Quick and Effective Feedback on Writing During Online and Classroom Lessons

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Abstract

Feedback on writing is an essential part of process writing that supports drafting and revision. Yet some teachers might have difficulty incorporating feedback into the writing course syllabus for various reasons, such as time limitations or difficulties with changing online and classroom settings. The following is a report on a five-step feedback process or activity I developed during the COVID-19 pandemic for providing both peer and teacher feedback on student writing quickly and during classroom time. With a few minor adjustments, the process can be used in both online and offline classes. The goals of this feedback process were to provide both peer and teacher feedback regardless of the lesson setting, alleviate overtime work for the teacher outside the lessons, and promote the development of good writing skills through collaboration. The key to success is to create and follow a rubric that focuses on key elements of effective writing and reflects what has been taught during the lessons leading to feedback sessions. First, I provide theoretical explanations to support my decisions, and later I offer a detailed description of the five-step feedback process. After describing a few observations, I conclude by offering troubleshooting tips and adjustments that can be implemented to suit different circumstances.

Keywords: feedback, writing, rubric, online, classroom

Introduction

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges, including a need to adjust reliable teaching practices. One such practice is providing feedback on student writing. This feedback can come in the form of suggestions from teachers, peers, or both.

Some teachers might forego the feedback step of writing altogether. A few possible reasons for this decision might be time limitations during lessons because of a need to adhere strictly to a syllabus, excessive teacher workload outside of working hours (Gibson et al., 2015), problems with teacher and student feedback literacy (Carless, 2020), and difficulties adjusting to new settings, such as online lessons (Cox et al., 2015).

However, feedback is a vital step in process writing that supports drafting and redrafting (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), and has numerous benefits, such as the promotion of learning through collaboration (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lin & Yang, 2011), strengthening of classroom relationships (Diab, 2011; Zhao et al., 2014), and improvement of writing (Diab, 2011; Ge, 2011; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). With a few adjustments to teaching practices, such as increasing student feedback literacy and opportunities for feedback uptake (Ducasse & Hill, 2019), students can benefit from feedback on their writing. Therefore, it is worth considering devoting time to providing feedback on writing when developing a writing course syllabus.

The following is a report on how I have been providing quick and effective feedback on writing during lessons since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will begin by explaining my five-step process. I will include tips on how to use this activity in online or face-to-face lessons to help alleviate the burden of working overtime, and how office hour consultations can be used to support major problems with student writing that require more time and attention. The paper is concluded with

observations from my classes, and suggestions for making adjustments.

Procedure

In order to provide students with effective feedback on their writing in a timely manner, preparation is required. The first three steps of this feedback activity will lay the groundwork for the success of steps four and five, the feedback steps.

Step 1 – Decide on the Type of Feedback

The first step in this feedback activity is to determine what sort of feedback can be offered in the time permitted and with the available resources. Along with self-checking, the two sources of feedback are from peers and the teacher. Therefore, the teacher must decide whether they will have students provide peer feedback, and whether they will provide teacher feedback on the students' writing. This step will depend on how much time can be made available on the syllabus for feedback.

Step 2 – The Syllabus

After the type of feedback has been decided, the teacher should develop, if possible, a syllabus that allows enough time for their choice. Of course, this step might be impossible if a teacher is given a fixed syllabus that must be strictly followed. If that is the case, and if the existing syllabus does not provide in-class time for feedback, review the syllabus to determine if there are activities that can be shortened to free up the necessary time required for providing feedback. Fortunately, I have been granted the luxury of creating a syllabus that will suit my students' needs. As providing feedback is a vital part of process writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), I personally prefer providing both peer and teacher feedback, and thus, I devote two full lessons per essay for feedback. After the students have completed their first drafts, I ask them to check their own essays. In the same lesson, they provide

