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Investigating Research Module: Dissertation Proposal

1. Statement of research interest:

> …for external feedback to be effective it must be understood and internalised by the student before it can be used to make productive improvements. Yet …there is a great deal of evidence that students do not understand the feedback given by tutors and are therefore unable to take action to reduce the discrepancy between their intentions and the effects they would like to produce (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006: 210).

Singapore's vision of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (TSLN) was launched in 1997 with the aim of developing creative thinking skills, lifelong learning passion and nationalistic commitment in the young (Goh, 1997). Despite such lofty aspirations, the initiative's focus is more on the 'how', rather than on the 'what' and 'why'. Seventeen years on and though changes have been made to the curriculum, the focus on assessments has not changed with emphasis still on summative assessments though formative assessment has been introduced. With formative assessments, teachers are expected to give more guidance and feedback to the students so that they can improve in their work (Neo, 2012).

Effective feedback to students has been identified as a key strategy in teaching and learning (Black and Williams, 1998; Hattie, 1999; Hounsell, 2003; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Therefore it is important for students to receive feedback that is understood by them and is most appropriate to their learning. This will enable them to use the feedback and as independent learners close the gap and improve in their academic work. Yet during in-service workshops, it is common to hear from teachers that feedback is a waste of time as their students are not improving in their written work despite the written feedback they are receiving. It could be because students do not understand the received feedback due to the gaps in the feedback process. It would then make sense to talk to the students to find out if they understood the written feedback and, if not, what reasons were preventing them from understanding it.

Though the use of feedback in higher education has been well researched and there has been some research done on feedback for secondary school students, there is little research done in the area of written feedback in history and even less involving how written feedback is understood by students who are perceived to be 'at risk' learners. In the Singapore context, these students belong to the Normal Academic stream. As such this study will focus on this group of learners.

2. Review of relevant research literature:

Feedback is a flexible term that can be used to cover a wide range of contexts. Sadler, in his seminal work, explains that feedback is information about how successfully something has been done and in order for improvement to be made, practice is required in a "supportive environment which incorporates feedback loops" (Sadler, 1989: 120). The three conditions stated below must be fulfilled

simultaneously rather than sequentially in order for feedback to be effective. The learner has to:

1) possess a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for
2) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard
3) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap

(ibid.)

Feedback should give information about the 'gap' between actual performance and desired performance. It should enable students to close the gap and move towards the level of desired performance (Ramaprasad, 1983, cited in Sadler, 1989).

The feedback must also be of high-quality in that it gives the student details on how well a task has been completed in order to be effective (Tang and Harrison, 2011). Hattie and Timperley (2007) break the effectiveness of feedback into four levels:

Level	Type of feedback	Purpose and effectiveness
1	Personal feedback	Boost students' self-esteem, unrelated to the task
2	Product feedback	Tells the student if they are right or wrong and is only useful when it corrects misunderstood learning
3	Process feedback	Informs the student of the steps they need to take to achieve their goal or 'feeding forward' (Higgins et al., 2001: 274)
4	Self-regulatory feedback	Allows students to modify their work themselves to meet the task requirements

While Hattie and Timperley suggest that feedback at levels three and four is most effective, it must be argued that feedback at level two is also necessary for students to improve and should be used as a starting point before moving to levels three and four.

In addition, for feedback to be effective it must be understood correctly by its recipient (Carless, 2006). One way of determining whether teachers' written feedback is effective is to ask the students for their views and to discover what feedback students want to receive. This was done by Alasdair Blair et al. (2013) in their study, 'What feedback do students want?'. The study would then offer strategies to improve feedback practices in universities. The study was undertaken in 2010 and made use of questionnaires in two post-1992 universities. It focused on second-year undergraduate students in the History, Politics and International Relations faculties answering 24 questions. Selecting second-year undergraduate students is a good choice as these students having undergone rounds of feedback in their first year would have become naturalised and so be able to offer a better perspective of their feedback experience. A total of 308 students completed the questionnaires. The findings were grouped into six themes:

