Student-Teachers' Perception of Feedback Sessions

Ana Carolina González Ramírez
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas
Universidad de Costa Rica

Abstract

In the implementation of an ESP course, post-graduate students receive their supervisors' opinions in post-observation sessions which tend to be considered troublesome and a "necessary evil." This study provided tips to 4 participants to improve their experience and thus change their perceptions of feedback sessions into a more enriching and positive experience because student-teachers who hold this view are more effective both as learners and teachers-in-training. Three data-collection instruments were used to evaluate possible changes in their perceptions. In the questionnaire, trainees mentioned emotions such as nervousness, mild interest, and frustration before, during, and after the feedback sessions. Observations and interviews indicated that the tips moderately achieved their goal and enhanced student-teachers' motivation, self-awareness, and open-mindedness toward the sessions and the feedback received. Trainees described these sessions as an opportunity for reflection, adjustment, and improvement. Possible negative effects of power-differential (Anderson, 2007) were also observed in the participants. Their emotions, physical condition, experience, and expectations are discussed as possible reasons underlying the negative concept that feedback sessions usually hold. Limitations of this study included availability of participants and schedule of supervisions.

Key words: perception of feedback sessions, student-teachers' motivation, supervisor's feedback, power-differential

Resumen

Al impartir un curso de ESP, los estudiantes de posgrado reciben las opiniones de sus supervisores en sesiones de observación posterior, lo que suele ser considerado como problemático y un "mal necesario." Este estudio proporciona consejos para 4 participantes a fin de mejorar su experiencia y cambiar así sus percepciones de las sesiones de "feedback" hacia una experiencia más enriquecedora y positiva, porque los estudiantes-profesores que sostienen esta postura son más eficientes, tanto en su calidad de instructores como de profesores en formación. Se utilizaron tres instrumentos de

recolección de datos para evaluar los posibles cambios en sus percepciones. En el cuestionario, los participantes mencionaron emociones tales y como el nerviosismo, el poco interés y la frustración previa, durante las sesiones de evaluación posterior, respectivamente. Las observaciones y las entrevistas indicaron que los consejos prácticos lograron moderadamente sus objetivos, incrementaron la motivación de los estudiantes-profesores, la conciencia de sí mismos e incentivaron una mente abierta hacia las sesiones y la respuesta recibida. Los alumnos describen estas sesiones como una oportunidad para la reflexión, el ajuste y el mejoramiento. Los posibles efectos negativos del poder diferencial (Anderson, 2007) también se observaron en los participantes. Sus emociones, su condición física, su experiencia y sus expectativas se describen como posibles razones que enfatizan el aspecto negativo que las sesiones de "feedback" suelen poseer. Las limitaciones de este estudio incluyen la disponibilidad de los participantes y el calendario de supervisiones.

Palabras claves: percepción de sesiones de evaluación, motivación de estudiantes-profesores, evaluación de supervisores, poder diferencial

In the preparation towards obtaining a post-graduate degree, higher education students are expected not only to internalize massive amounts of knowledge but also to apply it in their language classrooms. During the final stage of the process, post-graduate student-teachers (STs from now on) must design a course of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) while being the subjects of intense scrutiny by other more experienced language teachers, also called supervisors (SVs from now on). These "outside agents" are partially responsible for the STs' professional growth by giving the latter support, advice, and constant feedback during post-conference sessions.

However, these feedback sessions seem to be "one of the trickiest parts of the job" (Bailey, 2006, 829) for those observed and those observing, especially because of the occasional negative feedback that takes place during the sessions. Moreover, these conferences involve the danger of loss of face by both parties. In this context, Wajnru's (as cited in Bailey, 2006, 145) definition of face as "the public, socially valued image of self" evidences the potential risk of having one's performance questioned and criticized. The situation appears to become a threat in the eyes of the teachers-in-training, for they are also building their image as professionals based on the comments and critiques they are subject to. Nevertheless, it might be possible to change such a perception. In order to create a well-constructed and positive post-observation conference, this should be analyzed and some of its characteristics more carefully looked upon.

The current study was carried out in a Costa Rican public university's post-graduate program whose final graduation requirement is a practicum where STs demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities to design and teach an ESP course. The sample of subjects chosen for this study was composed of 9 STs, who

were all active educators and had already received intense feedback by the time in which this study was conducted. These STs had also had observed some of their classmates' classes as part of the course assignments; they had carried out an action research project based on the needs of their own students, and they had also reflected on their performance during quite comprehensive feedback sessions. This variety of activities demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of this postgraduate program.