Figure 1

Example syllabus from an Academic Skills Writing course

Week	Topic	Homework Due
1	Course Intro; Paragraph Writing (sentences, unity, coherence)	
2	Paragraph & Essay Writing; Essay 1 Intro; Topic Choices	**Paragraph Assignment**
3	Thesis Statement; Writing an Outline	Essay 1 Topic
4	Finding & Evaluating Sources	Essay 1 Outline 1 (with ideas)
5	Cause & Effect Structures; APA Formatting; Common errors	Essay 1 Outline 2 (with sources)
6	Peer Feedback	Essay 1 Draft 1
7	Revising and editing; Teacher consultations	Essay 1 Draft 2
8	Intro to Argumentation; Compare & contrast; Persuasion	**Essay 1 Final Draft**
9	Reading Academic Journal Articles	Essay 2 Topic
10	Avoiding Plagiarism (paraphrasing, citations, reference)	Essay 2 Outline Part 1 (with ideas)
11	Academic Vocabulary and Tone	Outline Part 2 (with sources)
12	Peer Feedback	Essay 2 Draft 1
13	Revising and editing; Teacher consultations	Essay 2 Draft 2
14	Essay 2 Group Discussions	**Essay 2 Final Draft**

peer feedback. After revisions are made to the second draft, in the following lesson, I provide teacher feedback they can use to revise their final draft. Figure 1 shows an example of a 14-week syllabus I developed for an Academic Skills Writing course.

Step 3 – The Rubric

Using rubrics as teaching tools for formative purposes is highly contested in the world of education. Some researchers claim that asking students to learn from a rubric promotes instrumental learning and criteria compliance (Sadler, 2014), or that using a rubric narrows the type of peer feedback provided (Bouwer et al., 2018). However, an analysis of 27 articles discussing the use of rubrics revealed that there was limited empirical support for the negative claims made against the use of rubrics; most of these claims were based on theoretical speculations and anecdotal evidence (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020). If designed and implemented correctly, rubrics have been shown to help students improve their performance (Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015), take responsibility of their own learning, and identify what should be done and how it should be executed. Despite the debate over whether rubrics help or hinder student learning, and the need for more studies on whether the use of rubrics promotes long-term retention (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020), I have chosen to use rubrics as writing tools in my writing courses to profit from some of the aforementioned benefits, in addition to providing transparency to the students about what I expect in their writing and consistency while I am grading their papers.

Therefore, the third step in the feedback process I am explaining is to develop a bespoke rubric that incorporates and clearly indicates the aspects of good writing that will be graded for the written assignment. Each descriptor on the rubric reflects a skill taught in the lessons leading to the first feedback lesson (compare Figures 1 and 2). Because I am asking my students to use the rubric as a tool for checking their own writing and that of their peers, I avoided overly complicated descriptors, as clarity and ease of use of the rubric is preferred by students while using it as a peer feedback tool

Figure 2.
Cause and effect essay rubric

Does Your Essay Have:	No (0)	Some (1)	Yes (2)
4 paragraphs describing causes and/or effects			
a hook & background information about the event, situation, or action in the introduction			
a clear thesis statement (stating the cause & effect and your opinion) at the end of the introduction			
topic sentences (topic + controlling idea) for P2, P3, and P4			
logical structure and organization of the C&Es			
3 supporting ideas (evidence) in the supporting paragraphs			
3 matching details (explanations) in the supporting paragraphs			
a summary & a prediction or advice in the conclusion			
paragraph unity (1 topic) & coherence (transitions; keywords)			
in-text citations from at least 3 sources			
an APA-formatted Reference List of at least 3 sources			
no common academic writing errors (from checklist)			
correct essay formatting (e.g., font, indents, titles...)			
		Total:	/25

(Wang, 2014). Therefore, I opted for the clear question form of "Does your essay have…?" instructing them to focus on and revise any questions from the rubric that were answered with a "No" or "Some." Figure 2 shows a rubric I developed for a cause and effect essay in the previously mentioned Academic Skills Writing course.

Incidentally, as the grades are included on the rubric, this particular tool could also be used for self- and peer-assessment of writing. These types of assessment, if shared with the teacher, can be used as a formal and collaborative approach between the teacher and students to provide the students with a grade, or as a possibly insightful suggestion to the teacher while they are grading.

