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Formative feedback for academic writing: Stuck in the mud?

Sometimes it's like if I throw enough feedback at them, some of it will stick. It feels like mud. Something they don't always want to receive.

(Personal communication, July 27, 2017)

Introduction

Our colleague, above, unearths the frustration that too often underlies the feedback process for tutors. For students, it has been labelled 'one of the most problematic aspects of the student experience' (Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam, 2011, p. 395). The effort spent by both parties should be rewarded and rewarding, but this remuneration is lacking when negative reactions are generated by the feedback process.

The nature of formative feedback is complex. Beneath the surface of visible feedback comments run the undercurrents of institutional practices, the delicate interplay between tutor and student and the tension between evaluative and formative approaches. The significant body of literature exploring feedback should help us to navigate these murky waters; however, a gap has been identified between teachers' espoused feedback beliefs and their actual practice (Orrell, 2006). Workload reality and time constraints may contribute to this discrepancy. For EAP tutors, there is an additional barrier when negotiating the literature on feedback. We are largely restricted to higher education (typically undergraduate level) or L2 literature. We must sift out relevant content and draw implications from these diverse settings. The assumption is that we can then apply this knowledge to the very specific context of (typically) postgraduate content-specialists writing in a second language. Notable research exceptions which target the EAP pre-sessional context are mentioned in this paper. However, we are still faced with limited practical guidance which links theory

to real-world application. We know what we should do, but how do we do it?

With this question in mind, this paper follows the structure of our workshop with the overall aim of providing a practical approach to operationalising the research findings and developing feedback practice. Drawing on a range of existing literature, we first propose criteria for 'better' feedback. We then mine a local example of formative feedback for these criteria. Student voices add a much-needed perspective on the experience of receiving feedback and help to inform our final suggestions for effective and efficient feedback practice.

Theory

The literature is awash with distinctions between the evaluative and formative nature of feedback. Evaluative feedback (*of* learning) is generally treated pejoratively and is characterised by an 'abstract, undefined notion of an "ideal" paper' (McGarrell & Verbeem, 2007, p. 229). An evaluative stance is concerned with focus on form and error-free writing (ibid.) and we are urged to resist this obsession (Bartram & Walton, 1994). Formative feedback, by contrast, is best summarised as feedback *for* learning. In the pre-sessional EAP landscape, notable work has surfaced which explores formative feedback intended to prompt revised drafts. Pertinent to this paper is the manner in which we portray our teacher self, or feedbacker personality, in feedback discourse. This has the capacity to disrupt or maintain teacher/student social harmony and impacts the extent to which learning opportunities are exploited and revisions are made (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Formative EAP feedback should be characterised by reinforcement of learning, rather than judgment of writing and help realise the text potential without overwhelming the writer (Seviour, 2015). It has the power to transform the higher education learning experience (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; O'Donovan, Rust & Price, 2016), but also the potential to demotivate (Ferris, 2003).

Our conceptualisation of feedback practices draws from the literature above and from Yang and Carless' feedback triangle highlighting the 'architecture' which underpins effective dialogic feedback in higher education (2013, p. 292). The choice of feedback models is relatively limited. Zhang and Hyland (2018) present a model which draws together affective, individual and contextual factors to compare student engagement with teacher-driven feedback and automated writing evaluation programmes. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) offer a comprehensive framework demonstrating the relationship between feedback and student self-regulated learning. However, for the purposes of this workshop, we selected Yang and Carless' self-styled 'simple illustration' (2013, p. 292) which represents the complexities of feedback in the form of three cornerstones of good feedback practice. These elements, we felt, could be more easily mapped to concrete examples. The foundations of this framework are a social-affective dimension (enhancing trusting relationships and emotional well-being) and a structural dimension (adopting a flexible and creative approach to resource constraints) which both support a cognitive dimension (enhancing student engagement and self-regulation). Drawing from the theory, we propose that feedback on academic writing should be developmental and (in)formative, motivational and supportive, contextualised and personalised, dialogic and flexible and

should creatively and effectively mobilise resources. In short, our mantra is 'effective and efficient'.

Practice

Who are you?

In order to examine our feedback practices, it is necessary to consider the question 'What kind of marker are you?' This question is more easily answered by comparing personas, exaggerated stereotypes we created for the purposes of our workshop. *The Rusher* forges ahead with minimal engagement; *The Obsessive Compulsive* aggressively corrects every error which upsets their fixed beliefs about 'good' writing; *The Doctor General* routinely dispenses the same superficial advice to all drafts; *The Riddler* provides comments which are (unintentionally) ambiguous, vague or contradictory; *The Overloader* assumes a helpful stance, but overwhelms the student with the volume of comments (mudslinging). Weaver (2006) concludes that issues with feedback include a lack of guidance (*Rusher*), focusing on the negative (*Obsessive Compulsive*), comments which are too general (*Doctor General*) and vague or unrelated to the assessment criteria (*Riddler*). We hoped to prompt workshop participants to (re)examine their beliefs about learning and feedback as 'fundamental beliefs about learning and the learning process [which] will strongly influence how they see the role of feedback' (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010, p. 278).

