ work without providing them with the tools they need to improve it. Feedback is needed to ensure that assessment will be followed by improvement. In other words, students need to identify not only what they need to improve but also how they can improve. Additional information about the errors and mistakes the students have made will make assessment and feedback beneficial for students. They also need encouragement and opportunities to work with and practise their skills to overcome their weaknesses.

\(^1\) My translation
Feedback can be both generic and individual. Phil Race (2005:99f) defines generic feedback as comments on errors that occur frequently in the group as a whole. Individual feedback, on the other hand, is easier to give to a small group or to individuals involved in the writing process and can be a way of interacting with the students and letting them develop their thinking before they finish the task. Both generic and individual feedback can be given very soon after a task is finished, when the students still have it fresh in their minds. According to Erlauer (2003:28) no matter whether the feedback is written or oral, it should always be specific so that the student knows exactly what is right and what is wrong. The best feedback is of the kind that provides the student with a full explanation of what is already good and what needs to be improved. Erlauer (2003:129) further points out that students benefit from receiving a variety of feedback methods.

Phil Race (2005:95) distinguishes between feedback and feed forward. Feedback most often points back at something the student has already done. However, there is a kind of feedback that aims towards future improvement: “Feed forward”. This is a kind of feedback that helps students develop their thinking and to progress. For the teacher this means to point out what the student has done well and what s/he can think about for next time, or to show ways to improve a first draft into a second. Feed forward is often delivered at the same time as feedback and is, in most cases, not distinguished from feedback.

Feedback has also been related to research about the human brain. According to Erlauer (2003:2) it is when teaching is adapted to “brain compatible learning” that we learn best. One of the most important aspects of feedback is that it involves “trial” as well as “error” both of which are important in human learning (Erlauer, 2003:123). According to brain compatible learning, teachers are considered as a kind of coach (Erlauer, 2003:121). In that capacity they should provide students with specific and individual goals and give them enough time to reach those goals (Erlauer, 2003:122). Individual goals for each student would mean that they learn according to their own capacity. A good coach makes sure that the students have access to the right kind of material and encourages them to reach their goal on time (Erlauer, 2003:121f).

2.1.2 When and how to give feedback
There is a list of dos and don’ts regarding the matter of giving feedback, written by Sloan Weitzel (2007:25). The dos point out the manners in which feedback should be given. The
don’ts, on the other hand, point out how feedback can be used incorrectly and the negative sides of doing so. Consequently, feedback should be specific and precise. Furthermore, there is no point in giving comments on something that is not important for the case. Since feedback has a tendency to be seen as criticism, it is important that the one who gives it makes sure that the feedback is interpreted as feedback on performance rather than as a judgement on the individual. Feedback must be precise in order for the student/receiver to know how to make use of it. Moreover, feedback should always come from the person making the assessment, not from someone else. Hearsay is not something to base feedback on since there is no evidence of it being accurate. Lastly, with the purpose of making feedback as clear as possible, positive and negative feedback should be delivered separately.

The timing of feedback has been identified as a problem since it should be delivered as soon as possible in order for the students to be able to make use of it (Race, 2005:22). Prompt feedback reduces the risk of the students having moved on to another topic; if they have, it may be difficult for them to take notice of feedback on a task they have already moved on from (Race, 2005: 106). The essential point of timing is that when feedback is “given at the right time and in the best possible way” it can enhance learning (Race, 2005:99). Another important aspect of the timing of feedback is that the students should have a fresh memory of what they have done. If complete immediate feedback is not possible the teacher could try to give at least part of the feedback right away (Race, 2005:110). It is also important that the feedback is relevant and interesting for the students; it should, therefore, be delivered during a task or project and be directly linked to the goal of the assignment (Erlauer, 2003:121f). If the feedback is given at the beginning of a task, the students have a greater chance of using the appropriate style for the assignment from the very beginning and use different kinds of source material if they should need to do so. Moreover, each learner is unique and needs different kinds of help and therefore it is important to assess and give feedback often during the process and not to save it until the end of a task (Erlauer, 2003:113f). Erlauer (2003:113f) also claims that the brain adjusts easier to smaller changes during a process than to big changes at the end of a finished task. Even though every student has their individual preferences and learns accordingly, studies show that feedback should be integrated into the learning process and not be delivered as a bi-product towards the end. Prompt and direct feedback is also important for the ego and students who feel good about themselves are bound to learn better (Erlauer, 2003:126). But as discussed in 2.1, this requires a lot of time and puts a great deal of pressure on the teacher (Pollock, 2007:2).
2.1.3 Benefits of feedback

Feedback has been described as a way to make people feel good about themselves and their efforts (Race, 2005:22), and it can be used as a way to encourage, motivate and give students a sense of understanding (Race, 2005:28f). Part of a teacher’s job is to make students comfortable enough to want to learn, because it is when a student has a ‘want’ or a ‘need’ to learn that learning will happen. If the students have an awareness of what needs to be learnt, and why, it is much more feasible to actually get started on the learning process (Race, 2005:26f).

If learners understand the benefits of feedback it is more likely that they will want to make use of it (Race, 2005:110ff). One way of making feedback useful is to encourage the students to give feedback to each other. By doing so, both parties will learn more as well as gain some experience in handling criticism and comments from peers (Race, 2005:112) It is also useful for students to take part in their own assessment and to keep track of their own progress (Marzano, 2006:89f). If the students keep a record of their own progress, they can go over the record later and actually see where learning takes place. This is encouraging for the students and motivates them to continue learning and as a result students may gain an understanding for how the assessment works (Marzano, 2006:92).

