From Good to Powerful: Using Technology to Provide Effective Feedback on Academic Writing

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Abstract

Feedback is an essential part of developing effective writing skills as it provides students clear guidance on how to improve their work. According to the Education Endowment Foundation, feedback is the most effective teaching practice, equivalent to eight additional months of class time per year (Higgins et al., 2012). Effective feedback can improve students' confidence, self-awareness and enthusiasm for writing. However, if feedback is not timely, appropriate, personalised, actionable and delivered using the right tools, it may fail to serve its purpose and potentially have a negative effect on the learner. Often educators search for methods and tools that enable the ability to provide feedback more efficiently while maintaining quality so that students can truly benefit from it. This paper, which has a practical focus, will address this challenge by first, reflecting on what constitutes effective feedback and highlighting the importance of providing meaningful and relevant feedback. Secondly, it will explore how digital technology can aid educators in the delivery of feedback in a variety of formats (written, audio and video). Next, it will discuss how technology, if used effectively, can make a difference by enhancing its quality and impact in the development of students' capacity to engage with and learn from it. Finally, a variety of tools will be discussed that teachers can use to provide effective feedback to their students.

Keywords: Feedback, academic writing, skills development, EAP, educational technology, technology-assisted learning

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the fundamental skills students must develop in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) environment. Research shows that well designed complex writing tasks promote high-level recall, linkage with known and related concepts as well as clear expression and organization of thoughts (Karpicke & Blunt 2011). Nevertheless, writing tasks like any other pedagogical tool can lose their effectiveness if they are not implemented adequately.

A critical factor that determines this effectiveness is the nature of the feedback that students receive from their tutors. Students trying to develop writing skills without appropriate feedback can be compared to practicing archery blindfolded; students can fire arrows, but they will never know where they land. In the worst-case scenario, students do not receive feedback at all, or it may be represented as a final grade without comments on performance, leaving them unable to perceive any improvement on their skills and causing loss in motivation. However, feedback is sometimes given in ways that is neither useful nor relevant to students. Kluger and Denisi (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of studies of feedback and discovered that the effect of writing feedback intervention on performance was rather positive. Interestingly, 38% of the time the control group outperformed the feedback groups leading the researchers to conclude that the effects of feedback depend on the nature of the feedback given. Feedback may harm students' performance when it is impersonal, overwhelming, not goal driven and inappropriate in tone. Consequently, students may simply ignore it, may not know what to do with it or may decide not to act on it.

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2. Rethinking Feedback: How can it make a difference?

Long gone are the days when teachers used to mark stacks of essays using a red pen, circling misspelled words and sentence fragments, adding punctuation marks and writing comments like: "be more specific" or "what do you mean?" or "great job!". Good feedback instead should have both a cognitive and a motivational approach; cognitively, students should receive clear manageable information that they can understand and which tells them where they are in their learning and what specific steps they should take to improve their work. This will lead students to take charge of their own learning which will likely increase their motivation (Brookhart 2008). Traditionally, feedback is regarded as comments written by tutors on students' work. However, we should move on from this stereotype and rethink. Feedback should be timely, specific, targeted to the learner's needs and should provide reinforcement. Apart from using the written format, feedback can be spoken, digitally recorded or visualised. Feedback does not need to be given by a tutor, it can also be self-created, from peers or from experts (Hounsel 2012). At the same time, feedback should also be personal and tailored to students' individual performance to make it relevant and meaningful for them.

3. Using technology to enhance feedback

One of the challenges that educators face when providing high quality feedback that positively impacts students' performance is the time they must invest, especially when dealing with large classes. Various technological tools can be used to help teachers save time on given individual feedback and facilitate the delivery of richer feedback to students. For example, providing spoken rather than written feedback, can be up to 75% faster than typing (Bless 2017), and it helps teachers convey tone and emotion in their feedback making it more personalized. Furthermore, since technology can save time for teachers, they should be able to give timely feedback to students. Receiving feedback soon after a learning experience allows students to act upon it immediately.

In addition, technology allows greater interaction between teachers and students as it allows them to engage in the feedback process without the need to be physically together. Thanks to technology, teachers and students are more accessible to each other and students can respond interactively to the feedback.