What we do

At our language centre, we provide feedback on three draft submissions over a 10-week pre-sessional course. These are not graded, nor do they contribute to the final grade. We comment on three areas of academic literacy: *genre*, *criticality* and *language*, which correspond to the descriptors used to mark the final paper. *Genre* focuses on section moves, structure and academic referencing conventions, while *criticality* takes into account position, argument, critical evaluation and exploitation of sources. There is no prescribed style or tone for our feedback, which is usually asynchronous and provided digitally in the form of the *review and comment* feature on Word documents. The authentic sample used in our workshop was representative of a final draft submitted on our highest level of pre-sessional course.

Analysing practice

Workshop participants were given time to consider the submission sample and aspects of the text which they might comment on. Discussions at this stage suggested an initial tendency to focus on language, rather than overall task achievement. This is a temptation which readers may recognise and resisting it takes effort. Gillway (2018), using think-aloud protocol to record tutor reactions during feedbacking, illustrates the attempts to suppress this urge with an extract from one of her participants:

> *What I'm aiming to do is … not react immediately to the grammar problems and try to read through.*

In order to give concrete and practical realisations to the theory detailed earlier, our workshop participants were then supplied with an example of what we suggested might be 'better' feedback practice using the same sample. The original marking tutor chose to split the submission. The student draft was copied and pasted onto

the same document giving two versions of the submitted text. The tutor commented on *genre* and *criticality* in the first version and then *language* in the second. Participants were encouraged to find examples in the feedback comments which illustrated our proposed criteria for effective and efficient feedback.

In the sample, the student explores different factors which contribute to obesity and starts a paragraph with the following sentence:

> *While some evidences suggest that obesity is complicated disease which might be related to psychiatric disorder too.*

The tutor comments (in the *genre* and *criticality* section of the feedback):

> *I think this is a good opportunity to use the word* multifactorial *here (which I really like). i.e., obesity is a complicated and* multifactorial *disease.*

There are a number of elements at play here. Firstly, the clear comment with the example fits the criteria of developmental and informative. The student is supplied with a word, *multifactorial*, which sits comfortably within the genre of medical writing and the context of her text. The comment also supports learning by recognising the cognitive dimension (engagement, we hope, is enhanced by tutor recognition of subject-specific lexis) and the social-affective dimension is addressed by the phrase in parentheses which aims to build a relationship with the writer and develop a sense of trust.

Contextualised and personalised feedback is realised in the next tutor comment we focused on:

> *It's clear you are working very hard and using ideas that we have covered on the course, especially regarding argument and critical reading of sources.*

The tutor, aware that the submission deadline followed a taught session on argument and counter-argument, credits the student for engaging with course content. While the submission was typical in terms of content and language, it was atypical in that this student had incorporated colour-coding into her submission to signal support from sources, argument and counter-argument and her own evaluative comments. The tutor shows flexibility in accepting this format and comments positively on the realisation of these learning strategies.

Receiving feedback can be an isolating experience for students. Therefore, we explored the possibilities for dialogue in digital, asynchronous documents. Examples of this are the marking tutor's questions ('What do you think?' and 'Do you agree with them?') where the student's evaluation of sources was lacking. These examples are not labour intensive and can transform evaluative and deficit comments, such as 'criticality needed', into questions which can elicit more positive responses. Nevertheless, overloading the student with questions can be interpreted as an interrogation rather than the initiation of a supportive and motivating dialogue. Selective use of questions has been linked to student achievement (Redfield & Rousseau, 1981) and aligns with Yang and Carless' socio-affective dimension, which aims to create an atmosphere of trust, redress power imbalances and can, ultimately, result in learner agency and self-regulation (2013).

In the final extract, we considered personalisation and the creative mobilisation of resources. The student provides the following recommendations:

> *First of all, acceptance of mindfulness intervention as supportive tool to minimize obesity rate [. . .]. Also, the concept of mindfulness need to be added to the NHS guideline for optimal obesity treatment.*

The tutor responds:

> *Yes – and is this starting to happen e.g., the info you showed me on mindfulness and QMC?*

This demonstrates a real-world opportunity to exploit learning resources. The tutor references a poster she has seen promoting mindfulness workshops at the Queen's Medical Centre (QMC), the university's teaching hospital. The student investigated the workshop content further and the marking tutor refers back to this, prompting the student to include this in her assignment. The comment exemplifies the components of feedback (*yes* – confirmation that this is approved content), feedforward (a prompt to include reference to mindfulness at QMC) and 'feed up' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This last category acknowledges the student as an academic with an existing or future career. It satisfies the feedback craving for relevance and applicability (Price, et al., 2010) and validates pre-sessional assessment by making a tangible link between our assignments, the accompanying feedback and the student's context for future study.