1. What is feedback?
2. What type of feedback is helpful?
3. What type of feedback is unhelpful?

4. The amount of feedback provided.
5. The timeliness of feedback.
6. Areas where feedback can be improved.

One issue arising from this study is the fact that participants could “indicate whether their response was ‘frequently’, ‘sometimes’, ‘never’, ‘don’t know’ or ‘not applicable’” (p. 70). This can affect the outcome of the survey results as students’ understanding of the meaning of the terms can vary from student to student (Dowling & Brown, 2010). The main researcher then states that the responses provided a “detailed understanding of student engagement with feedback” (ibid.) but does not explain how this might be so; only later in the findings section of the research paper does the reader find written responses included to support the different themes. From this it can be assumed that there is also an open-ended section for each question. Another issue is that no mention is made of any ethical considerations undertaken for the participants in this study. No mention is made of assent, consent, anonymity and confidentiality (BERA, 2011). The questionnaire also asks for participants to indicate their course and the university attended, making identification a possibility.

In the research paper’s findings section, while the use of statistics, in the form of percentages, give the reader a clear indication of the participants’ views towards the effectiveness of feedback, it is not done consistently across all themes. This leaves the study open to some grey areas. The grouping of the findings into themes is also an issue. For instance, the theme ‘What type of feedback is unhelpful?’ seems disjointed as the discussion starts off with feedback the students found unhelpful, then moves into a section on opportunities for or accessibility to feedback and then returns to discussing types of unhelpful feedback. The discussion on accessibility, which the students saw as being important, could have been a separate theme.

In the paper’s conclusion and recommendations section, the main researcher cautions against generalisations as the study involves a small sample of participants. Among the recommendations made is for the exploration of a “wider range of feedback mechanisms” (p. 76), which includes the use of technology. The researcher should have perhaps emphasised that since students have indicated that their preference is for verbal, face-to-face feedback, as it provides an opportunity for them to clarify and understand the feedback received, the use of technology should be an additional means of providing feedback and not replace verbal, face-to-face feedback. The question sample included in the appendix includes questions such as “What year of study are you in?” and “Gender?” These questions seem redundant as the questionnaires were distributed to second-year undergraduates as stated in the outset of the research paper and the study is not specifically looking into differences in gender perspectives in understanding feedback.

Another useful study is ‘‘Feed-forward’: improving students’ use of tutors’ comments’ by Neil Duncan. This research study was undertaken to find out why students were not engaging with their assignment feedback and were therefore repeating their mistakes. This was in response to the feedback from university tutors. The

methodology used for the study was action research. Due to limited resources, the study could only be undertaken in a single Level 2 university module for one and a half months. Only 15 out of 52 students took part in the study. Each participant submitted his/her 'feedback history' of eight feedback sheets or more to a member of the project team for analysis. Recurring mistakes were picked out. Another project team member read the feedback sheets independently and a consensus was reached on the key issues that appeared for each participant. These were consolidated into advice on a support sheet for each student on how they could improve their work or 'feed-forward'. This was followed up with a one-to-one session for each student who was supported in developing an individual learning plan for their next summative assignment. After the next summative assignment, it was revealed that students who participated in the study generally made improvements, with only two of the fifteen participants achieving a grade below their overall average. This was followed up with group interviews conducted with participants to discover what participants do with their feedback. Participants who did not refer to their feedback cited that their feedback was general or vague and was not specifically directed at their work. Feedback given for one module was only relevant to that module and finally there was nothing specific for the students to work on and improve.

The main researcher admits that the small sample of participants means the results only tentatively show that the additional interventions helped most of the participants to improve their grades and thus is cautious of making generalisations. So too with the new knowledge that how and why feedback is written can be improved to raise students' learning. One issue of this study is that the size of the project team is unknown and thus the division of labour, save for two team members, is unknown. A further issue is that only one cycle was undertaken. The next issue the team is looking at is how to make tutors' feedback a more iterative process but it is unknown when this cycle will be undertaken.

Both studies are relevant to my study as the first explains what type of feedback students want and the second study reveals that the teacher's feedback has to be critical and specific to help the students work on and improve.

3. Research design and general approach:

The aim of this research is to examine how secondary two NA students, perceived as being 'at risk', understand their teacher's written feedback in history. It is hoped that through this understanding light can be shed on how NA students' learning in history is affected by their understanding of the written feedback they receive. The goal of the study is to therefore rely as much as possible on the students' views of the situation being studied. Hence the research takes an interpretivist approach rather than a positivist one because it focuses on the students' perceptions of an issue that is based on the "meaning and experience" shared by this specific group of students (King and Horrocks, 2010: 26). This study is interested in understanding a process in a particular social setting. Interpretivism allows the researcher to

understand his/her own intentions through reflection and to interpret the participants' intentions by analysing what they say or do (Creswell, 2009, Crotty, 1998).

