**Tutor feedback - online academic writing courses**

**Improving tutor feedback on online academic writing courses for postgraduates**

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**ABSTRACT**

Feedback is considered to be central to student learning and academic achievement. With the continuing increase in the numbers of both distance and face to face international Masters students, providing effective online formative feedback to develop second language (L2) English academic writing skills has become a crucial concern. Identifying the characteristics of effective feedback is an important first step in spreading good practice more widely.

Whilst there is a general consensus that effective feedback is personalised, specific and timely (Busse 2013, Hyland 2013), studies into student and teacher perceptions of feedback effectiveness have sometimes produced conflicting results because the experimental design removes feedback “from the contexts in which it has meaning for students” (Hyland 2013: 182). This small-scale grounded theory inspired study aims to provide rich data by investigating written teacher feedback on the weekly texts produced by taught and research postgraduates taking academic writing courses run jointly by ELTC and specific academic programme organisers. The teaching and learning environment is, potentially, a very meaningful context for research in this area.

It is envisaged that the research will develop both understanding and skills in providing effective feedback for ELTC tutors which will contribute to developing better support for the improvement of postgraduate students’ academic writing ability. A better understanding of how to effectively tailor our approach to different disciplinary areas and programme needs should also ensue.

We hope to be able to share our learning more widely with other university staff though both the Schools and IAD initiatives

**REPORT.**

**Work completed.**

The research was undertaken and completed as planned.

## Data collection.

The data consist of two versions of the four short written texts submitted by each student from two separate online academic writing courses. These are **Scientific Academic Writing** for Masters by Research in Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine and **Academic Writing for Social and Political Sciences** for taught Masters programmes in the School for Social and Political Sciences. The second version of the texts include the comments, changes and corrections from the EAP tutor. Each tutor manages a group of 10 students. All the students are in the first month of their one year postgraduate programmes.

In addition to the writing samples, **Feedback on Feedback** questionnaires were sent to students on three separate occasions to elicit student comments on the feedback they were receiving. A final course evaluation questionnaire was sent to all students participating in the course.

## Data Analysis Procedures.

Adopting the modified Grounded Theory approach outlined in the PTAS proposal we conducted an initial trawl of the data, beginning from the returned Feedback on Feedback questionnaires, to identify any emerging themes and generate categories through open coding. These initial categories were then refined and developed and applied to sets of data, checking for both positive and negative instances. Multiple coding of samples of each individual researcher’s data coded was undertaken. Research memos were written throughout the process and the three researchers met regularly to discuss the findings and hypotheses/theories generated, creating the “genuine interweaving of data collection and theorizing of the kind advocated by Glaser and Strauss” (Bryman and Burgess 1994, p. 6). As the work progressed we read the relevant literature, particularly in relation to the written corrective feedback debate, and compared our emergent findings. Initial categories developed were refined and grouped as coding progressed to produce the scheme in Table 1.

**Table 1** Categories and Codes

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| --- | --- |
| CATEGORIES | CODES |
| Positive comments from tutor leading to increased motivation and improvement | POS |
| Corrective feedback leads to improvement and elimination of mistakes | CF |
| Refreshed knowledge of academic conventions and style | REFRESH |
| Developed awareness of academic expectations | EXPECT |
| Critical awareness developed | CRITAWARE |
| Confidence developed | CONFID |
| Improved but lack of detail | NONSPECIFIC |
| Extended academic vocabulary | VOCABEXTEND |
| Positive mention of specific tutor | NAMED |
| Suggestions for improvement | IMPSUGG |
| Any comments related to feedback on this. | CONTENT |
| Tutor comments/instruction/correction to improve academic style | ACADEMIC |

Once the Feedback on Feedback had been coded questionnaires were matched with students and tutor groups to examine written work and the tutors’ written feedback. We were particularly interested in those students who had expressed a strong sense that their written work had improved as a result of the course. Whilst there is general agreement that effectiveness of feedback is very hard to pin down we hoped to discover whether there was any evidence that the students’ expressed perceptions of improvement reflected their actual written performance. Four texts produced over a period of four weeks provided an opportunity to examine uptake of feedback.

Examination of written feedback began with the students’ texts and tutor comments to identify patterns. These were matched afterwards with student comments on the effectiveness of the feedback and the course.