Rationale

A rather tense and defensive attitude is likely to appear in the STs during post-observation sessions since they are being evaluated and their work is being questioned. Even though STs acknowledge the importance of the conferences, feedback sessions seem a troublesome part of the process for STs. Many questions arose regarding this phenomena, and they were merged into one single inquiry: *How can giving recommendations in the form of tips to student-teachers currently teaching the practicum at a public university help these to perceive post-observation discussions as more positive, enriching, and enjoyable experiences?*

Review of the Literature

Importance of Motivated Teachers

Studies have demonstrated that teachers' motivation is an essential factor for students' effectiveness and improvement in a regular classroom (Tumposky, 2003). However, the complexity of the issue increases when the instructors have a two-folded role as teachers *and* students. Their motivation becomes more intricate because of the numerous ramifications it holds. These student-teachers (STs) are in a difficult position where they are constantly torn between their responsibilities as teachers and their susceptibilities as students. As learners, STs are subject to observations and subsequent and intense feedback sessions. These periods of conversation and advice bring about both positive and negative emotional responses in the trainees. Feedback sessions are considered to be meetings in which suggestions and advice are provided in a safe and friendly environment, but for some STs they are not.

As mentioned before, studies have shown that teachers' motivation directly influences classroom effectiveness and school performance (Ofoegbu, 2004). If the instructors of a course are under great stress, this is reflected in their classes, and students are likely to feel it. The result might be highly tense classes, distracted professors, and students who are not receiving the best training they could. On the other hand, motivated, confident STs might be capable of delivering better classes and of using all the skills they have acquired to provide their students with more educative and richer experiences.

Similarly, STs who perceive the feedback session as a well intentioned, enriching experience are probably more likely to not only accept the suggestions and comments but also embrace them and actually use them in their classes. That is, STs who consider feedback sessions as positive experiences might achieve more significant professional growth that will improve their classes and their students' performance and learning.

However, many STs tend to see feedback sessions as evaluating periods where their mistakes are pinpointed and whose only purpose is to criticize all those elements that were not of the observer's like. Some STs question feedback sessions and approach them distrustfully and negatively. For them, post-observation sessions are considered a "necessary evil" to overcome. Moreover, many of those who are observed comment on the many negative points highlighted and the very few acknowledgments that they are granted during the sessions. Is it that STs can only see these negative aspects because they approach them with such a negative attitude? Could it be that with some tips and suggestions STs can approach these sessions more positively, or at least less negatively?

The Supervisor's Role in Post-observation Conferences

Supervisors have multiple roles in feedback sessions. According to interviews carried out with experienced supervisors, there are some common aspects that could be pinpointed as important and that are kept in mind by them during feedback sessions to make STs feel more comfortable and to have a richer post-observation session. For example, they are conscious of their role as critical feedback providers and of the importance of their linguistic choices on the reception of negative feedback. They know they must adopt apparently antagonistic attitudes: supportive but objective, encouraging but sincere, guiding but critical. Moreover, SVs believe there should be "an atmosphere of trust, fairness, and cooperation . . . to enable STs to work more efficiently and give successful, productive instruction" (S. Jones, personal communication, September 29, 2009). Finally, they are aware that, in order to increase the possibilities of their advice being well received, they must be careful and tactful when providing feedback.

According to Tracy (1995), these aspects may reflect in the STs' behavior and acceptance of the feedback provided by SVs. That is, "a positive teacher/supervisor relationship is important for effective supervision" (Tracy, 1995, n.p.). If both parties get along, the possibilities of the feedback session to be successful and enriching are enhanced. This point was also stated by supervisor A. Hernández (personal communication, September 30, 2009) when she mentioned that even the *order* of issues addressed during feedback sessions should be carefully considered, not only to avoid making the ST feel badly but also because "it makes STs more receptive towards my comments."

Other roles that SVs may assume during feedback sessions and which can affect the development of the post-observation conference are mentors, professors, and teacher leaders (Wanzare & da Costa, 2000). The course of the sessions depends also on more specific aspects such as the student himself (his previous

experience with and knowledge of feedback sessions), the particular class and subsequent session, and even the moment within the practicum in which the ST is (D. Bolaños, personal communication, October 2, 2009). Depending on the seriousness with which each factor is perceived by the STs, they may feel more or less comfortable during the reception of feedback.

The Role of Feedback in Post-observation Conferences

Feedback can be defined as a raising awareness strategy which intends to shed light on the flaws or weaknesses of STs' teaching practices. As Bailey (2006) mentions, "the assumption is that feedback increases awareness, which enables teachers to change their behavior" (p.141) into a more positive one. That is, the goal of feedback is to promote positive change by receiving a report on the possible effectiveness of our teaching. The word *possible* is emphasized for the real outcomes of our teaching can ultimately be seen in the students' learning and performance; and because the latter can occur long time after constant input has being received, the feedback given can be considered a *prediction* of our teaching success in the long run.

The SVs interviewed agree on feedback as an enhancer of STs' instruction by providing STs with suggestions and comments that will motivate them to try new methodologies and activities that they would not have tried otherwise and which have already been applied by the advisor instructors. SVs also emphasize the importance of qualifying their feedback with explanations and reasons based on what was observed so that they can verify STs' understanding. Such comprehension of information should somehow increase the possibilities of seeing changes and the actual implementation of changes in the following classes.