Step 4 – Peer Feedback (optional, but recommended)

In the first of my two scheduled feedback lessons, students focus on self-checking the first draft of their own papers and providing peer feedback while using the rubric. I introduce the rubric to my students simultaneously with the introduction of the writing assignment so they can become familiarized with what they will be learning and what will be graded as they write their first draft. During the peer feedback lesson, I explain that the rubric can be used as a tool for checking their own papers, and for collaboratively working together to provide suggestions that might help improve each other's essays. During the scheduled peer feedback lesson, I demonstrate and model how to use the rubric and provide appropriately polite comments by checking an example essay and thinking aloud during the demonstration (Chang, 2015; Lam, 2010), which also help promote student feedback literacy (Ducasse & Hill, 2019) by offering them possible feedback phrases and what they mean. I then ask them to practice using the rubric by checking their own work to become accustomed to using the rubric as a checking tool and strengthening their skills in identifying problems (Lam, 2010). Self-checking also promotes the necessity of proofreading your own work and helps lighten the load on the next person checking their paper. The peer feedback lesson ends with a few rounds of checking papers of different partners, writing comments, and explaining the comments that are not understood by the feedback receiver to promote collaboration, clarification, and comment uptake (Ducasse & Hill, 2019; Zhao et al., 2014). To help facilitate easy access to each other's work, my students write their assignments on Google Docs and set the share settings to "anyone with the link can comment." By asking my students to check the first draft, it is my hope that, at minimum, minor problems will be eliminated during their revision homework, thus making teacher feedback on the second draft manageable in the available time.

Step 5 – Teacher Feedback

The lesson following the initial peer feedback lesson is the teacher feedback lesson. Before I begin the consultations, I review the rubric to help focus my attention on what needs to be checked. For teachers who are uncomfortable with examining students' work rapidly, provided they have enough time, I recommend a brief review of the students' written assignments, making notes on the major issues that will affect their grade. These prepared comments can be used by the teacher during the actual individual consultations with the students. Please note that prior access to the students' assignments is required if pre-checking is to be performed. My students write their assignments on Google Docs and add me as an editor in the share settings of their document.

During teacher consultations, I adhere strictly to the rubric when offering advice, as consultation times are limited. I place the rubric adjacent to their writing, once again modeling by thinking aloud

to help further their feedback and paper checking training. The key to quick feedback is to focus solely on the problems that will affect the student's grade. If the rubric reflects aspects of good writing, the students will be receiving feedback that will help improve their essays, not just their grades, and help bolster their writing skills. I always remind the students that I will not be proofreading their papers; I will only be indicating major problems that will affect their grade, as indicated on the rubric. Should there be other minor problems such as spelling and grammar errors, I inform the student of their existence in general, and either offer them more time for consultation during my office hours or recommend other tools (e.g., grammar and spelling checkers) to help them find the minor problems. I provide further support after class or during my office hours to students who have clearly misunderstood important aspects of the skill building courses leading to the feedback sessions and display serious issues in their writing.

Different preparations will be required depending on the setting of the teacher consultation lesson. If the lesson is being conducted online, I would recommend a tool such as Zoom that allows for easy separation of the students into private breakout rooms. During the lesson before teacher consultations, I explain the procedure so as to save time during the following feedback lesson. Moreover, I provide a detailed written description of teacher consultation procedures so that students can review them prior to their lesson (see Figure 3). On the day of the consultation, I offer students the option of joining whatever room they like and encourage them to switch rooms if their purpose changes. I then create five or six breakout rooms, labeling each room with a different purpose. The purposes I choose are peer feedback (to give the students a chance to consult with each other for additional collaborative assistance), silent writing (for students who want to use their feedback in revisions immediately), chat (to promote a much-needed chance for socialization that some of our

Figure 3.
Teacher consultation instructions.

1. I will set up several Breakout rooms (online) or groups (classroom) with different purposes (e.g., peer feedback, writing room, chat, and teacher consultation).
2. You can change rooms or groups throughout this lesson, so choose the group matching the purpose that you would like to devote your time to.
3. One by one, I will meet each of you privately in the teacher consultation room (online) or at my desk (classroom).
4. To save time, I will automatically move you to my room (online) or call you to my desk (classroom). I apologize in advance for interrupting your conversation with your group members.
5. (online only) Because this room change will happen suddenly, you must please remain at your computer during this lesson.
6. (online only) If you are not at your computer when I move you to the consultation room, I will bring someone else to the room and you might lose your chance to talk to me about your essay during the lesson. However, help will always be given during my office hours if you send me an email to arrange a meeting.
7. I will create a column next to your names on a Google Doc and mark an "O" next to your name when I talk to you, so if you want to follow my progress and possibly know when you will be moved to the consultation room, you can watch the Google Doc.
8. When you are in the consultation room, I will speak very quickly. To save time, I will not write comments.
9. You can record our conversation if you want (using Zoom or your smartphone's audio recording function).
10. You can also take written notes.
11. I will be checking your essay for any major/serious problems you might have. I will not have time to proofread and check all your grammar and small problems.
12. If you are in a peer feedback room or group, please help each other by giving advice on your essays.
13. If you are in the writing room or group, please work on your paper quietly.
14. If you do not need to work on your paper, or if you are feeling social and just want to get to know each other, please join the Chat room or group, and take the opportunity to talk to your classmates.