There are several approaches to making feedback beneficial for the students. One way is through a good teacher-student discussion (Carnell, 2000:54). Carnell (2000:54) suggests that the communication about student work should be open and direct and involve both positive and negative things for the student to reflect on. Honesty from the teacher is rewarding for both teachers and students, and if there is a good teacher-student relationship, it is possible to have an open dialogue about the process, about errors and mistakes and about how to correct them (Ur, 2005:255). Moreover, the feedback should clarify goals and give a sense of direction and purpose (Carnell, 200:54); otherwise the student might ignore it. Since this kind of feedback takes the form of one-way communication from the teacher to a student, or group of students, it is important that it identifies mistakes and provides advice. Carnell (2000:54) and the students she interviewed agreed, however, that it is the feedback that is important, not the relationship. One of the students, however, pointed out that it is easier to receive feedback from a person one trusts than from a person one hates or disrespects. One way to overcome this is to make sure (as pointed out) that the feedback is honest and useful so that personal differences are set aside, leaving room for development.
2.1.4 Misuse of feedback and other problems

Feedback that is incorrect or inappropriate (i.e. related to factors such as, ethnicity, gender and disabilities), can create problems for both students and the teacher (Race, 2005:104f). Aside from not being helpful, it can cause students to feel inadequate. Also, in the case of oral feedback misuse might be difficult to prove. But feedback does not necessarily have to be of bad quality to have a negative effect on the student. Robert Marzano (2006:89) claims that feedback can have a negative effect on learning if it is handled in a bad manner by the teacher. But it also depends on the student. The way one handles feedback is an individual matter and depends, among other things, on whether the student has a positive or negative attitude towards failure. According to Marzano (2006:89), if a student who has a negative attitude towards failure does not succeed on a test; this creates an image of being a failure in the student. For a student who thinks it is possible to learn from failure, on the other hand, feedback on mistakes will work more efficiently. The ideal situation, according to Marzano (2006:8), would be to give students ways to interpret low results as ways to improve rather than as marks of failure. In addition, the teacher must show the students that student efforts will result in higher scores. Marzano (2006:89) also claims that students do not benefit from the teacher only telling them what is right or wrong, without offering an explanation as to why that is the case.

Irons (2008:2ff) points out several other problems that need to be taken into account. First, students might be used to one kind of feedback and therefore might not notice feedback given in another manner (Irons, 2008:2). This means that if they normally get only written feedback, it might be difficult for them to acknowledge oral feedback. Another problem concerns their not making use of the feedback they actually get. Such negligence could be due to the fact that they only care about the grade, but it could also mean that they do not know how to make use of the feedback. Eventually, this could lead to the students using the feedback in a way that was not intended by the teacher and which is not very helpful for the students (Irons, 2008:4). Lastly, there is a matter that concerns the proficiency level of individual students. Race (2005:105) claims that proficient students may not need as extensive feedback as less proficient ones. A grade or a comment might be enough for a student who has performed well, while a longer comment is more beneficial for a student who has had problems with the task and therefore is in need of more help. It is important to find a balance and make sure that every student gets the feedback they are in need of.
2.2 Oral feedback

Apart from the focus on correction, oral feedback can also involve acknowledging student efforts, requesting clarification or simply showing that what the student is doing is of importance (Ellis, 1985:296). Unlike written feedback, oral feedback often takes on aspects such as appraisal or works as behaviour management in the classroom for example by asking the students to be quiet or to calm down, encouraging them to start working, or the like. This kind of feedback on behaviour is therefore not synonymous with a guide to improve students’ learning (Pollock, 2007:104). Sometimes it is difficult to separate behaviour management from constructive feedback (Irons, 2008:8). Therefore, it might be a good starting point to say that feedback concerns how to improve skills, no matter whether they are oral or written. Also, oral feedback tends to concern oral work and often involves how to improve one’s speech both as regards grammar and pronunciation (Ur, 2005:246).

A common way of giving oral feedback is to give it face-to-face in a private meeting (Race, 2005:99f). This can be difficult to manage, since it would mean that the teacher has to set up an appointment with each student. Consequently, this could lead to the feedback not being delivered straight away or the students neglecting this opportunity since it would occur outside classroom hours. This is unfortunate since feedback given in a private meeting has been identified as the most preferred way of giving oral feedback, since individual oral feedback given in front of the whole group might be something students want to avoid (Race, 2005:104f).

Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada divide oral feedback into five sub categories\(^2\) (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:126f). First, there is explicit correction, a kind of feedback that focuses on error correction, where the error is indicated and the correct form provided. Second, there is recasting, where the teacher reformulates a student utterance into a correct form, and when requesting clarification, simply asks the student to explain, in their own words, what they mean. The third is metalinguistic feedback in the form of comments, questions and information about a student utterance that does not provide the correct form, but rather helps the students find out by themselves. The fourth type of feedback is elicitation, which is a use of questions to help the student correct an utterance. Finally there is repetition, which is a way of highlighting the error to make the students notice that it sounds wrong. However, even

\(^2\) These were originally developed by Roy Lyster and Leila Ranta
though Lightbown and Spada (2006:126f) explicitly use this terminology for oral feedback, the same procedures can be used for written feedback.

2.3 Written feedback

Written feedback can take on many forms. Race (2005:99) gives the following examples: remarks written directly on a student’s work; a summary of errors at the end of a task; or a sheet listing all occurring errors added to an assignment. Written feedback can also be delivered in the form of a “model answer”, in order to show the students what the teacher has been looking for when correcting, or it could be in the form of generic feedback on common errors handed out to all students in one class. It is difficult to give written feedback on oral exercises; hence, it is mostly used for written work or tasks (Ur, 2005:246). Additionally, Ur (2005:50) mentions that there is a significant difference between the feedback given on oral and written productions. Written productions do not necessarily take on the form of compositions; they can be grammatical assignments, answers to comprehension questions, tests and so on. It is therefore good to take into consideration what kind of feedback is more suitable for a particular type of task and use an adjusted type of written feedback.