Student-teachers' Expected Role in Post-observation Conferences

SVs expect STs to take a more active role, to analyze their comments and enrich them by asking more questions and adding on the topic (D. Bolaños, personal communication, October 2, 2009). Observer teachers also expressed that they looked forward to the opportunity of seeing the suggested changes in the STs' teaching practice. For the SVs, this would mean not only that the supervised teachers actually paid attention to their feedback but that their comments are respected and valuable. Therefore, for those observing and evaluating the practicum, STs should assume a more active role that involves analysis, discussion, and thoughtful consideration of their recommendations.

Student-Teachers' Perception of Post-observation Conferences

According to Waite (as cited by Bailey, 2006), there are three roles that STs might undertake during feedback sessions: passive, collaborative, and

adversarial. The latter occurs when "both the teacher and the supervisor bring strong agendas to conferences and the teacher does not capitulate to the supervisor's position" (Bailey, 2006, p.146). The result of such a situation might be the rejection of supervisorial feedback, inability to interpret and consider this, and lack of interest for change based on it, which turns to be an uncomfortable situation in which neither party benefits or reflects upon.

Schulz (2005), in his three-year study on practicum students, emphasized the importance of reflection upon one's work during the post-lesson conferences. However, the author also mentioned that the burden of expectations placed on STs might frustrate and overwhelm students, which might negatively affect the results of feedback sessions. To support this argument, he quotes Dewey, who says that "the experience might well become miseducative if it halted the growth of further learning" (Dewee as quoted by Schulz, 2005, n.p.).

Another very important element that affects STs' perception of post-observation conferences is the background experience that they posses. Teachers who have already constructed their teaching patterns of behavior tend to be more difficult to persuade to try new methodologies or procedures because "these patterns of behavior and related ideas of the nature of language teaching may cause interference, confusion, or resistance when they receive the course input" (Murdoch, 1994, p.49). Therefore, the challenge for these experienced STs might be two folded: implementing new ideas and changing their old preconceptions.

The power and functions of the SVs and the perception that STs may have of them can also affect the way in which STs perceive and react during feedback sessions. Such variation of power is called *power differential*.

Power differential. Anderson (2007) develops this topic at length. He pinpoints the difficult situation that SVs are put into when they are asked by STs to be supportive, but they are also required by the institution to be objective and evaluative because of the grading task they are demanded to perform. As Anderson explains, power differential is "a fundamental flaw" for "Student teachers are aware of the cooperating teachers' decision-making power" and tend to act based on pleasing their mentors (Anderson, 2007, n.p.). Likewise, the SVs' power and influence on the practicum may hinder STs' performance and openness to experiment with different methods or activities. The influence exerted by SVs, who in this particular study are also evaluators, might affect the parties' interaction during the post-observation sharing sessions as well.

Suggestions for Improvement of Student-teachers' Perception of Post-observation

Conferences

Explicit information on how to improve the experience of STs during feedback sessions was not found in the literature. However, some "ideal" characteristics of feedback sessions could be inferred from the texts consulted and the interviews that were carried out.

Bailey (2006) describes what an ideal feedback session should be like. To begin with, she states that successful conferences are those in which

> ... supervision is expected if not welcomed. The trainees acknowledge that they have something to learn about teaching. They typically enroll in a practicum course, which is the "major opportunity for the student teacher to acquire the practical skills and knowledge needed to function as an effective language teacher" (Richards and Crookes, 1988:9). (Bailey, 2006, 226-227)

Therefore, the perfect post-observation conference should hold feedback at its core, and grabbing the importance and richness of it should be the ultimate goal of both parties involved.

Tracy (1995) enriches the concept of the ideal feedback session by mentioning the importance of the inherent analysis of the observed data. Both parties should learn, reflect, and teach. The supervision process is a built-in work whose responsibility lies in the supervisor and student-teacher (Arredondo et al. 1995 as cited by Wanzare & da Costa, 2000).

The issue of people's interaction is also commented by Anderson (2007), who states that "Certainly the student teaching practicum, like any partnership, is replete with situations where conflicting preferences result in one person's preferences winning out over another's" (Anderson, 2007, n.p.). Therefore, a good awareness-raising conference is that in which interaction between the parties leads not to a competition-like situation in which one party tries to demonstrate he/she is right, but one in which both parties reach an agreement where professional growth and analysis are found.

Methods

List of Suggestions

A list of suggestions was developed based on the literature consulted and the interviews carried out with the SVs (see appendix #1 for the list of tips). The four tips addressed STs' motivation and attitude toward feedback sessions; they included practical ideas related to flexibility, adaptation, awareness raising, and effective teaching. The tips were intended to open a window for a better understanding of the positive role of feedback sessions. The tips included quotes from experts in the field to show the subjects that research had been done and that the information provided was constructed with the knowledge of research studies. The tips were also phrased in a friendly, not extremely academic, language so that STs could identify with the suggestions provided.

