"WHO'S (NOT) AFRAID OF FEEDBACK?"
CASE STUDY OUTLINE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ECML PROJECT "QUALITRAINING AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL"[1]

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1. Brief outline of the context

The main topic of discussion in our group was *Giving and receiving feedback in ESP classes* for the undergraduates, especially for speaking activities.

The analysis focuses on classes taking place in the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. Our project on feedback can be applied to all departments where English for Special Purposes is taught. We take into account all courses involving Business English – General English, English for Accounting, English for Banking, English for International Business Relations etc. The students are all attending day courses and may or may not work in the domains they are preparing for.

2. What we would like to change/introduce/deal with in our context

In today's society it is mandatory for people to know how to give and receive feedback. Everybody looks at feedback as one of the most feared kinds of communication. This statement is true for both teachers and students. Why is feedback looked at as "the big bad wolf"? There are many causes, such as fear of being criticized, maladaptiveness to communication, fear of negative response etc.

One immediate problem with feedback springs from the mentality of both teachers and students. From the students' point of view, it is perceived as useless, since they do not believe it will actually be taken into account. From the teachers' perspective, fear of poor assessment appears as the main impediment. Moreover, the incompatibility

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[1] Case Study - Action Plan inspired by the ECML Project "QualiTraining at Grassroots level" and the ECML "QualiTraining" workshop organised at the Academy of Economic Studies in January 2011

between evaluation by the student and our left-oriented outlook on the act of teaching has its say in the issue at stake.

In the context of business English classes we emphasized the idea that knowing *how* to provide input to people (be they teachers or students) is mandatory.

3. Main purpose and why?

Giving or receiving feedback can be hard, but of the two, receiving feedback can be harder. Looking into the topic from the perspective of the participants to the communication process, and taking into account the context – that of an academic environment - we have identified the following:

➢ *Students* :

- are not aware of the purpose of the speaking activity they are asked to participate in (i.e. It is a description of a student's performance intended to guide performance and not a mere evaluation which judges performance)
- do not have a clear idea about the way their activity is graded, being unsatisfied with the weight of certain criteria over others.

On the other hand,

➢ *Teachers*:

- feel the need to improve themselves and learn from peer colleagues *other* effective feedback practices.
- need to overcome the anxiety of being observed

4. What needs to be done? Stages and processes

We took the case of providing feedback for a speaking activity and established the following sequence of events:

➢ for *Teachers:*

1. Teachers establish a workgroup meeting in order to discuss about: i) objective and efficient criteria for giving feedback both to students and to peers, ii) further necessary research on feedback

2. After the research undertaken, teachers exchange information and design two criteria based feedback evaluation questionnaires: *the first* to be used by students to give teachers feedback on the way the activity was conducted and *the second* to be used by teachers to give peers feedback on the same matter

3. Then classroom observation takes place. After the observed activity ends and the teacher informs students about their level of performance, teachers administer the first questionnaire to their students to find out the latter's opinion on the feedback they received from their teacher. At the same time, teachers are observed by peers who make notes on the way the observed teacher gives his/her students feedback on their activity, starting from the second questionnaire.

4. After the class the observed teacher and the observers meet to discuss about the effectiveness of the feedback practices observed. Hopefully, both observed teachers and the observers will thus develop/ improve skills in giving students better quality feedback on their learning

In a nutshell, in order to overcome the anxiety of being assessed by peer teachers, objectivity must be ensured. Therefore, all observing teachers gather together and develop the criteria based feedback evaluation questionnaires. The latter are used during classroom observation and the findings could be published and disseminated in a workshop.

➤ for *Students:*

1. Students perform the activities given by the teacher, the teacher and other students grade according to the criteria provided by the teacher

2. Students receive feedback from Teacher and fellow colleagues on their performance

3. Teacher stresses the importance of giving objective feedback and together with students he/she develops a plan on improving the way each party provides feedback. Together they set goals for future performance both as regards speaking activities and as regards providing effective feedback

5. Expected outcomes and time frame

When considering expected outcomes, we envisage both students and teachers, as follows:

Students:

- increase awareness of labour market needs as regards speaking skills & performance and assessment criteria
- increase their confidence, motivation and self-awareness related to self-improvement
- raise consciousness to monitor their learning process
- divert their attention from "accuracy" and "language learning" to "fluency" and "language acquisition", gradually understanding the fundamental importance of the last two concepts.

Teachers:

- increase awareness of feedback tools
- increase confidence facing peers
- together develop a working feedback grid.
- Increase their own awareness of real labor market needs facing their students, thus orienting the teaching materials towards domains more useful to the students.
- Shift from a theoretical approach to teaching towards a more concrete, practical one.
- Try to reach a balance between fluency and accuracy in the speaking skills of their students.

As regards the time frame for the implementation of the stages and processes described in section 4 above, here are a few suggestions:

- Piloting instruments and class observation – October-December 2010
- Reporting on this experience to fellow teachers at the Department of Business English and German, eliciting suggestions for improvement – January - February 2011

- Revising instruments and implementing them more widely in the next semester – February-May 2011

- Drawing up a group presentation of the activities in the two semesters, on the occasion of the Departments' annual conference – May-June 2011