The methods used for oral feedback can, in many cases, be applied to written production. However, it is important that written feedback does not give disproportionate attention to mistakes (Ur, 2005:170f). The correction of mistakes should be done in a subtle way so that the student can correct the mistakes without worrying that the evaluation is based on mistakes rather than content. It is also important that a distinction is made between mistakes and errors, that distinction being: mistakes are quite easy to correct while errors are more consistent (Ur, 2005:85). By this Ur (2005:85) suggests that errors are something the learner needs to work with whereas mistakes can be corrected without much further ado. However, Ur (2005:85) further claims that it might be difficult to distinguish between errors and mistakes in classroom situations and she gives the suggestion of mainly correcting errors that disturb the language.

Since it is important to give feedback as soon as possible, this automatically leads to a problem in the case of written feedback, which is very time consuming for the teacher. And the longer students have to wait for their feedback, the less likely they are to make use of it (Pollock, 2007:104f).
2.4 Other kinds of feedback that need to be taken into account

There are many ways to give feedback, but oral and written feedback are by far the easiest forms to identify. Nevertheless, when it comes to encouraging students, there are other ways to give feedback. Laura Erlauer (2003:131f) states that many times the student only needs to be seen and recognized. This means that a smile or a pat on the back is sometimes enough to encourage a student. Feedback does not always need to be delivered in a serious way: it should always be honest, but a bit of humour is allowed. When a class has done very well on a task, applause from the teacher could be in order. Moreover, it is important to remember that feedback does not necessarily have to come from the teacher. Anyone can give feedback to anyone. Staff in schools as well as parents can be encouraging and helpful, peers can also help each other achieve the goals set out for the group (Erlauer, 2003:131f).

2.5 Other studies

Julie Montgomery and Wendy Baker conducted a study with high beginning to advanced learners (Montgomery & Baker, 2007:86). The purpose of the study was to find out how much specific and general feedback teachers give on written assignments. Montgomery and Baker also looked at how teachers assessed their feedback methods and the amount of feedback they gave and how well this coordinated with the students’ perceptions of the amount of feedback they received (Montgomery & Baker, 2007:83). The results showed that the teachers gave a lot of feedback on specific issues such as grammar and spelling, but very little on general issues in the whole assignment such as style and organization (Montgomery & Baker, 2007:90). The total amount of feedback the students thought they received correlated quite well with the teachers’ view of the matter (Montgomery & Baker, 2007:91). On the other hand, teachers underestimated the amount of feedback given on specific issues and overestimated the amount they gave on general issues (Montgomery & Baker, 2007:92).

Eileen Carnell (2006:46) conducted a study that focused on students’ opinions on feedback. Her aim was to find out student views on the help they got from different people. This study was not only about teacher-student feedback, but a more general study of feedback in everyday life. In order to find out the students’ views Carnell interviewed fourteen students in years 7-11 (secondary school students) about feedback and where they usually got it from. Carnell’s results are of importance in the educational context since much of what the students said about feedback involved feedback in school. More specifically, the results suggest that
feedback may be more efficient if students take part in their own assessment and thereby become aware of the strategies they use in order to learn (Carnell, 2000:60).

3. Material and methods
The aim of this study was to find out how students react to and make use of oral and written feedback. To this end, a questionnaire was handed out to all English A students at a Swedish upper secondary school, 62 in total. In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with three groups of three students each as well as with two teachers.

3.1 Participants
I chose to focus on upper secondary school students since I figured it might be easier for slightly older students to notice feedback and use it for development in language. I also reckoned that there would be more conversation in English among more advanced learners, which would mean that the chances of coming across oral feedback would increase.

3.1.1 Students
The participating students were all in the English A course at upper secondary level. I chose to use only one course level for the study since there might be a difference between how much students of English A understand about feedback as compared to students of English B. Another reason for choosing only the A course was to ensure a large number of participants, since there were more students in the A course at this particular school than there were in the B course. The number of participating students amounted to a total of 62 students, 23 of whom were female and 39 were male. These students came from three different programs, one of which was theoretical the other two were being practical.

3.1.1.1 Gender and programme bias
Unfortunately there was not an even representation between female and male students in the interviews; neither was there an even representation between programs. There were two practical programs in the school where I conducted the study but only one theoretical. Since the interviews were voluntary, I did not get groups consisting of both girls and boys. Only one girl from the theoretical program volunteered for the interview which means that the gender bias might have influenced the results. Also, there were no girls from one of the practical programs that volunteered, which means that it was not possible to control results for gender and programme influence.
There was also a difficulty in getting students from all programs to volunteer for the interview. I had originally decided to do three interviews, since there were three different programs. However, one of the practical classes did not have time for interviews which meant that I had to look for another group. Also, the other practical class was divided into two groups, one of which was out on field studies. This means that two interviews were conducted in a theoretical class, and one interview in a practical class. Nevertheless, I think that the class who did two interviews did not affect the final results since both their interviews matched each other fairly well and were easy to compare with the results of the third interview.

3.1.2 Teachers
The teachers I chose to interview were those who taught the English A course. At this particular school there were three teachers of English as a foreign language. Two of them taught in the participating classes and were therefore interviewed. The third teacher taught a class of students who were about to move on to the B course, which meant that both the students and the teacher were excluded from the study.