Four STs were chosen based on their teaching-dates availability. They all agreed to answer the questionnaires and to be interviewed after each feedback session. Their ages oscillated between 23 and 30 years old. All of them had had previous teaching experience although for different periods of time and in different institutions.

Short questionnaires were completed by the STs before the list of tips was given to avoid any biases. The list of tips was provided to three of the STs a week prior to their classes according to the teaching calendar so that the subjects had time to read and internalize the recommendations provided. One of the subjects was given the information the same day of the observed class because of the ST's time constraints.

Instructions on how to use the tips were given orally. The individuals were asked to read carefully the list of suggestions some time before their classes and shortly before the post-observation conference as well. STs were also asked to reflect on the tips and to have them in mind during the feedback session. These recommendations were also written in the handout so that STs could refer to them if necessary.

STs' classes and their corresponding feedback sessions were observed and recorded from beginning to end, and notes were taken. Afterwards, each subject was interviewed in regard to the application and usefulness of the tips.

Data Collection Instruments

The several data-collection instruments ensured not only a more objective study but also enough data to be analyzed. A questionnaire collected STs' perception of post-observation discussions and gathered data about their opinions and attitudes before, during, and after feedback sessions; it also elicited comments and suggestions on the matter (see appendix 2 for blank instrument that was administered). The questionnaire posed 7 questions; the first of which inquired the opinion of feedback sessions by asking STs to rank different emotions on a scale that went from *very x, somewhat x, a little x* and *not x* -being x a given adjective to describe the session. The following three questions asked STs to describe their feelings *before, during*, and *after* feedback sessions by choosing a number that represented the intensity of these emotions in them at these stages of the process. The fifth question provided a list of 10 adjectives that conveyed both positive and negative ideas; STs were asked to choose only 5 of these words, which were organized alphabetically so as to avoid any biases. The last two questions were open-ended to obtain more information regarding the parties' responsibilities and any other aspect that the subjects considered important to mention but that was not included in the questionnaire.

The information from the observation of STs' feedback sessions was collected based on a specific list of aspects (see appendix 3 for blank instrument). Such a list started by mentioning possible attitudes that the subjects could have had before the feedback session took place; also, specific behaviors and any other attitudes that indicated stress, anxiety, or concern were written down. The possible behaviors portrayed during feedback sessions were classified as "negative" and "positive." Some examples of the first group are interruptions, nervous movements, and defensive or disrespectful comments, among others. "Positive" attitudes, on the other hand, include the request for advice or addition of comments, politeness, interest, and follow-up questions. Both pre- and during- observation sections included extra space for additional information.

Finally, the third instrument of data collection was an interview carried out with STs after the feedback session had concluded. Although there was a set of questions used as guidelines (see appendix 4), the interviewer included additional questions as the interview proceeded. The first two questions of this interview intended to confirm the observations collected in the second instrument. Questions 3 and 4 were aimed at determining STs' opinion in regard to the comments and suggestions provided by the observer. Questions 5 to 8 dealt with the usefulness of the tips provided.

These sources of information would provide enough data on the STs' reactions and emotions. They also helped to determine whether or not there was any change; and more importantly, they were aimed at showing the efficacy of the process in order to change the perception of feedback sessions to more positive, enriching experiences.

Data collection procedures

First, the questionnaire was distributed among the chosen STs. Participants were expected to fill it out several days before the tips were provided so that they discussed their perception of feedback sessions prior to the implementation of the study. STs were asked to be honest and not to answer the questions after any feedback session but at a moment when they felt comfortable and at ease.

STs were observed during one feedback session each. The researcher observed and took notes not only of the conference session but also of the class upon which it was based. Such feedback sessions were also recorded.

Two of the participants were interviewed immediately after their feedback session. Such interviews were carried out in an informal environment in the same place where the post-conference session had occurred. The other two participants were sent the questions via Internet because in one case there was not enough time to carry out the interview, and in the other, the laptop computer in which the conversations were recorded ran out of battery. One of the participants did not return the questionnaire; therefore, this participant's answers could not be included in some of the data analysis.

Results and Analysis

Table 1
STs' Attitude Before Feedback Sessions

Emotion	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
a) stress		†	†	† †
b) anxiety	†	†	†	†
c) uneasiness		† †	†	†
d) eagerness	†	†	†	†

The results portrayed in table 1 show STs' degree of nervousness before feedback sessions. STs felt somewhat nervous before the post-observation conversations. These data seem to contradict the information collected from the feedback session, for the STs did not exhibit behaviors that showed them anxious or stressed prior to the conference. Moreover, only one subject commented on the forthcoming feedback session. The question related to stress was also posed during the interviews, and none of the subjects expressed they had felt nervous before the post-observation conference. This information seems to indicate that even if STs do not show it or admit it, they are experiencing some degree of discomfort during the feedback sessions.