Another advantage of using technology for giving feedback is that it allows teachers to provide feedback in a variety of formats including written, audio and video, this will benefit students as they will find different ways to engage with their feedback and choose one that best fits their learning style.

4. Written Feedback

Most assignments at Zayed University are in electronic format. This allows educators to easily utilise digital tools to deliver feedback to students. One popular tool amongst teachers is Google Docs. This tool allows educators to provide direct written feedback efficiently with their smart editing and styling tools. One of the advantages of using this tool is that teachers can highlight relevant sections in the text, make corrections and write comments. At the same time, its collaboration feature allow students to respond to these comments - this will give the feeling that both teachers and students are engaged in a conversation about their work without the need to be physically close to each other. As students respond, they can edit their work which will increase engagement. In addition, teachers can add hyperlinks to their comments to connect students to lessons that students use to improve a skill or review a topic they are having problems with.

Teachers can use a color-coding system for the different error corrections, for example red for paragraph structure related mistakes and blue for mistakes related to content, enabling students to easily identify and monitor their mistakes. Google Docs has a notification system that informs students when changes are made to their documents, resulting in timely feedback. In addition, Google Docs facilitates collaboration that allows students share their work with other classmates allowing for peer and class feedback.

Another great too that facilitates written feedback is blogs. Students can submit their work on a common classroom blog and teachers and fellow students can use the comment box to provide their

feedback. Teachers can share students work and projects with external experts in the field they are working on, adding another dimension to feedback. When students know, their written work will be reviewed by external sources it typically increases their motivation to create high quality work.

5. Voice Feedback

Numerous applications such as Kaizena, allow teachers add voice feedback to Google docs. This can make the feedback more personal because the teacher's voice will add tone and emotion. Furthermore, it may be faster and easier for teachers since they are speaking instead of writing or typing. Another benefit of this method is that it allows teachers to give thorough feedback and explain to students how and why they made certain mistake and show with examples the correct way of writing their essays. A student can save the comments and play them any time. Kaizena has a feature that allows the upload of outside resources to a library. This resource library allows teachers to provide voice feedback supported by links to teaching models or lessons. This is a practical time saving feature as teachers can use these links every time they deiver feedback on similar work. Additionally, students can access their feedback from any device and they can also share their work a provide voice peer-feedback when needed.

6. Video Feedback (Screencasts)

Teachers can add a new dimension to student feedback by using screencasts. A screencast is a digital recording of a computer screen containing an audio narration. Screen Castify is a great Google Chrome extension that teachers can use to create their screencasts within Google Docs. This technology allows teachers not only to record their voice, but also to record their screen while scrolling through the document, highlight problematic areas of students' essays and narrating comments about their work. Students can access these videos anytime, anywhere, from any device and reply as needed. Teachers can ask students to write notes while they watch their videos for extra engagement with their feedback. Video feedback can accommodate different learning styles; students who engage better with visual input rather will greatly benefit from it.

7. A Pedagogy First Principle

Michael Fullan, a leading change expert, said, "Pedagogy is the driver, technology is the accelerator". It is important that as teachers we operate under a "pedagogy first approach". Before we decide on the tool that will make feedback a positive experience for both, teachers and students, we should think about how and why feedback is given. Good feedback takes place "when teachers make sound decisions of feedback timing, mode, amount and audience" (Brookhart 2008:113). Technology will simply act as the medium that will allow teachers to provide feedback more effectively.

8. Conclusion

The effort require to providing effective feedback is low. However, the benefits of delivering effective feedback techniques are tremendous and can greatly improve learning. It is likely that teachers may require professional development to improve their feedback skills and feel confident using new technology. Students will also benefit from training on responding to different types of feedback and understanding the benefits for their learning. Technology can improve students' involvement with feedback by making the process more interactive and facilitating a dialogue around assessment and feedback between students and teachers. It also aids teachers to be more efficient when providing feedback allowing for more personalised high quality feedback in less time. Technology can create transformative teaching and learning opportunities allowing for new feedback methods that were previously inconceivable, transforming students into critics of their own work and increasing engagement and motivation levels.

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