3.2 Questionnaire
The questionnaire was handed out to a total of 62 students. There were different types of questions; some of them offered several alternatives to choose from, while others were asking the students to rank how often they thought they received feedback with a certain purpose or the like. A third kind of questions asked the students to explain in their own words what they thought feedback should be used for. The questions concerned the kinds of feedback they usually got in their English classes and whether they found it useful or not (see Appendix). The students were also asked to indicate whether there was a kind of feedback they preferred and what purpose they liked the feedback to have. Furthermore, they were asked about the timing of feedback and when they wanted to receive feedback. The questionnaire was handed out at the end of class so that it would not distract the students too much from the planned lesson.

I chose to write the questionnaire in Swedish, mainly because I wanted to avoid confusion on the students’ behalf, but also because I wanted them to be able to explain certain answers without suffering from language difficulties.
3.3 Interviews

The interviews with the students regarded the results from the questionnaire. Three groups of students from two of the participating classes volunteered for the interview. In the first group there were three male students, in the second group there were two male students and one female student and in the third group there were also three male students. Together they were able to clarify certain things from the questionnaire. These interviews were conducted in Swedish for the same reasons that were stated in 3.2.

The interviews with the teachers were conducted in English since there was no apparent risk of language difficulties. Another reason for choosing English was that I would not have to translate the interviews before analyzing them.

3.4 Delimitations

Since many programs include practical subjects, classes who were in the workshop or out on practical studies at the time of the study had to be excluded.

The student interviews are not based on randomly chosen students. This is because I wanted to record the interviews to make the analysis easier. In order to do so I needed student consent and therefore asked the students to volunteer. Also, students who volunteer for an interview might be more likely to speak their minds than students who are chosen on random. However, it was not possible to pick students from each class for the interviews. One particular class was very busy during the two weeks that I devoted to the study and asked only to participate in the questionnaire survey. Another class was divided into two groups where one group was at school taking theoretical subjects for two weeks, while the other group was at the workshop for practical studies for two weeks. After the first week, when I handed out the questionnaire, the two groups switched locations. That means that only one of the groups was present when the interviews were conducted. The questionnaire, however, was answered by both groups. This shortcoming is not likely to have influenced the results since the interviews were a qualitative study used for highlighting the quantitative study – the questionnaire.
4. Analysis and results

This section will deal with the results of the survey. First I will present the student views on the feedback methods used in class and the amount of feedback they receive. Secondly, I will go into what kind of purposes the feedback has and what the students think is important regarding delivery and purpose. I will also deal with the results regarding what kind of feedback the students prefer. Finally, in the student views section I will deal with some differences between gender and programmes and how this might have affected the outcome. After the student views, I will present the teachers’ views on what kind of feedback methods they use and which ones they find work better. Lastly, I will compare my results to those presented in 2.5.

That not all questions were properly answered might be due to the fact that the students were not used to reflecting on the way they receive feedback. I will deal with these shortcomings as they appear and describe how I chose to deal with them in the paragraphs where they occur.

4.1 Student views

This section will deal with the results of the questionnaire (see Appendix) and the interviews. In some cases I have also chosen to include what was said during the teacher interviews in order to compare and clarify results.

Questions 5, 7 and 8 gave the students opportunities to choose more than one alternative. It is therefore difficult to make a distinction between how large a part of the total amount of students thought what. I have instead only counted how many students who chose one alternative and compared which alternatives were the most and least popular ones. This means that when I discuss these questions and mention the percentage of students, the results might seem inconclusive. This is, however, not the case. It only means that a certain number of students have chosen more than one alternative.

4.1.1 How much feedback is given and what methods are used in class

The first question concerned whether or not the students noticed when they received feedback. About 11% admitted that they did not notice when the teacher was giving them feedback. This is a fact that might affect the rest of the results, which concern the methods used and what the purpose of the feedback was. These 11% are therefore excluded from
questions 2-4 regarding amount of feedback received. Hopefully, these students were still aware of the methods they prefer and answered the rest of the questions truthfully, their answers are therefore still used in the rest of the results.

In question 3 the students were asked how often they received feedback. They were asked to indicate this on a scale from 1-5 as follows: never; 1-2 times per month; 1-2 times per week; every lesson; and several times per lesson. Three students marked their answers in between 3 and 4. Since this means that they did not think their amount qualified as a 4, I have counted them as belonging to grade 3. None of the students thought that s/he never received feedback, and there was only one student (2%) who claimed to receive feedback several times per lesson. Only 20% of the students reported that they received feedback 1-2 times per month, while 65% perceived it as being 1-2 times per week and 13% thought it was as much as at least once every lesson (see Figure 1). These figures correspond to the teachers’ perception of the amount of feedback they gave. One of the teachers tried to acknowledge all students during every lesson, while the other teacher was satisfied to manage giving feedback to every student at least a couple of times per week.

![Figure 1](image.png)

*Figure 1 How often the students received feedback*

Since my study makes a distinction between oral and written feedback, the students were asked which of the two they received most often (question 2). As many as 60 % of the students said that they received mostly oral feedback, while 27% thought written feedback was the most frequently used form and 13% estimated that both forms were used to the same extent (see Figure 2). This corresponded quite well with what was stated by the teachers during the interviews (See Section 4.2).
4.1.2 The purpose of the feedback

The students were asked to rank purposes of the feedback they received in class. In question 4 they were asked to rate how often they received feedback with the purposes of correcting written errors, correcting pronunciation, correcting oral errors and mistakes, developing ideas and encouragement. The students were able to choose from the 1-5 scale: where 1 is never; 2 is rarely; 3 is sometimes; 4 is often; and 5 is always, how often they received feedback with different purposes. They were also asked, in question 5, to choose one or two purposes they saw as more important than the others. Three students came up with “to correct errors” as the most important purpose. These results I have interpreted as a generalization that they thought the main purpose should be correcting errors in the fields of writing, speaking and pronunciation. These answers are discussed in 4.1.2.1, 4.1.2.2, and 4.1.2.3.