**OUTCOMES**

Ferris (2006, p.98) maintains that there is ‘a strong case for the superiority of indirect feedback over direct feedback’. Other research reported (Ferris 2006) suggests that written corrective feedback should be indirect when dealing with so-called treatable errors. Untreatable errors, such as word choice and word order, it is claimed, can only be addressed by direct correction as there are no rules which students can apply (Ferris 2001). Indirect feedback, on the other hand, allows learners to engage with the rules and apply them to their own correction of errors, resulting in deeper learning.

However, our data suggest that any kind of correction, including proofreading for errors may result in perceived improvement and student satisfaction with feedback if other factors are present. It appeared that the combination of corrective feedback with personal engagement by the tutors, improving confidence and establishing a relationship with the student, individualising feedback to take account of both the student’s first language (L1) and cultural background as well as disciplinary and professional background were more likely to result in student satisfaction with feedback and perceived improvement. Matching students comments with drafts of writing and tutor written feedback we developed the theory that it is a combination of POS/NAMED/CF on referencing/citation as well as grammar/sentence structure/vocabulary with ACADEMIC + CONFID with evidence that the student has acted on the feedback which leads to both student satisfaction and improvement.

This tentative conclusion is perhaps not so different from Lee (2008) researching Hong Kong secondary classrooms, discovering that ‘student incentive in the study was found to be inextricably linked with the teacher’s personality and pedagogy, which can indirectly influence student reactions to teacher feedback’(p.156). We concur with Lee (p.146) that ‘feedback is a social act’. This is as true of the online as the face to face classroom context. Establishing a persona online to project a friendly and involved yet critical friend is central to good feedback practice.

As expected, feedback uptake proved complex. We found examples where although all of the above elements were present, it was clear that the student had not acted on the feedback to make changes and corrections to their writing. We found, however, little evidence of what Truscott (1996, p.355) refers to as ‘the inherent unpleasantness of correction’. On the whole, our postgraduate students appreciated the correction provided, even when there was little evidence that they had acted upon it.

# CONCLUSION

This collaboration of EAP and subject teachers is a response to Hyland’s (2013a, p. 251) ‘strong argument for writing teachers to establish greater collaboration with discipline teachers to identify the arguments, expressions and expectations of the discipline’. As trained language teachers with academic qualifications we have the ‘luxury’ of time to spend giving detailed feedback and recognise that other academic colleagues, whilst bearing the brunt of student satisfaction survey results reporting poor experience of feedback, have little time to focus on this area. Given our training and experience, it does not seem to us to be hubris to identify examples of best practice from our colleagues’ work and base our guidelines for improving feedback practices on those. However, our research and experience sound a warning signal and we are also aware of the need not to reinforce the wrong message perpetuating an artificial distinction between content and language thereby potentially hindering academic writing development.

**BENEFITS TO ELTC AND SCHOOLS WE WORK WITH.**

We used the Guidelines produced in our briefing sessions with course tutors at the start of the 2015 session and, to date, have the impression that we are providing “better” feedback. This would seem to be substantiated by the many emails received expressing strong appreciation of the courses and ELTC tutor feedback. Students have also told us they use the course materials for reference when writing their course assignments. We are extending our provision to both Geosciences and Nursing Studies this semester.

As a research team we have experienced the benefits of having time to research our practice resulting in improved understanding and confidence about the value of our work in this area.

**DISSEMINATION**

In addition to Tutor Briefings and a CPD session for ELTC academic staff we have presented at two conferences:

2015. Northcott, Jill and Pauline Gillies ‘Improving tutor feedback on online academic writing courses for postgraduates’. Presented at *EAP in a Rapidly Changing Landscape: Issues, Challenges and Solutions*. Biennial BALEAP Conference. University of Leicester. 17-19 April 2015.

*An article based on this has also been accepted for the BALEAP 2015 Conference Proceedings*

2015. Northcott, Jill “Feedback on feedback. Improving postgraduate academic writing ability”. Presented at “Academic Writing in Multiple Scholarly, Socio-Cultural, Instructional and Disciplinary Contexts: Challenges and Perspectives”. 8th Biennial Conference of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing. Language Centre. Tallinn University of Technology. 15-17 June 2015.

**FUTURE WORK**

We would be happy to share our research with other university colleagues at an IAD session or Schools-based fora. We are planning to continue our research, focussing more specifically on the CONTENT category identified. It would also be of interest to “track” the students during the course of their year to see if there are long-term benefits for the quality of their academic writing.

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