

Writer Feedback: Tracing the process of personal change in feedback strategies gained during teaching online classes.

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Cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker, quoting from Darwin, stated that, “Man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our young children, but no child has an instinctive tendency to bake, brew, or write” And of all the language skills we acquire as a first language and have to learn as both a first and a second language, there is no doubt that writing is the most challenging to master to any degree of fluency and to teach with any level of competency. This challenge becomes more pronounced in an L2 setting if students have progressed into higher education where the level of writing makes the leap from general writing skills, to a more academic format, structure and register. To further compound matters, when students submit written work, writing teachers are faced with the dilemma of how to provide guidance and feedback that is both useful in their learner’s linguistic development, and helpful in their mastering the structure required to conform to a strictly defined set of rules that constitutes the academic writing genre. Below is an account of my journey through this maelstrom brought about through necessity after the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes online and how this helped me reassess my essay feedback for the better.

Keywords: Writing feedback, Corrective feedback, Essay feedback

Introduction

I have been involved in English second language education at the university level for over 20 years, during which time I have taught classes at various levels of competency in listening, communication, reading and writing. Out of the four learning skills, I have to admit writing to be the most challenging. This is partly due to the style of writing I am required to teach, which is mostly “Academic”; a genre which can be challenging for even native speakers of English from undergraduate level and beyond should they continue to study for advanced academic qualifications. Another challenge (in my own teaching environment at least), comes from the fact that a writing course is very often limited to one semester of 15 weeks, and there is only so much that can be taught in such a limited time frame. That said, students can carry on to take a second semester course which builds on materials covered in the first 15 weeks but is graded separately. However, given all the hurdles I have touched upon, the biggest challenge in the writing class by far, is how and what kind of feedback I provide students when they submit assign-

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ments. This includes the kind of feedback that does not over-correct errors to the extent that learners are not learning from their mistakes, but yet highlights elements of their writing which can create an effective learning gap, whereby they have to figure out the correct answers to errors without direct corrections from me.

This paper provides an overview of how I have approached dealing with issues related to writer feedback as a form of guidance to help learners improve their writing for future essay submissions, rather than just one-off responses to aspects of their writing that are more often than not superficial and quickly forgotten. It also traces my transition to providing a form of feedback pre-COVID-19, where classes were face-to-face, to how electing to teach classes online has helped me re-examine and improve upon my approach to essay feedback, with the added benefit of making all my classes paper free and environmentally friendly.

Pedagogical approaches to the writing process

My general approach to academic writing has been to eschew the use of textbooks in favour of trying to personalise and condense my own teaching materials into some form of achievable format which is academic in its adherence to form and structure, and equips learners with the knowledge to take their writing skills to a higher level should they go on to take a higher degree or have the aim of studying abroad. This is in spite of some arguments suggesting that students may find comfort and security through the use of a textbook (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p.123). That said, I have indeed tried to utilise textbooks in my classes in the past, but apart from the expense, and the weighty burden of students having to carry them around, I have come to realise that they do not represent the vision I have for teaching writing, given that, "...some textbooks are designed according to a linear, mechanical sequence, making creative deviations difficult" (ibid), something I find to be restricting. In this regard, as I write this paper, I am not writing in any way reflective of how many writing textbooks recommend it be taught, but as a messy patchwork of ideas I jump back and forth to; reviewing and revising as I go. These evolve over time into more cohesive ideas which, after a process of revision and constant rewriting, come to coalesce around the essay theme and the final product emerges. However, an analytical description of individual teacher's approaches to their own writing, as opposed to the way they teach it, is beyond the scope of this paper. Though I would hazard a guess that the way many teachers teach writing is far removed from the way they themselves compose their own work. That said, as a starting point in my writing classes, I emphasise to the learners that writing is not a linear process in much the same way as writing a song is not a linear process, with it being more the evolution of a set of ideas that are consciously moulded over time in various iterations into a final, finished product. to coalesce around the essay theme and the final product emerges. Howev-