4.1.2.1 Correcting written errors/mistakes

The students were asked how often the purpose of the feedback was to correct written errors and mistakes. According to the questionnaire ‘sometimes’, with 49%, was the most common answer. Only 7% of the students thought their feedback was never used for correcting written errors, 24% thought rarely, 16% quite often and 2% (one student) thought it was always used for this purpose (see Figure 3). As to purpose, 13% of the students thought the correction of written errors and mistakes should be the main purpose of feedback.
Written feedback is mostly used for written productions (see section 2.3). As can be seen in Figure 3, feedback was not frequently used in order to correct written mistakes.

4.1.2.2 Correcting pronunciation

According to 36% of the students, correcting pronunciation was ‘rarely’ the purpose of the feedback. According to 4% the feedback they received was never used to correct pronunciation, while 25% said sometimes, 27% thought it was often and 9% always (see Figure 4). As many as 21% of the students saw correcting pronunciation as the most important purpose of feedback. This was discussed in all three groups during the interviews and the students’ theories about why this was important were that they were more likely to use English orally in the future. Since many of them planned to travel, they thought pronunciation was far more important than e.g. spelling.
4.1.2.3 Correcting oral mistakes

The category of oral mistakes involved all oral mistakes and errors that did not have to do with pronunciation, i.e. word choice and grammatical errors. This was clarified orally before the questionnaire was handed out. As regards the frequency of this kind of feedback, ‘sometimes’ was the most frequent response chosen by 45% of the students. Only 7% thought the feedback they received was never used to correct oral mistakes, 24% thought it occurred rarely, 20% often and 2% always (see Figure 5). The students who thought the correction of oral mistakes was the most important purpose of feedback amounted to 11%. During the interviews the students clarified that oral mistakes, pronunciation excluded, were not that important since it was easier to improve in this part when using the language more frequently. They also said that it was easier to understand the meaning of an utterance in spite of these kinds of errors, than it would be if there was something wrong with the pronunciation.

![Figure 5 How often oral mistakes were corrected](image)

4.1.2.4 Developing ideas

It was difficult for the students to understand how feedback could be used for developing ideas. They asked many questions while completing the questionnaire as well as during the interviews. In the interviews they explained this as being due to the fact that they had not worked a lot with their own ideas. Since this is the first term of the English A course for most of the students participating, many of their lessons were planned according to a textbook. This does not leave a lot of room for creative productions, but they said that when they did something creative “feedback was of course important”³. Anyway, 9% of the students thought feedback never had the purpose of developing ideas. As many as 20% thought

³ My translation
feedback was rarely used to develop ideas, 40% thought it was sometimes used for that purpose, 25% often and only 5% thought it was always used in this sense (see Figure 6). The fact that many students found the purpose of developing ideas difficult to relate to might be one of the reasons why no more than 13% thought this was one of the most important purposes. That was also what the students thought when they were interviewed.

![Figure 6 How often feedback was used for developing ideas](image)

4.1.2.5 Encouragement
This was by far the most important purpose of feedback according to the students. Almost half of the students, 47%, picked this alternative as the most important purpose. This was also the form of feedback where the largest number of students claimed to receive it ‘always’ with this purpose, namely 13%. Only 2% thought that the feedback they received never had the purpose of encouragement, 16% thought rarely, 35% sometimes and 33% said that it had this purpose often (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7 How often the feedback was used for encouragement](image)
4.1.2.6 Comparison of frequencies of feedback purposes
In this section I will clarify and compare the results in 4.1.2.1-4.1.2.5. This section deals with the purpose of the feedback used in class (question 4); the focus is on the most frequent as well as the least frequent purposes of feedback. I asked the students to rank these categories from 1-5, where 1 was least frequent and 5 most frequent. In this comparison I have only included the rankings 1-2 (never and rarely) for the least frequent purposes, and 4-5 (often and always) for the most frequent ones. The number of students who thought they did not receive a lot of a specific kind of feedback are compared to the number of students who thought they did. The intention with this was to find out whether there were any purposes that stood out as more or less frequent. Figure 8 shows the responses which indicate the least frequent use (gradings 1-2) and the most frequent use (gradings 4-5) of the five different feedback categories.

![Figure 8 Most frequent and least frequent feedback purposes](image)

As shown in Figure 8, the students thought feedback was more often used for encouraging than not. On the other hand, feedback rarely concerned written mistakes. This view agrees very well with what was said during both teacher and student interviews. The teachers claimed to focus more on encouraging feedback than on correcting written mistakes. This is also how the students perceived it to be.

As for feedback on pronunciation, oral mistakes and for developing ideas: there were almost as many students who considered these purposes as very frequent, as there were students who thought they were least frequent.
4.1.3 Amount of feedback given in class

In question 9 (see Appendix), the students were asked whether or not they felt that they received a sufficient amount of feedback or if they wanted more. A whole 83% of the students claimed to be satisfied with the amount of feedback given to them, while 13% were not satisfied, and 4% were only partly satisfied (see Figure 9).