What they say

Attempting to exploit learning opportunities and hear student voices in the feedback process may appear onerous for tutors, jeopardising efficient practice. Informed by a focus group of pre-sessional students, we suggested practical strategies for feedback efficiency.

The first extract relates to the quantity of language comments:

> *If it's wrong once, don't write the same thing over and over. If it's written each time, I correct it without thinking. I can't notice it.*

Here we sense the frustration students can experience at the hands of *The Obsessive Compulsive* and *The Overloader*. While our first stereotype adopts an evaluative approach, the second is driven by a desire to help students. However, both approaches can generate negative reactions. Mahfoodh (2017) notes similar reactions to overloading which causes disappointment and frustration. This comment also echoes theories of noticing which foreground the role of consciousness in student language learning (Schmidt, 1990). A practical solution, which takes into account student voices, is to free up time by highlighting (for example, colour-coding) repeated and fixable language errors such as articles and verb forms. Ferris (2006, p. 96) provides examples of *treatable* errors (drawing attention to the error is likely to prompt the student into self-correction) and *non-treatable* errors (the teacher needs to give more explanation). Knowledge of error treatability can help tutors to be more efficient and effective. Students can self-correct, encouraging engagement and self-regulated learning. By raising conscious awareness of treatable errors and prompting situational practice in revising them, the learner proceduralises explicit knowledge with the ultimate goal being automatisation (DeKeyser, 2015).

The lone feedback comment 'unclear' prompted the following response in the focus group:

> *I don't know what you mean. What do I have to change?*

McGarrell and Verbeem (2007, p. 232–233) state that comments such as 'meaning unclear' and softened equivalents such as 'what do you mean here?' are unhelpful in guiding students. They advise adding suggestions to show how the writer could clarify meaning. Ferris provides similar advice for untreatable errors. A prompt (e.g., 'Do you mean …?') or a suggestion (2006) can prevent lost opportunities for learning that Weaver (2006) attributes to misinterpretation. Although it takes a little more tutor time and effort, contextualising our feedback thoughts is more effective and encourages positive cognitive and socio-affective responses.

Our final extract concerns the balance of positive and negative comments. Inevitably, feedback has to include comments which can be perceived as potential criticisms and the presence of a positive/negative imbalance may seem obvious and even necessary, given the purpose of feedback (to improve writing). However, the affective reaction that positive praise generates is important to note:

> *It makes me happy. At least I did something good.*

Although it is unlikely to necessitate or result in a specific revision (Mahfoodh, 2017), we would argue that a positive socio-affective response is more likely to build a sense of trust which offsets other more critical comments and, as the following extract suggests, positive endorsements are retained for future writing:

> *It makes me feel proud and I remember to repeat this kind of thing.*

Acknowledging student achievements seems obvious, but it may be neglected or tokenistic if we are bogged down in marking. Well-placed, selective praise clearly has an impact on students' affective responses and agency. In terms of retention, positive feedback has greater recall than negative (Fritz, Morris, Bjork, Gelman & Wickens, 2000). We are not arguing for an equal balance between the two; nevertheless, positive endorsements are effective and valued.

Praising the positive can also be neglected due to the asynchronous nature of our feedback and the frustration generated if the immediate focus is on language issues. Students themselves may resist this prioritising of language over content and organisation. Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 214) illustrate this point with the following think-aloud student extract: 'I think he thinks about the language, i.e., the grammar, more than he does about the content and organisation'. Similarly, Gillway (2018) presents a tutor's insights: 'For me as the reader it's just disturbing … these minor grammatical errors which of course then puts me in a bad mood.' In order to switch off the noise of micro language errors and tune in to macro elements instead, we suggest 'splitting' and (re)ordering the focus of feedback. This encourages attention to what the student *has* achieved in terms of the overall submission requirements and mitigates potential deficit tendencies. Splitting can be done in a number of ways. Firstly, the copying and pasting option mentioned earlier, with *genre* and *criticality* featuring before *language*. Secondly, Grimley (2019) details a process which issues feedback in two discreet stages: students receive feedback on macro elements first (coherence and task achievement) before the language feedback is released after a time-delay. Finally, Mahfoodh (2017) suggests concentrating on organisation and content

in earlier submissions before moving on to the mechanics of language in future drafts. All three strategies have the potential to suppress negative tutor reactions and an obsession with errors.

Conclusion

The scope of our proposed criteria is broad and the process of getting feedback right is a perennial and complex challenge. However, we suggest that EAP departments could replicate or adapt a workshop such as this to initiate or revisit a focus on feedback, (re)assess feedback beliefs and share 'better' or alternative practices. Indeed, revisiting our own feedback, considering other local and contextualised samples and acknowledging the interplay between theory and concrete examples of practice is a useful exercise in exploring effectiveness and efficiency. Inclusive practices which accommodate student responses (see, for example, Mahfoodh, 2017) are necessary to better understand the feedback (re)actions of pre-sessional students. The triangulation of student voice, theory and ongoing practitioner development has the power to transform formative feedback practice and enhance the EAP student experience.

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