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Teaching strategies

As noted above, my classes are split into two 15 week semesters and comprise of a balanced mix of female and male undergraduates ranging from first to fourth year students which complicates things from the outset given that I have no real sense of what other writing classes learners may have been exposed to. Given the labour intensive nature of the writing class, I try to limit numbers of students to around 16. The first semester usually focuses on learning the general framework of what constitutes an academic style essay, with a specific focus on understanding the thesis statement and avoiding personalizing the essay with a tendency to overuse "you" often written in a more conversational register by inexperienced learners. Then there is the problem of guiding students away from making concluding statements in their introductions or in the body of the essay; a legitimate approach to answering a test based question, but far removed from the more structured format required in an academic essay. In order to help learners avoid such pitfalls, I place emphasis on the fact that the introduction is the part of the essay intended to provide background information which narrows down to the thesis statement. And this in turn explains to the reader exactly what the essay will be about. Following on from that, I try to make learners aware that the body of the essay is intended to provide evidence and information for the reader to evaluate by themselves, not a place to insert a personal opinion, which ultimately belongs in the conclusion.

To reiterate, students are required to have a working knowledge of the framework of what an academic essay should look like, especially with respect to having a working knowledge of the function and composition of the thesis statement. As the course progresses, learners also acquire the knowledge of how to use sources and citations in their writing. This is in addition to providing guidance on essay planning and brainstorming as a group activity and a gateway to developing ideas. However, I always emphasise that writing is an individual process and learners have the freedom to approach it in any way they feel most comfortable. A final, but important element of my teaching strategies has been to include some form of feedback to guide learners in how to rectify the kinds of errors noted above, and to provide some form of scaffolding for them to adhere to as they become familiar with the academic writing genre.

Types of feedback

The kind of feedback provided by the teacher can take many forms and in certain cases, may not include any input from the teacher at all, depending on their respective writing experiences and individual pedagogies. That said, in my experience, if providing essay feedback is part of the teaching process, there are generally four different options at the teacher's disposal. There can be *direct* feedback, where the teacher directly points out and corrects errors in student's work. By contrast, there is the option of giving *indirect* feedback, where a teacher will hint at there being a mistake in a sentence such as a mistaken tense of a verb form, the omission of an article, or an inappropriately constructed collocation etc., leaving the student to draw on their linguistic knowledge to work out where the error may be (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 287). There is also an optional strategy where students combine their linguistic resources to work out the answers to indirect feedback as a pair or in a group through *peer review* work (Tigchelaar & Polio, 2017, pp. 97-133). Finally, another more focused form of more intensive feedback can come in the form of Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (DWCF), where students are asked to produce short paragraphs which are submitted to the teacher who in turn provides some form of focused feedback via a pre-taught coding system which repeats until the student has attained the main elements of the target skill they were lacking (Ferris & Kurzer, 2019, pp. 114-118). While this system shows promise in helping with learner writing, it can be a labour intensive task for the teacher (*ibid*). Apart from this, additional drawbacks with DWCF could be considered to be the fact that it is overly focused on a limited form of feedback which may not allow time for practicing the overall framework of the academic essay form. Furthermore, in an educational environment where teaching times are limited, DWCF may not be a practical option for students taking a single semester course; in which case a top down approach may be more appropriate given the constraints of time. And this leads me to describing my personal approach as to how I provide feedback for writing classes which focuses on the idea that, "Quality feedback supports learning by revealing any gap between students' current performance and expected levels of achievement, and by assisting them to take actions to know that gap" (Hyland, 2019, p. 281).

My approach to the feedback process

As cited above, from the choices at my disposal for feedback strategies, perhaps DWCF is the least practical in terms of what I envision I need to achieve during the 15 weeks I have with the learners. In pre-COVID classes, which were face to face, my usual form of providing feedback was to collect hard copies of students' draft essays formatted at a line spacing of 1.5 so I could make corrections between the lines with a red pen and make additional comments in blue in the margins. These were returned to

students, usually after a week, whereupon they read the feedback and resubmitted a final essay for final evaluation. When classes were moved online, I had to figure out ways to provide feedback without the benefit of a hard copy. In my case, I opted to conduct classes via the Zoom platform, and created separate email accounts for each of the classes I taught. This meant that for all my classes, students would send their homework or term assignments to a specific mail address for each respective class. For the writing class, this necessitated finding a way to continue providing feedback from mail attachments. Originally, after downloading the essays to a class-specific folder, I envisioned printing out the essays, giving feedback in the usual fashion by pen, then scanning the essay with the feedback and resending it to the respective students. But I quickly realised that this was a totally impractical and time consuming solution which forced me to think of other options. My initial idea was to create a colour coding template which I would use to make corrections and give comments without the process of printing out and scanning.