![Pie chart showing feedback satisfaction](image)

Figure 9 How many of the students who were satisfied with the amount of feedback they received

I have left out the answers from the seven students who claimed that they did not notice when feedback was given to them (Question 1, see section 4.1.1). However, (since they did answer question 9) it is interesting to note that 57% of those students nevertheless claimed to be satisfied.

The interviews revealed that the students actually thought there was an upper limit to the amount of feedback they wanted. They thought too much feedback would be difficult to handle. Especially if they were to receive a lot of feedback of one kind during a lesson they claimed it would be easy to stop paying attention to it. In addition, they thought it was important to receive both positive and negative feedback. However, they did not wish to receive too much of one kind of feedback since receiving positive feedback only could make the feedback seem unserious to the students, and receiving negative feedback only could be discouraging. It is also important that the teachers direct the feedback to the right student. Several of the interviewed students felt that they had, at some point, been blamed for something that they did not do (this refers to managing feedback).
4.1.4 The timing of feedback

During the interviews the students agreed on one thing that had to do with the timeliness of feedback: none of them wanted feedback to interfere with their tasks, especially if it was an oral task. They said it was discouraging to be interrupted in order to be corrected. It was better to get the feedback afterwards or during a pause in the assignment. This also became obvious in the responses to question 7 on the questionnaire, although the question made no distinction between oral and written feedback. Almost 2/3 of the students, 58%, preferred their feedback after the assignment was completed while 34% preferred it during a task. This agrees with what Weitzel (2007:25) says about the timeliness of feedback (See section 2.1.2).

Additionally, question 7 also concerned in what kinds of situations the students would wish to receive more feedback. Percentages of the students wanting more feedback when they had done something wrong (45%) as well as when they could improve (48%) were almost equal. Moreover, as many as 87% of the students wished to receive more feedback when they had done something good, while 45% wanted it when they had done something bad.

Question 10 asked the students to give their own views on when they wanted more feedback. These answers were further discussed during the interviews. To sum it up, students were most likely to want more feedback in the following situations: when they had done either well, or achieved poor results; when they had bad self esteem and needed encouragement; when they had ideas of their own; and on tests when they had done something wrong. What could be said about these results is that they correspond to what is said in section 2.1.2 by Weitzel (2007:25) on how feedback should be delivered. However, there is a tendency towards students preferring feedback when they have done something well rather than when they need to improve.

4.1.5 The feedback most preferred

Question 6 concerned the form of feedback most preferred by the students, oral or written. Oral feedback was preferred by 61% of the students, written feedback by 27% and 11% preferred both forms (see Figure 10).
Both teachers and students seem to agree on oral feedback being the most beneficial form of feedback since it involves eye-contact and leaves room for discussion and development.

In question 8 the students were asked how they preferred their feedback (see Figure 11). They were allowed to choose more than one feedback method since it is difficult to make a choice that works equally well for both oral and written exercises. The most popular ways to receive feedback were oral feedback in private with 53% and written feedback at the end of a task with 50%. But oral feedback in the classroom, with 45%, was also approved of. The least popular alternatives were written comments in the assignment (36%) and on a sheet of paper listing feedback on various tasks (both oral and written) (15%). Finally, very few of the students (only 13%) wanted feedback in the form of symbols and markings (such as R, X, underlining etc.) in their written productions.

In the interviews it was made clear that oral feedback was easier to grasp and could be more thorough than written. The fact that oral feedback could be delivered immediately was also seen as an advantage. The students thought markings in the assignment were dull and discouraging and that written comments should preferably be written at the end of the assignment so that their assignment would not be so discouraging to look at. A sheet listing
feedback on both oral and written performance was easy to ignore and did not invite further
discussion. Although many students did not care whether the oral feedback was given in class
or in private, they found that it might be a little embarrassing to receive all feedback in front
of their peers. Their own solution for this problem was to restrict feedback in class to
pronunciation issues and things a student had done well. Such feedback could be beneficial
for more students than just the receiver of the feedback. In the case of more extensive
feedback, they preferred to receive it in private.

4.1.6 Gender differences
Here is a small difference in the purpose students want feedback to have. Of the female
students, 65% wanted the feedback to be of a more encouraging and developing kind. Only
44% of the male students were of the same opinion. Moreover, 38% of the male students
thought that feedback should have as its purpose to correct errors, whereas only 13% of the
female students were of this opinion.

4.1.7 Program differences
Between the programs, the biggest difference was why they thought feedback was important.
In the interviews, students from the theoretical programs thought feedback should mainly be
about correcting errors and encouraging students, while students from the more practical
programs thought feedback should be encouraging and used for classroom management.
Students from the theoretical program also had a more positive attitude towards receiving
feedback, whereas students from the practical program did not think feedback was that
important. Finally, there was also a difference in how they preferred the feedback. Both
groups preferred their feedback orally, but the manner in which this was delivered was rated
differently by the two groups. The theoretical students thought it was acceptable to receive
feedback on small errors in the classroom if the rest of the class might benefit from the same
information. When it came to more individual feedback, they wanted it face to face in private.
The practical students did not mind if all their feedback was delivered in the classroom.