However, interpretivism is not without its critics. Postpositivists, whose research is diametrically opposed to interpretivism as it is based on elements of being "reductionistic, logical, empirical, cause-and-effect oriented" (Creswell, 2013: 24; Creswell, 2009) argue that interpretivism lacks objectivity. Interpretivist research can be objective if the researchers recognise their own backgrounds shape their interpretation and acknowledge in the research how their interpretation stem from their experiences (Creswell, J., 2009). Since the study is about getting and using the views of the participants, the method adopted will be through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions.

A semi-structured interview will be used as this allows the wording and flow of the formulated questions to be modified during the interview process (Ary et al., 2013, Robson, 2013). Probes will be used to clarify participants' responses and to get to the depth of the participants' reasoning (Dowling & Brown, 2010). Samples of the student participants' written work will be collected and used during the interview to elicit their understanding of their teacher's written feedback. The semi-structured interview method was chosen over a structured method, which is too prescriptive and undirected and where the interviewee can deviate from the topic. However, Interviews have their drawbacks. The fact that a former teacher will be interviewing students will tilt the power asymmetry even more to the researcher's end. This is something the researcher has to be mindful of. Otherwise the interviewees will end up saying things they think the researcher wants to hear (ibid.)

4. Empirical setting:

a) Brief description and access:

The study will be undertaken in a state-run secondary school. Principals, whom the researcher has previously worked with, will be telephoned to briefly inform them about the study; this will be followed up with an email outlining the purpose and benefits of the study to the school. A timeline for the interviews to be conducted will be included and adhered to as the Singapore school terms are quite different from British schools and the Ministry of Education is strict about when researchers are allowed access to schools[1] (Ministry of Education, 2013).

b) Sampling:

A homogeneous sample of students, of both genders, will be asked to participate in the study.

No	Criteria for students	Rationale

[1] The data collection should NOT be conducted during school busy periods such as beginning/end of the year and during examination periods.

1	Participants must be in the Normal Academic stream	The focus of the study.
2	Participants must be in secondary two as this would mean they would have already experienced receiving feedback from their history teacher	They would be able to give their perspective of understanding written feedback in history having become naturalised to the experience.
3	Between eight to ten participants will be selected	Taking into account the manageability of data and time constraints faced by a single researcher, between eight and not more than ten subjects will be selected. Students will be informed that if there is an overwhelming response to participate in the study, their names will be put into a hat and the final participants' names will be drawn by a class representative[2]. (ibid.)
No	Criteria for teachers	Rationale
1	The history teacher teaching the sec 2 NA classes will be asked to participate in the study	Due to the shortage of history teachers in Singapore and the small size of the NA cohort of students, schools usually deploy one teacher to teach both the secondary one and two NA classes.

c) Data collection:

The following table shows the data types, sources and quantity to be collected for this study:

Types of Data	Data Sources	Quantity	Total Quantity
Written work samples	Student participants	8-10 files (1 per student participant)	8-10 files
Audio recordings of the semi-	Student participants +	8-10 (1 per student participant)	9-11 audio recordings

[2] Sample size should be reasonable and should not incur too much effort on the part of the school personnel and/or students.

structured interviews	Teacher participant	+ 1	

d) Data analysis:

A generic form of analysis (Creswell, 2009) will be used. The stages of analysis will involve analysing the collected data for themes or perspectives and the researcher will report on four to five themes. The themes generated will include "balancing clarity, inclusivity and auditability" (King and Horrocks, 2010: 149-152). Hence, the researcher hopes to "work out a coherent explanation by piecing together what different people have said, while recognizing that each person might have his or her own construction of events" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 11). In order to ensure a high level of reliability, the responses from the interviewees will be coded as consistently as possible (Oppenheim, 1992, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 205).

e) Contingencies:

When planning to conduct a research study it is important to anticipate and pre-empt problems that may arise. For this study, possible problems would include getting sufficient participants for the study, the restraint of the participants with an unfamiliar interviewer and finally the conducting of the interviews.