Below, is a typical example of an actual essay I received as a mid-term submission with the colour template in the top left and the corrections and comments highlighted in the appropriate colours in the body of the text. The name of the student has been removed to provide anonymity and the line spacing has been reduced from 1.5 to 1.0 and the font sized reduced from the original 12 to 10.

Integrated English Skills II A, Mid-term Essay

Green = good

Red = changes/corrections

Blue = comments

Line unnecessary

Good or Bad in the City or the Country (I think you could have made a better title than this like **A comparison of living in the city and the country**)

Choice (2) Compare the advantages and disadvantages between living in the city, or the country. Be specific with your information and include your personal experiences if you want.

Title?

There are a lot of opinions about **living in** the city, and the country because both have good and bad points. Some people say that the city is better than the country ~~if they live,~~ and **however,** others say the opposite. In this essay, ~~we~~ **(You have the right idea about this kind of structure but only you are writing**

the essay, so you can't use we. You can use In this essay I will investigate, Or This essay will investigate) how different the advantages and the disadvantages between living in the city or the countryside in terms of the material, and the mental wealth health.

Firstly, we I will discuss the material wealth between the city and the country. One example is that living in the city enables people to go many different places because there is various public transportation services such as trains, buses, and taxis. In contrast, the country doesn't have so many means of public transportation because the number of people living in the country is small. Therefore, you need to have your own car in order to go far places. Also, public transportation comes with a high frequency. (But you are talking about the country here so isn't it the opposite? I think you are mixing up the country and city pros and cons) For example, even if people couldn't catch the train on schedule, the next one come soon so they can catch it. Meanwhile in the countryside, you have to wait for a long time if you missed the train. When I lived in the countryside, local trains come every one hour, so I had to wait for so long time if I missed it. However, when I moved to the urban city, I was impressed that I don't didn't have to worry about the train schedule because trains come every few minutes. Another point is the variety of work. If people want a job in the city, they can choose from many kinds of jobs, but when you they (avoid using you) live in the country, there are few jobs so you (once you start using you, it is difficult to vary your writing style of stick with the formal writing structure) can't choose freely. For instance, the job advertisements of in my hometown were few because there were few jobs in the area. had few jobs because there are few places to work as a part-time job, so I didn't have a free large number of options choice, but that of However, in the city where I moved there were many part-time and full-time job opportunities. was thick and had a plenty of both full-time and part-time jobs, so I was free to choose jobs.

Secondly, we I will talk about the mental wealth health (There is no such collocation as mental wealth) between them. The countryside makes it possible for people to enjoy the natural environment. The countryside is rich in nature, so people can play enjoy themselves in the natural environment such as forests, and rivers, and it makes people healthier. For example, my hometown, which is the countryside, has the a stream near my house. There are trees and flowers around the stream, so I would often play with my friends there in my childhood. However, the urban city where I moved to doesn't have streams, trees or flowers to enjoy. Another point of view is that time passes slowly in the country. In fact, it depends on people, but I think this is good especially for people living in the city. In the country, people feel the flow of time is slow because things don't move or change so fast, so people can rest and relax, while the city doesn't allow it. In my experience, I want to rest well when I feel tired, but I can't feel relaxed when I'm in the urban city because there are lots of buildings and noise. On the other hand, in my grandparents' house, which is near the mountain and river, I feel relaxed because the scenery is tranquil, and I can hear

birdsong eries.

In this essay, way, we I discussed both good and bad points between living in the city and the countryside in terms of material possessions and mental health. I can't say which is better because both can be good and bad. In short, living in the city is rich in things that we can see easily, while living in the country is rich in things that we can't see concretely.