4.2 Teacher perceptions
Both teachers who were interviewed claimed that they used mostly oral feedback in English.
They preferred it this way since they considered it a waste of time to write comments, saying
that very few of the students actually looked at the comments. One of the teachers only wrote
encouraging comments on written productions, simply because he considered the oral part
more important. The other teacher liked writing comments but tried only to do it when the students had put a lot of effort into their productions. Another reason for using more oral feedback was to benefit from receiving student reactions. Both teachers found it important to clarify the feedback and give explanations so that the student would really understand. This was considered easier to do face to face than in writing. Both teachers aimed at giving mostly encouraging feedback and appraising feedback. They also used it for awarding good behaviour as a kind of reversed classroom management. By appraising students who behaved well they intended to set the example that bad behaviour was not accepted. Also, they wanted to encourage the students to dare to speak in class. In order to do so they tried to give as much positive feedback as possible on oral performance rather than focusing on criticism. They wanted the students to feel that it was the content that mattered rather than the form. Moreover, both teachers thought that oral feedback might be easier for the students to make use of. Finally, they found the time aspect important; since oral feedback can be given immediately, it makes it easier to have a dialogue about the matter.

When the teachers were asked about the frequency of feedback, each answered differently. One teacher tried to acknowledge the students at least a couple of times a week, if not every lesson. The other teacher said that it depended on how much feedback the student needed. Stronger students mostly received a ‘good’ or ‘keep up the good work’, whilst weaker students received more encouraging feedback to help them get on with their work. One teacher said that oral feedback was used most of the time; the other teacher claimed to use oral feedback most frequently for encouragement purposes, whereas written feedback tended to be used in assignments to point out errors and mistakes.

Another aspect that was discussed was what the teachers considered to be good feedback. They agreed that individually directed feedback was among the best kinds of feedback. Another important aspect of feedback that was identified was that of recognition, i.e. that each student was seen and encouraged by the teacher. Therefore, they both tried to at least make sure that every student was seen every lesson, even if they did not have the time to give them a lot of feedback on every lesson.

They also felt that it was difficult to give their students enough feedback. But this was no major problem since they thought the students managed to tell them when more feedback was needed. One of the teachers only gave written feedback on student demand since giving such
individual feedback is a time consuming undertaking. Both, however, always tried to find the time for individual feedback if the students asked for it. One of the teachers also thought that it was important to “sugar the pill” since it could be very discouraging for students to receive criticism only. This is a method that contradicts Weitzel’s (2007:25) suggestion about not to mix positive with negative feedback, since this might be confusing for the student (as discussed in 2.1.2).

4.3 Comparisons with other studies
In 2.5 two studies on the subject of feedback were discussed. The first one, by Montgomery and Baker (2007:90), showed that the teachers overestimated the amount of feedback they gave on specific things and underestimated the amount they gave on general things. However, they also found that the teachers’ perceptions of how much feedback they gave correlated with the amount the students thought they got. The present study, where the results of the teachers’ perceptions of the amount of feedback they gave was also measured against the amount of feedback the students thought they got, showed similar results.

The other study, by Carnell (2000:60), concluded that students benefit from taking part in their own assessment. The results of the present study show that many students prefer to be able to discuss their own development, which, according to Carnell is beneficial for their learning outcomes.

5. Discussion
My aim in this study was to find out how students react to and make use of oral and written feedback. I wanted to see if one of the methods was easier for the students to make use of and whether the students preferred a specific method.

Although it was very difficult to measure student reactions, the interviews gave mostly positive responses about the feedback. The students seemed to prefer encouraging feedback, while negative feedback was easier to deal with in a face to face situation. Also, the students wanted to avoid too much feedback, whether positive or negative. How they made use of the feedback depended on the situation and on the kind of feedback they received. Written feedback was often ignored since it looked dull, while oral feedback could lead to discussions on how to improve. Oral feedback was also frequently used for classroom management. Both teachers and students saw oral feedback as a useful tool to keep order in the classroom.
However, as discussed in 2.1, feedback must include comments on performance in order for it to be useful (Pollock, 2007:4f). The teachers in Pollock’s study (2007:5) often claimed to use feedback as a tool for encouraging students to behave and urging them to finish their tasks on time. Nevertheless, her study offered ideas on how feedback can be used to promote learning. These ideas involved, among other things, that the feedback should be delivered during the assignment and that it should be used in a way that promotes students’ progress.

The students seemed to prefer oral feedback since it invited discussion and follow up questions. This was an advantage of oral feedback that was also recognized by the teachers. However, oral feedback was not the only kind of feedback the students wanted. Many students asked for more written feedback at the end of assignments, as a guide to both their strong and weak sides. This was something the teachers said they were willing to give on request and this idea is also supported by Erlauer (2003:129) who claims that students benefit from a variety of feedback methods (see Section 2.1.1). The reason for the teachers to not give written feedback every time was that it was time consuming and often a waste of time since many students ignored the comments. According to the students, this was likely to occur if there were too many comments or if they were only curious about the grade.

There were several benefits of feedback discussed in section 2.1.3, but the “feel good factor” is probably the most obvious one. Race (2005:28f) pointed to the benefits of encouraging and motivating students as well as to the fact that feedback can be used to make people feel good about themselves (2005:22). Another benefit is that feedback teaches the students how to deal with criticism (Race, 2005:12). Finally, feedback strengthens the ego (Erlauer, 2003:126) and helps students to keep track of their own learning process (Marzano, 2006:89f), which is also established in the curriculum (Skolverket, Lpf 94:11) that states that the students should be given a chance to have more responsibility of their own learning process (see Section 2.1). I think that even though it might be difficult for the students to know how to deal with feedback, receiving feedback is beneficial because it promotes learning in several ways. Even though the content of the feedback might be difficult to make use of, the message of the feedback lets the students know that they are seen by the teacher and that the teacher is there to encourage them to be at their best. My general impression of what the students think is that they like receiving feedback, especially when they have done something well.
In section 2.1.2, timeliness of feedback was discussed. What was stated there was that feedback should be delivered as soon as possible after a task was completed, and if that was not possible at least part of the feedback should be delivered immediately. Weitzel (2007:25) also contributed to the discussion of feedback and timeliness, pointing out that it should be delivered at a suitable time. In the case of the students in this study, in order not to interrupt them, the best time for feedback would be after a task or during a pause (See section 4.1.4).