Table 2
STs' Attitude During Feedback Sessions

Attitude	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
a) interested	† †	† †		
b) motivated	†	† †	†	
c) offended		†	†	† †
d) attacked	†	† †		†

As it can be observed in table 2, all the STs were interested and motivated, which are two very positive feelings, during the post-observation conversations. This was confirmed during the observations of the feedback sessions, for most STs were taking notes, scribbling, nodding, maintaining eye contact with the supervisor, and elaborating and adding to the observer's comments and advice while asking for more suggestions. However, there were also some nervous expressions such as biting their nails, playing with objects in their hands, and touching their hair.

It is also relevant to pinpoint that the majority of STs mentioned feeling attacked during the post-observation conferences, and most of them showed "defensive" behaviors, for example, interrupting the observer, ignoring her, and justifying their actions and decisions. All this information seems to contradict the data collected in the interviews for STs claimed having felt relaxed and comfortable during the exchange.

Table 3
STs' Attitude After Feedback Sessions

Emotion	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
a) frustration	†	† †	†	
b) offended		†	†	† †
c) motivation		† † †	†	
d) relief	†	† †		†

The results in table 3 indicate that STs stated feeling some frustration after the session, although they also mentioned to feel quite motivated. Even if both emotions seem contradictory at first sight, in the interviews STs explained that they cannot help but feel frustrated since their work is being criticized and even "torn apart" by the supervisor. However, this emotion transforms into motivation, for STs feel they need to prove themselves and the observer that they can improve and learn from their mistakes. In this regard, the interview also showed that STs agreed with the supervisor's recommendations; they coincided on their objectiveness and value. This motivation-raising result proves the positive and negative consequences of SVs' power that Anderson (2007) mentions when he states that "There is no reason why power cannot act to advance the interests of others" (Anderson, 2007, n.p.). Motivation may arise from different sources, but a positive result is likely to be the outcome.

Table 4
STs' Description of Feedback Sessions

Negative Adjectives	People who circled the option	Positive Adjectives	People who circled the option
depressing		dynamic	†
disillusioning	†	encouraging	† † †
frustrating	† † †	enlightening	† † †
stressing	† † †	helpful	† † † †
useless	†	pleasant	†

Table 4 shows a general positive opinion towards post-observation conferences. Most of the subjects agreed on their usefulness and enriching characteristics, as evident in the selection of positive words to describe them such as encouraging, enlightening, and helpful. Finally, even if there were some STs who considered them "uncomfortable, stressing, and frustrating," it seems the value of feedback sessions is mostly well perceived by STs.

The results depicted in the tables might seem contradictory at first; however, the adjectives used in the instrument do not cancel each other out. All of them refer to complementary emotions that can occur simultaneously in the subjects because of the complexity of the factors involved: feedback, personalities, teaching styles, time constraints, and emotional state, among others.

The post-observation interviews with students provided more information related to the feedback session itself, STs' emotional state during it, and their opinion towards the observer's corrections.

Table 5
STs' Emotions at Different Moments of the Feedback Session according to Their Points of View After the Feedback Session Has Been Held

	Before the feedback session	During the feedback session	During the observer's corrections
ST # 1	No nervousness	Relaxed	Disappointed (not to have noticed some very clear elements)
ST # 2	No nervousness	Relaxed, exhausted	Reflective, attentive to recommendations
ST # 3*	——	——	——
ST # 4	No nervousness	Comfortable, surprised	Content with their seriousness and objectiveness

* ST #3 could not be interviewed after the post-observation session of his/her class

According to table 5, STs did not mention having felt nervous or anxious neither prior nor during the feedback session. This information contradicts the data collected in the questionnaire administered at the beginning of the study, where most STs admitted to have felt somehow anxious or stressed before the feedback session. The disparity among these data can be due to several factors: the fact that a fellow graduate student was asking the questions, the immediacy with which the interview was held after the class, being under the rush of having taught, denial, or the tips provided. This result may show that STs' receptiveness of and flexibility towards feedback might have improved after the implementation of the tips.

Some STs also commented on them having their own *teaching personality* as one of the ideas they recalled during the feedback session. "Learning about your own teaching" was quite important for some of them. Therefore, for STs, feedback sessions meant both criticism from people who have vast experience in teaching and personal and professional growth; feedback sessions are considered to be an opportunity for reflection and adjustment into new teaching structures and practices. This practice of inquiry, elaborated on by Schulz (2005), is the opportunity for self-reflection that increases awareness but at the same time, as he mentions, can raise a feeling of disappointment. Therefore, managing this very important element of feedback sessions seems key to adequately internalize the value and message of post-observation conferences.