(622 words)

(Author's original data: May 2022)

While the essay above is fairly comprehensive in the nature of the feedback, which is purposefully *direct* in its nature, it was extremely labour intensive, requiring at the bare minimum, 20 to 30 minutes per student. Even in a class limited to 16 students, this was far too much time to be providing essay feedback for first-draft submissions where students unused to the register of academic writing tend to make the most errors. Of more significance, I began to realise that by providing this degree of direct feedback, I was in essence writing students' essays for them, which resulted in *their* essays becoming *my* essays. So, all they needed to do for the submission of their final version was to just change the font colour to black, remove the comments and resubmit the work as their own. By providing this form of feedback, when students sent me their final essay version, I was essentially getting my own writing thrown back at me. In addition, it occurred to me that with this style of essay response, there was no real learning taking place given that I was doing all the work for the students, with no guarantee that it would improve their abilities in the writing process. This is not to say that direct feedback is an ineffective endeavour given the range of students I have in my classes. Indeed, for learners at lower language levels, "...direct correction can play a productive role among lower-level students who are unable to self-edit even when an error is called to their attention. Direct correction may also be appropriate for selected idiomatic lexical errors (e.g., collocations involving wrongly selected prepositions etc.) and perhaps when a writing sample will not be further revised and the teacher wishes to call the student's attention to recurring errors (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 287). By contrast, were I to switch to responses focused mainly on indirect feedback, I had to consider the following issues:

"If a teacher opts for indirect feedback as the primary mechanism, a further correction option to consider is whether the errors should be *labelled* as to the error type (with labels or correction codes) or whether they should simply be *located* – the error circled or highlighted but no further information provided. The argument in favour of the labelling option is that an indication of error type might elicit previously learned rules that the students can then apply to the self-ed-

iting task. The opposite argument is that the less explicit option (locating) requires even more effort on the part of the student writer, who must not only figure out the correct form but also determine why it was ill-formed in the first place” (ibid, pp. 287-288).

However, after a particular painful episode of tendonitis, along with my concerns stated above, that I was essentially doing the student’s work for them, I was forced to look for a less time-consuming way of providing essay feedback, which at the same time would create a suitable learning gap, forcing students to draw upon their linguistic resources in order to work out errors they may have made in their writing. I therefore decided to move my feedback structure to a combination of direct and indirect feedback whereby difficult sections were given direct correction, and parts where students made errors that could be worked out from their existing linguistic knowledge, I would provide indirect feedback. This entailed giving a hint that there was a mistake in a phrase or sentence, but where students had to work out what the errors were by themselves. One added bonus was that when I applied this strategy, I found I could integrate both direct and indirect feedback together with peer review feedback. In this way, I could put students in groups where they shared the feedback I provided in their respective texts, and ask them to work out correct answers to my indirect comments for each other’s essays. This enabled me to make reference to the more challenging aspects of learners’ writing with direct comments, and also helped challenge student’s linguistic resources with indirect comments while at the same time promoting a more interactive format through peer review activities. With the teaching platform being on Zoom, it was very easy to jump from group to group and provide hints to help with parts of my comments learners still had difficulty resolving. In order to achieve this form of feedback, I utilised the Microsoft Word comments function, an example of which I have provided below, with a first draft text written by the same student from the example above for their second writing assignment of the semester.

Writing 1st draft final report

Selected: 7 Should employers be able to monitor employee's email during working hours? Discuss the arguments for and against.

In these days, the problems about relationships between employers and employees become more and more controversial. One of these problems is about employers monitoring employee's email. In this essay, I will investigate this discussion in affirmative and negative point of view.

First, I will talk about the good points about the monitoring. Monitoring employee's email is good for working performance. A lot of mistakes at work are caused by not thorough reporting, contacting, and consultation. So, companies can understand and deal with mistakes quickly by monitoring worker's email, which leads to fewer mistakes.

Moreover, employers can prevent mistakes from happening by doing this. For example, even if an employee forgot sending an email to his client, companies could notice it and tell the boss to encourage him to send the client the email. Therefore, monitoring worker's email can cover their mistakes, which helps their performances.