Based on my fifteen years of teaching experience there have been many instances of students not turning up to participate in programmes and activities for which they had signed up. Also, in Singapore, parents feel reluctant to get involved or allow their children to get involved in anything outside or additional to their school work. This is because they worry that their child might be penalised for saying something negative against the teacher or the school and so when they feel that their interests might be threatened, they tend not to display a spirit of generosity (Tan, 2012, Dwyer & Hecht, 1992). Therefore there is a risk that parents might not give consent for their child's participation in the study and to pre-empt this, more than the eight final student participants will be interviewed. If there are absentees, I should still be able to reach my minimum of eight participants.

Students in the NA stream are usually not as articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2009) and are more reserved as they do not want to get into trouble for saying the wrong things. The researcher also has to be alert that the participants are not saying what they think the school or their teacher wants them to say (Dowling & Brown, 2010). This can be overcome by asking the teacher to recommend some articulate participants; however based on experience, having seen how selected students are prepared before a director's visit or an interview with a reporter, the use of recommended students must also be avoided. Therefore, building rapport with and reassuring the participants will be an important part of the interview process.

To overcome the researcher's lack of experience in crafting interview questions and in conducting interviews it is particularly important to practice the interview questions on a volunteer to verify the questions can be understood clearly. Any limitations or shortcomings of the questions can be amended at this stage.

5. Ethical issues:

The entire research process will be closely guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) with special emphasis given to the following areas:

- **Assent:** In order to help the participants and their parents understand what the research study comprises, what participation in the study entails and to obtain informed consent, an information letter and a consent form have been created for the teacher participant, the student participants and their parents/guardians because the student participants are below the age of 18. The teacher and students will firstly be given time to read the information form. The students will opt-in and return their forms by the next day while the teacher will have the option to opt-out. Next the parent/guardian of the students who have opted in will be given the information letter and consent form. Because parents/guardians are often too busy with work to respond, to help them, they only have to respond by opting-out if they do not want their child/ward to participate in the study (BERA, 2011, Guidelines, 10-12).

- **Informed consent:** All participating individuals will be informed through their information
  letter that if they have reservations, they are free to withdraw from the study (BERA, 2011, Guideline, 20). In the case of the teacher participant, though he/she was recommended by the Head of Department, he/she will still be issued with an opt-out form. This is to remove the impression that the teacher must participate. It is important for the teacher to feel that he/she still has the ability to exercise his/her choice. Prior to the interview the researcher will meet the teacher to talk about confidentiality and anonymity issues and to ascertain that his/her participation is voluntary and to assure him/her that there will be no repercussions from the school should he/she wish to withdraw (BERA, 2011, Guidelines 10-12, 14-16, 24, 27-29).

- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All participants' names will be removed and they will choose their own pseudonyms during the data analysis and reporting. The school's name will also be anonymised (BERA, 2011, Guideline 25). While every effort will be made to preserve the anonymity of all the participants and the school and all the data will be handled and safeguarded sensitively and securely, it may be possible for some readers to identify the participating teacher. This is because the teachers in the school would know of his/her identity and might talk about the teacher's participation in the study to other teachers outside the school. Furthermore the teaching fraternity in Singapore is not very large. The community

of history teachers is even smaller as there is a severe shortage of history teachers. Hence the teacher participant may be identified by the Singapore teaching community (BERA, 2012, Guidelines 9-12, 22-23). The teacher will be apprised of this (Dowling & Brown, 2010).

- **Risks to participants and/or researchers:**
  At the end of the study, the teacher will be given a more detailed report earlier in order to obtain his/her approval before releasing a shorter and more general version to the student participants and to their parents. After the teacher participant's approval has been obtained, the school will be provided with a summary of the research findings. The teacher participant's confidentiality and privacy will be protected by not quoting him/her ad verbatim (BERA, 2011, Guidelines 23-25, 29).

6. Professional/researcher development:

It is hoped that this study will be able to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on feedback practices. In the Singapore context, that the study will also help History teachers to improve their feedback processes with their NA students and help these teachers to craft feedback comments that are tailored for and understood by these students who are perceived as being academically 'at risk'. Thus these students will be able to take ownership of their learning, improve in their written work and will be more able to experience success in the subject.

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