Table 6
STs' Attitudes in relation to the Tips Provided

	Reading of tips before the feedback session	Remembering of tips during feedback session	Helpfulness of tips
ST # 1	Yes (minutes before)	Yes	Yes
ST # 2	Yes (the day before)	Yes	Yes

ST # 3*	——	——	——
ST # 4	Yes (an hour and a half before)	Yes	Yes

* ST #3 could not be interviewed after the post-observation session of his/her class

The answers in table 6 showed that the three STs interviewed considered the tips helpful and interesting. They seemed to have grasped their underlying idea of improvement. For example, one ST said that "they all made perfect sense to me." Another participant stated that it was the first time he/she accepted all the feedback for it seemed "good and reasonable." Understandably, they also mentioned they would try to use the tips in the forthcoming feedback sessions.

In this last question, the subjects also commented on their new understanding of criticism not as a synonym of a "bad" lesson but as a reminder of the possibility of improving their lessons. A ST also commented on the usefulness of these tips for future STs, but he/she also questioned the possibility of providing similar input to the SVs, for "There are some people who weren't born to give feedback."

Table 7
Most Frequently Mentioned Tips to be Recalled by STs During the
Feedback Session because of the Usefulness of Their Ideas

	Tip 1	Tip 2	Tip 3	Tip 4
ST 1		†		
ST 2	†	†		
ST 3		†		†
ST 4		†		

After having read the tips and recalled them during the post-observation conferences, all STs remembered two key ideas from the tips provided: open-mindedness and flexibility, both of which were mentioned in tip 2. The ideas took root on the STs, for they provided the possibility of adjustment according to their beliefs and because they allow the ST to grow professionally by reflecting upon the suggestions and comments provided. Specific information on the usefulness of each tip provided can be observed in table #7. Both Bailey (2006) and Tracy (1995) highlight the importance of this reflection and awareness-raising feature, which was particularly clear in the STs' interviews.

As the table shows, the ideas conveyed in tip 3 were not mentioned by the subjects. When inquired why this was so during the interview, STs mentioned that the possibility of "experimenting" mentioned in the tip was non-existent in the practicum. According to them, SVs expect their suggestions and commentaries to be implemented during the following class, excluding the possibility of introducing new methodologies or ideas owned by the ST themselves. Moreover, because the practicum is given a grade by these observers, STs feel obliged

to use the supervisor's ideas in order to obtain good grades. These comments demonstrate Anderson's concept of "power differential' as perceived by STs. He mentions that teachers' decision-making power is acknowledged by STs, and it is because of this that ST feel forced to implement the suggestions given during feedback sessions by their SVs.

Possible Factors that Influence the Negative Perception of Feedback Sessions

As the researcher interviewed the subjects and collected their answers in the different instruments, some reasons for the rather negative perception of feedback sessions emerged. There are several factors that, whether directly or indirectly, can contribute:

- emotional factor: STs believe that they have put in their effort, time and energy in the preparation and implementation of their lessons. Having an outsider criticize their hard work arouses negative emotions and affects the reception of the feedback provided. This disagreement, however, originates rich discussions in regard to the teaching activities and the class itself, which is one of the characteristics of feedback sessions desired by the SVs interviewed.
- STs' conditions: the study also brought up the tiredness of the STs. Since this research was implemented during the last weeks of the practicum, STs claimed to feel tired, both mentally and physically. Two students wanted to "get through it" as soon as possible.
- type of feedback: sometimes the comments of the SVs were perceived as a reference to the ST's *personality*, not to his/her teaching. Such type of feedback was not well received and became a serious obstacle to accept any subsequent comments, whether they continued to refer to the ST or to the class itself.
- STs' teaching background: some ST felt their experience in the teaching field was not taken into account or valued during the feedback sessions. The previous negative experiences of STs with feedback might have affected their emotions towards this, even if the sessions were mostly pleasant and reassuring.
- expectations: STs feel their personal standards are challenged in many of the sessions. STs commented on the need to be emotionally and mentally prepared for feedback. Moreover, this burden of expectations (mentioned by Schulz, 2005) is likely to result in a generalized feeling of disappointment and frustration because the amount of effort put in the class does not match the type of feedback received. The experience then becomes "miseducative," for STs do not feel capable of fulfilling all what is expected of them, and consequently, they feel overwhelmed and disappointed.
- cultural factors: Since Costa Rican society is mostly not confrontational and sessions tend to be very direct and straight-forward, feedback is

usually not well received by STs. Their defensive reactions are triggered more easily.

·   bonds between ST and his/her class: some STs mentioned that during feedback sessions they feel that their "sense of belonging to the class is being challenged." STs claim to be genuinely invested in their students' well being and learning success. However, during the sessions, STs might feel their effort to improve their classes and their students' learning is questioned.