Another opinion that agrees to the monitoring is that companies can deal with corruption and prevent other scandalous affairs. One of the causes that worries employers is misconduct of workers. This problem is crucial to companies because a single scandal can ruin their credibility. If workers are up to bad things secretly, the companies can get things under control quickly. What is more, the employers can prevent these scandals. For instance, when some employees tried to sell the products illegally contacting with each other via emails, em-

Milne Alan

This is the topic. You take this and make it into a proper title, letters in bold and properly centred.

Milne Alan

No such an expression in English.

Milne Alan

You need a word before become.

Milne Alan

A little out of place. Think of better expressions to use in the thesis statement.

Milne Alan

Erase this and add information about who is being monitored because you are on a new paragraph so you have to restate some information that was in the first paragraph. Then you will have to edit the second sentence.

Milne Alan

Right word, wrong form.

Milne Alan

This isn't a sentence. It's a fragment, or part of a sentence. Like saying "Because I am tired". It makes no sense because it isn't a sentence.

Milne Alan

What does this refer to? If it looks odd, repeat the paragraph topic.

Milne Alan

Wrong form of the verb which requires a preposition before it.

Milne Alan

Who does "their" refer to?

Milne Alan

Incorrect English, it is not "agree to"

Milne Alan

By doing.....?

<p>Milne Alan Right word, wrong form</p>	<p>employers could find out the scheme and prevent it from happening by monitoring the email data. So, administering employee's email help</p>
<p>Milne Alan Monitoring what? Be specific.</p>	<p>employers prevent scandalous acts, and keep the company's credit-ability.</p>
<p>Milne Alan You could combine these sentences to make a much better sentence</p>	<p>Second, I will examine the bad points about the monitoring. There would be no privacy if companies monitor employee's email. Many</p>
<p>Milne Alan Wrong verb form unless you change <i>employers to an employer</i></p>	<p>companies are introducing observation worker's email data includ-</p>
<p>Milne Alan Supposition. You are making this up from your own ideas and is invalid. You can't just assume something without proof or verifiable evidence</p>	<p>ing their private mails, and it can constitute an invasion of worker's privacy. Privacy is one of the most important rights today, hence employers that neglect privacy does not give people good impression. In addition, employees will be under heavy stress if the monitoring is conducted because they feel like they always be watched by someone.</p>
<p>Milne Alan Wrong preposition</p>	<p>This stress can cause mental disorders and their working performance will go down. So, companies should not watch employee's email.</p>
<p>Milne Alan Wrong article</p>	<p>Another point of view that disagrees to the monitoring is that com-</p>
<p>Milne Alan Using <i>at least</i> looks odd. Needs revision.</p>	<p>panies need more people and costs to administer the whole data of all the employees' emails. The more things employers want to do, the more resources they need. For example, if employers try to make the</p>
<p>Milne Alan For who?</p>	<p>department for the monitoring, they have to hire at least the people</p>
<p>Milne Alan You can't spend extra people.</p>	<p>who can monitor emails, record data, report problems, etc. Also, they need to provide facilities to do these tasks. This means employers</p>
<p>Milne Alan Needs an article.</p>	<p>have to spend extra people, money, and equipment in order to monitor worker's email, hence it takes long time to prepare for monitoring.</p>
<p>Milne Alan Needs editing. Lots of errors in just these three words.</p>	<p>Furthermore, if data of employees leak out, not only workers get damaged but also companies do. Employees would be in danger if</p>
<p>Milne Alan This indicated that you are talking about just one company, but you are writing about a general situation which includes many companies, so this article is wrong.</p>	<p>their email data leaked, of course, but the companies may also be untrustful owing to lacks management skills. For instance, if the administrator mistakenly leaked out the contents of an employee's email</p>

that contained his personal information, his information would be spread immediately and used for bad things.

Milne Alan
Whose? The employer's or the employee's?

I have discussed both positive and negative opinions of monitoring of employee's email by companies. Watching worker's email can deal with mistakes quickly. Also, employers can prevent serious problems or scandals from happening by the observation. On the other hand, the monitoring invades employees' privacy, so it gives bad impression in today's sense of values. In addition, a lot of resources such as people, money, and equipment will be needed. Moreover, there is a risk that email data including personal information leak out. Therefore, if employers want to introduce the monitoring, they must be careful with workers' data.