It was difficult to find conclusive answers to the questions stated in the introduction. When analysing my results, I discovered that several students had tried to give answers “in between” the alternatives in the questionnaire. Consequently, many of the results are not as clear as I thought they would be. For example, when I asked the students to grade how often they received a particular type of feedback, there were almost as many students who thought they rarely got it, as there were students who thought they often got it.

I knew in advance that some of the results might not be what I expected since the way people prefer feedback can be highly individual. What I did not expect was that there would be so much difference in the students’ perceptions of how they got their feedback. Of course, this might be due to the fact that the participating classes had different teachers, but according to the teacher interviews the two teachers did not differ much in the ways they chose to give feedback.

6. Conclusion
The results of the present study indicate that the students generally had a positive attitude towards feedback and appreciated receiving it. However, they preferred feedback to focus on encouragement rather than criticism.

Most students seemed to notice the feedback given to them and were satisfied with the amount given. In the classes participating in this study, the feedback was most often given orally, for the purpose of encouraging students. Sometimes, the oral feedback also took on the form of classroom management. The students also thought oral feedback was the easiest form to make use of, since it invited to further discussion. Not surprisingly, this was also the form of feedback most preferred by the students. The students primarily wanted oral feedback to focus on encouragement and motivation and secondly to correct pronunciation. As for feedback on pronunciation, the students did not too much mind receiving it in front of their
peers. When it came to more extensive oral feedback, however, they preferred to receive it in private where they could ask questions and sit down face to face with the teacher.

Written feedback was not as important for the students since most of them thought they would more likely to use spoken English in the future, rather than written. However, written feedback at the end of an assignment was seen as useful for written work by the students but they did not want the comments to be too extensive. Moreover, they did not like having written comments all over their assignments. Some of the students wanted more feedback on tests, and the teachers claimed to be willing to give more written feedback on request. Otherwise, neither teachers nor students preferred written feedback.

The present study shows that there is an agreement in the amount of feedback the teachers think they give and the amount the students perceive they receive. This partly correlates with the results of Montgomery and Baker’s (2007) study. However, their study also made a distinction between how much feedback the teachers gave on specific and general issues, which my study did not include. Additionally, I found that the students want to discuss their development and that they think it is useful for them to be able to ask questions about the assessment of their tasks. Carnell (2006) found in her study that students want to discuss their development which might be beneficial for them. Consequently, her results support mine.

In my study, I discovered that there were some differences in how male and female students prefer their feedback. I do not know the extent of these differences but it would be interesting to find out in further studies. There also seemed to be slight differences between students in the practical and theoretical programs which might be interesting to look further into.

If I were to conduct a similar study, I would include a larger sample of participants in order to get more reliable results. Furthermore, I would reformulate my questionnaire survey since I realized that some of the answers could have been interpreted in several ways. I think it is easier to analyze results where the students choose one alternative instead of several.
List of references


Hej!

Den här terminen skriver jag en C-uppsats i Engelska. Jag har valt att skriva om feedback i Engelsk undervisning och behöver därför er hjälp med att svara på den här undersökningen.


Tycker ni att det finns mer att säga om en fråga än det svar ni gett, lämna gärna en kommentar i kanten eller på baksidan.

Tack så mycket för hjälpen!

//Jennie Parviainen
Kön: Man □ Kvinna □

1. Brukar du märka när läraren ger dig feedback?
   Ja         Nej

2. Brukar det för det mesta vara muntlig eller skriftlig feedback du får?
   Muntlig   Skriftlig

3. Hur ofta upplever du att du får feedback? Uppskatta på ett ungefär genom att använda skalan 1-5, där 1 = aldrig, 2 = ett par gånger i månaden, 3 = en eller ett par gånger i veckan, 4 = en gång per lektion och 5 = flera gånger per lektion.
   1         2         3         4         5

4. Vilket syfte har den feedback du får? Använd skalan 1-5 där 1 = aldrig, 2 = sällan, 3 = ibland, 4 = ganska ofta, 5 = alltid, och ringa in hur ofta du uppfattar det som att feedbacken är till för att:
   Rätta skriftliga fel 1   2   3   4   5
   Rätta uttal 1   2   3   4   5
   Rätta muntliga fel 1   2   3   4   5
   Utveckla dina idéer 1   2   3   4   5
   Uppmuntra dig 1   2   3   4   5


_____________________________________________________________________

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6. Vilken/vilka typer av feedback föredrar du?

   Muntlig          Skriftlig

7. När tycker du att du borde få feedback? (Du får markera fler än ett alternativ om du vill)

   När du gjort något bra     □
   När du gjort fel          □
   När du har möjlighet att göra något bättre □
   Under tiden du jobbar med uppgiften □
   När uppgiften är färdig  □
   Annat ________________________________________________________________

8. Hur vill du ha din feedback (Det är tillåtet att markera mer än ett alternativ)

   Muntligt i klassrummet □
   Muntligt men enskilt □
   Markeringar i uppgiften (som bockar, R, X, m.fl.) □
   Skriftligt i uppgiften □
   Skriftligt i slutet av uppgiften □
   Skriftligt på ett separat papper som rör all prestation □
   Annat ________________________________________________________________

9. Tycker du att får tillräckligt med feedback?
   Ja      Nej

10. När skulle du vilja ha mer feedback?

   _________________________________
   _________________________________

   Tack för din medverkan!

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