·   personalities: If the ST's personality and the supervisor's conflict, the feedback session is probably going to be uncomfortable, stressing, and not fruitful in regard to professional and personal growth. Tracy (1995) mentions this when she states that "a positive teacher/supervisor relationship is important for effective supervision;" (Tracy, 1995, n.p.) therefore, if there is some discomfort between the parties, this will certainly affect the development of the feedback session.

Conclusions

Having carried out this case study, several conclusions were drawn.

The concept of power-differential is perceived by STs and it does affect their behavior, activities, and teaching choices during the practicum, for they feel the need to please their supervisor so as to obtain good grades and receive less negative feedback.

STs tend to feel disappointed and frustrated when the feedback provided only pinpoints their mistakes and areas of improvement; some positive reinforcement is necessary at the beginning of the session so as to soften the subsequent "criticism."

STs need more guidance in regard to what is expected of them by the SVs. Lack of clear guidelines undermines their confidence and affects their performance in the classroom, including their teaching choices, attitudes, and perception of feedback.

The relationship between the supervisor and the trainee affects the reception/acceptance of the feedback provided. If the ST does not like the way the supervisor gives feedback, this rejection will continue throughout the course and will impede any valuable piece of advice to be taken seriously and objectively. In this regard, SVs must be careful in smoothing the suggestions given, some STs are sensitive to any negative comment. STs, on the other hand, should keep in mind the idea of flexibility and open-mindedness toward any kind of comment.

Some of the tips seemed to have been successful and positively influenced STs' perception of feedback sessions. After the implementation of the tips, ST said they felt more motivated to implement the SVs' comments and suggestions in their everyday classes and not only in the practicum, which is one of the ideal outcomes of feedback according to the literature. This newly encountered motivation would result in better classes for the ESP students of the practicum courses.

The most successful tip was that which dealt with flexibility and open-mindedness. STs felt it portrayed respect to their teaching styles while at the same time encouraging them to take what suits their personalities and experience. STs dislike feedback to be a convincing session in which they must accept and implement every "suggestion" given.

There are many reasons that can affect the internalization and welcoming of suggestions. The type of feedback given, including word choice, order of ideas, and aspect addressed, seems the most influential aspect to which STs pay attention to. STs appreciate objectivity, professionalism, and recommended guidelines in the SVs' feedback.

Limitations

There were occasions in which the subject of the study was observed, but he/she was not supervised. The policy of supervisions states that STs will occur only when possible or when considered necessary. Supervisions depend on the decisions of the coordination, and these are not known by the ST until some minutes before the actual class. Since this study depended on the reception of the feedback provided after each teaching session, having no supervision prevented the collection of data. This situation happened in two opportunities and delayed the study.

In other occasions, the class to be observed was not held. Cancellations happen when the majority of students cannot attend classes because of the many responsibilities they must undertake.

STs were required to read the tips provided some days before their session and also soon before their class started. Sometimes, the STs observed did not read the advice provided as it was required. If the tips were read shortly before the class and not days before, it may have hindered the comprehension and internalization of the information provided. On the other hand, having read the pieces of advice so soon before the post-observation session could have enlarged the subjects' possibilities of recalling the tips during the reception of feedback, helping them more than with other subjects.

Two of the subjects chosen for this study worked together with the researcher during the practicum. This could have meant more straight-forward answers and comments as well as more trust to show their emotions and true feelings.

Even if the interviews were carried out immediately after the observed class and subsequent feedback session, one of the subjects could not be recorded. The guiding questions were sent to him/her via e-mail but this person did not send the answers back. Therefore, only three interviews were carried out and analyzed.

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Appendix 1

List of tips provided to ST

General Instructions

1. First of all, thank you for participating in this action research project.
2. The following is a list of 4 strategies or "tips" to help you improve your perception of feedback sessions. Please read them carefully.
3. Try to keep them in mind during your next post-observation session.
4. At the end of such session, the investigator will ask you some further questions in regard to these tips.

Strategies to Make Your Feedback Sessions More Positive and Enriching

1. Try to reconcile the new ideas with your previously acquired skills. Whatever is being said to you represents an opportunity to change from

the methods you experienced as a learner to those you can implement as a teacher. "Let go of" your preconceptions and embrace new stances (Murdoch, 1994).

2. As a teacher, you are the result of the learning experiences you have had. Unless you were born in the last 5 years, your experiences were quite different from what teaching is today. This means that you might need to "reconstruct [your] existing frame of reference by balancing prior beliefs about teaching and learning" (Oosterheert & Vermunt , 2001, p. 136). It is not about forgetting all what you have been doing, it's about being flexible enough to be open-minded enough to reinvent yourself and become your "ideal self as a teacher" (ibid).

3. Don't think of feedback as an "altering" experience; think of it as an activity "to note effective teaching, to identify less effective teaching, and to promote positive change" (Bailey, 2006, 141). Think of the feedback session as the first stage towards a "hands-on-learning" experience in which you can experiment with different approaches and methodologies given to you from an external point of view so that you consider integrating them into your teaching philosophy.