Milne Alan
Is this article necessary?

Milne Alan
Same here

Milne Alan
Missing article.

Milne Alan
What do you mean by *today's sense of values*?

Milne Alan
Using this inappropriately in too many places. Something you need to review or *notice* more when you read looking at *how* it is used and *when*.

(637 words)

(Authors original data: July, 2022)

As can be seen from the second example, there are hardly any direct corrections, and making use of the comments function of Word enabled me to draw attention to areas of the text in need of correction without directly indicating what the perceived error was. In addition, as alluded to earlier, unlike with the coloured feedback text, I could also use this style of feedback as a groupwork activity where I could ask students to show and discuss each other's feedback comments and make suggestions between themselves on how to correct areas I deemed to be in need of change or improvement in their respective work. On the final day of the semester, after I had used this mixed response format for the first drafts of their final term essays, I asked students to provide their opinions on what they considered to be their preferred choice of feedback, comparing the coloured response style, to the mixed comment format using the Word comment function. Out of a class of 17, I received 8 responses in total. These are reproduced verbatim below.

Feedback question:

- o Regarding the kind of feedback you received. Which kind of feedback did you prefer? The mid-term style, where I did a lot of corrections for you and inserted advice using a colour code

system, or the final essay first-draft feedback where I made a comments section and never explicitly (directly) told you what was wrong, and made into a class activity. Please indicate which style you preferred and why in as much detail as possible. If you are stuck for vocabulary or expressions you can write some of it in Japanese.

Student responses

1. I submitted mid-term essay late, so I didn't know mid-term style. However, I like final draft feedback style because I face my essay to be better.
2. I found the color-coded corrections to be the best for me, because I could look back at them over and over again. Your corrections are very on point and succinctly show me my shortcomings. In my case in particular (特に私の場合), I think there were many areas that you corrected. Therefore, I have learned a lot and discovered many areas to reflect on.
3. I think the final draft feedback is better. Because we can understand what we were wrong and improve it by thinking ourselves. It is very important to think by ourselves.
4. I prefer the final draft feedback because I felt that one is easier to understand than mid-term style. The final style has only one colour while the mid-term one has multiple colours, so the final style is simpler and easier to understand.
5. I prefer to the final draft feedback style. Because I can receive various opinion about my essay. Watched and advised by many people, I think, my English skills could be better. Besides, telling my false indirectly would allow me to develop my thinking ability (思考力が養われる).
6. I think that the type of final draft feedback is better than mid-term one because it is easy to find my wrong points.
7. I preferred the final feedback style because I want to correct my essay by myself. I think mistakes can be labelled as highlights. For example, spelling miss is blue, grammar miss is yellow etc.. so that the teacher's work time can be shortened as well.
8. I prefer the final draft feedback style. In the mid-term style, we do not have to rewrite our report. So we don't think how to write transitional expression. Although the final draft feedback bothers me, if the final draft feedback is assigned, we can find out why there are mistakes, how we rewrite that, and typing that than the mid-term style.

As can be seen, the general consensus seems to indicate that the combination of direct and indirect

comments, combined with the chance to engage in peer review activities, was the preferred choice for the students. Allowing them to work to collectively solve problems by pooling their linguistic knowledge, removed me from the process of directly correcting texts in my own writing style. It also allowed students to maintain the originality of their writing by solving problems through the peer review element of the process. In general, the combined format seems to be considered to be a better form of feedback according to the responses I received from the students in this particular class. Although the number of respondents were fewer than I had hoped, the basic idea behind this kind of feedback was received positively and shows promise for future classes and a possible fruitful avenue for further research along these lines. An additional benefit is that through developing this process, if and when I return to regular face to face classes, as stated earlier, they will all have the benefit of being paper free.

Having to teach online may not have been for everybody, but despite some reservations and a very steep learning curve, it has forced me to be creative in ways I would never have imagined and holds exciting possibilities for new ideas in other language classes such as communication and reading. As Disraeli stated, "There is no education like adversity." In the journey I have described above, these words ring so very true.

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