first- and second-year students have been deprived of during the COVID-19 pandemic), and teacher consultation (the room I use for individual feedback sessions). After creating the breakout rooms and setting the timer of the rooms to close at the end of the lesson, I tell the students to join the room with their desired purpose, and I begin the consultation process. I forewarn the students that I will be pulling them out of their respective rooms and dropping them directly in the teacher consultation room when it is their turn. I apologize in advance for any conversations I might interrupt during this process. I also share a Google Doc with a list of their names, and I move down the list while placing an "O" next to the students' names that I have consulted with, so they know approximately when they will be moved into the teacher consultation room next. Please note, in addition to the three semesters that were conducted online during 2020 and spring 2021, I have used the same process in the fall 2021 semester while conducting face-to-face interaction in the classroom. The only difference between an online and classroom setting is that in the classroom, I ask the students to break up into groups according to their desired purpose, rather than "join a breakout room." The full set of teacher consultation instructions offered to students has been included in Figure 3.

Observations and Recommendations

Regarding the rooms with different purposes, I have seen varying results. One class used the different rooms fairly equally. Another group of students remained mostly in the silent writing room. The final outcome was an online class where all the students eventually joined the same "chat" breakout room, evidently enjoying the time to interact. At the end of the teacher consultations, I joined that room and was relieved to find that they were actually talking to each other instead of silently waiting for the lesson to end.

Concerning class size, I have successfully performed the teacher consultation step with a class of 18 Advanced English students during a 100-minute lesson. I generally allocate four to five minutes per student. Time is often saved with students whose writing exhibits a few problems, and thus, some students with more serious issues can occasionally be given more than five minutes. However, please note that I have several years of experience checking student writing in a fast-paced environment, so it is definitely a skill that needs to be developed over time. I would also not recommend this feedback activity with a large number of students who have written papers longer than five paragraphs. Should four to five minutes per student seem too daunting, an alternative to the method I described above would be to conduct teacher consultations and peer feedback simultaneously during the two feedback lessons, allowing the teacher to meet with half of the students during the first lesson and the remaining students during the second.

Further Troubleshooting and Adjustments

There are a few tricks that I learned while developing my skills checking student writing in a fast-paced situation. To begin with, I encourage the student to voice record their feedback session. Nowadays, most students have smartphones with built-in voice recording apps. If in a Zoom room, I enable the participant record function in the settings prior to the lesson and encourage the students to record their session. Recording the session saves the teacher from writing individual comments that will only slow down the consultation. With a voice recording, the students can listen to the comments they received at their own pace.

Second, be aware of the role of a teacher. When I first started teaching writing, I acted like a

proof reader, marking every problem, large or small, that I could find. After reading articles that focused on the negative effects of providing excessive corrective feedback resulting in the dread of the red pen (Semke, 1984; Truscott & Yi-ping Hu, 2008), I found that this method might be more harmful than helpful for some students, possibly leading to being discouraged and overwhelmed. Now, I have a few personal rules that often guide me as I check student writing: 1) if it seems like I am putting more time into checking their writing than they spent actually writing, I stop checking, and 2) I focus solely on the big issues (those that affect the comprehensibility of the piece and that should be, if possible, reflected by the descriptors in the rubric), and remind my students that I am available for further consultation. Students eager to learn will seek out their teacher, whether it is after class or during office hours.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the key to offering feedback quickly and effectively, as explained earlier, is limiting comments to those covered by the rubric. A carefully constructed rubric will allow students to understand important requirements for academic writing, and free teachers from feeling like they are only helping students "get a good grade." Having their writing and the rubric side-by-side during the consultation will show, through modeling, the importance of using the rubric as a writing tool. Additionally, limiting comments will save time and help students avoid the dread of the red pen. Many students will tune out if the teacher goes into too much detail because they just want to improve their grade. Therefore, by constructing the rubric so that it reflects key writing aspects that have already been taught, it is hoped that the students will improve their grade and learn how to write.

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