4. Think of the feedback session as a raising-awareness practice whose main belief is that your teaching can be even better. In this regard, Gebhard (1994, 45) contends: "Awareness of teaching is empowering... [which involves] more freedom [teachers] will have to direct their own teaching toward successful student learning". Bailey (2006) also comments on this by saying "Knowledge of results of one's actions is necessary to change those actions." (Bailey, 2006, 142) Therefore, post-observation sessions are making you more powerful towards making the right decisions and helping your current and future pupils.

Appendix 2

Blank Questionnaire for STs

Instrument #1
Questionnaire: Student-Teachers' Perception of Feedback Sessions

1. Circle the best option to show your opinion towards feedback sessions. I consider that feedback sessions are:
   - very positive / somewhat positive / a little positive / not positive
   - very useful / somewhat useful / a little useful / not useful
   - very enriching / somewhat enriching / a little enriching / not enriching
   - very uncomfortable / somewhat uncomfortable / a little uncomfortable / not uncomfortable
   - very stressful / somewhat stressful / a little stressful / not stressful

2. If the following continuum represented your attitude <u>before</u> feedback sessions, where would you locate yourself? Circle the most appropriate number based on the scale given.

	a lot	somewhat	a little	not at all
a) stress	1	2	3	4
b) anxiety	1	2	3	4
c) uneasiness	1	2	3	4
d) eagerness	1	2	3	4

3. If the following continuum represented your attitude <u>during</u> feedback sessions, where would you locate yourself? Circle the most appropriate number based on the scale given.

	a lot	somewhat	a little	not at all
a) interested	1	2	3	4
b) motivated	1	2	3	4
c) offended	1	2	3	4
d) attacked	1	2	3	4

4. If the following continuum represented your attitude <u>after</u> feedback sessions, where would you locate yourself? Circle the most appropriate number based on the following scale:

	a lot	somewhat	a little	not at all
a) frustration	1	2	3	4
b) offended	1	2	3	4
c) motivation	1	2	3	4
d) relief	1	2	3	4

5. The following is a list of adjectives. Which adjectives would you use to describe feedback sessions? Notice they are listed in alphabetical order. Please circle only five.

depressing   disillusioning   dynamic   encouraging   enlightening
frustrating   helpful   pleasant   stressing   useless

6. Do you agree with the following statement? Why or why not? Please explain in the lines provided.
"Feedback sessions are both the observer's and the student-teacher's responsibility."

_____
_____
_____
_____

7. If there is any other comment you would like to make in regard to your perception towards feedback sessions, please do it in the lines that follow.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your help and conscientious answers.

Appendix 3

Observation List for Feedback Sessions

Instrument #2
Observation list: ST's Behavior during Feedback Sessions

Date of observation: _____ Student-teacher (ST) observed: _____

Before the feedback session

ST portrayed behaviors that showed them anxious and/or stressed (restlessness, facial expressions, etc.).

ST commented on the forthcoming feedback session.

Other

During the feedback session

Negative

ST interrupts the supervisor disrespectfully.

ST stops commenting, talking to, or addressing the supervisor.

ST portrays gestures or facial expressions denoting anger/frustration/sadness, etc.

ST seems uncomfortable or stressed.

ST appears to defend him/herself from the supervisor's comments.

Other

Positive

ST requests recommendations and suggestions from the supervisor.

ST or supervisor makes jokes or comments to lighten the atmosphere.

ST shows interest in the supervisor's input (takes notes, asks questions, etc.).

ST is polite when addressing the supervisor (greeting, titles, thanking, farewell, etc.).

ST indicates comprehension of the relevance/ of the feedback.

ST makes comments to build on what the supervisor said to enrich the class.

Other

Appendix 4

Guideline Questions for STs' Interviews after Feedback Sessions

Instrument #3
Questions for ST after the feedback session in which the tips where applied

1. Were you nervous before the feedback session? Did you think of the session during the class you were teaching? Was there any moment in which you thought: "Oh... the supervisor will definitely mention this..."?
2. How did you feel during the feedback session? relaxed, uncomfortable, anxious, attacked? Mention any other feelings that come to mind.
3. Did the supervisor's corrections make sense? Where they appropriately worded? Will you take into consideration few/some/all of these recommendations given? Why?
4. You commented on the supervisor's suggestions in several occasions. Why did you feel you had to defend yourself? Were you respectful/aggressive/angry/etc?
5. Did you read the tips before the feedback session? How much time in advance did you read them?
6. Did you remember any of the tips during the feedback session? If so, which? Just mention the key words that come to your mind. Why was this tip more important than the others?
7. Were the tips helpful? Would you consider using them in future feedback sessions? Was there any tip nonsense, or silly, or too obvious?
8. If you have any other comments please write them.