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An integrated approach to providing feedback in a blended course of academic writing

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Abstract An exploration of ways of providing feedback was conducted in a blended course of academic writing for postgraduate (PhD) students in history, geography and anthropology. The online resources of the Moodle Platform were used to provide initial, colour-coded feedback, which proved simple to use (for the teacher) and easy to interpret (for the students). The redrafted versions made as a result of this feedback were then subjected to peer revision and a final teacher overview in a follow-up workshop. The study concludes by suggesting that an integrated approach to feedback, using online and traditional resources, can enhance a process-oriented approach to teaching writing, while addressing the issue of time management of feedback which has been identified as a major concern of teachers of writing.

Content 1. The extent and nature of feedback research. — 2. The context of the present study: English for academic purposes in Europe. — 3. Using the Moodle platform to provide colour-coded feedback. — 4. What is an error? The limitations of feedback. — 5. Refining feedback: self-reflective comments and peer review. — 6. The post-feedback questionnaire. — 7. Conclusion: A feedback 'continuum' to enhance the process-based approach to teaching writing.

1 The extent and nature of feedback research

Giving feedback to learners is a priority for teachers of writing. Paran (2012) identifies it as «the most common issue raised when teachers discuss the teaching of the writing». This may be due in part, as he suggests, to the amount of feedback teachers believe they are required to provide. But what kind of feedback, and how to provide it continue to contribute to the discussion, and provide the impetus behind much research into the acquisition of writing skills. Nearly two decades after Truscott's (1996) claim that corrective grammatical feedback is ineffective, and Ferris's (1999) opposing claim, the jury are still out. A number of more recent and carefully constructed studies (e.g. Sheen 2007, Bitchener, Koch 2009) suggest that focused corrective feedback, in which a single error type (such as use of articles) is selected, can be beneficial, although Storch (2010) warns against research which is over-restrictive and in which «the pendulum has swung too far towards experimental studies».

The form taken by feedback - oral, written, with or without meta-linguistic comments - is fundamental to the debate. So too, is the teaching

context. Furneaux, Paran and Fairfax (2007) suggest that in ESL (English as a second language) environments, feedback tends to be focused on content, whereas in EFL (English as a foreign language) they found it to be focused on form, and as such would seem to indicate that teachers continue to prefer a product-oriented rather than a process approach to writing, at least at secondary school level, where their research was carried out. The teachers saw themselves as 'providers of feedback' rather than as advisors, supporters, or initiators of a learning process.

To be beneficial feedback needs to be interpretable, within an agreed framework. Ellis (2009) draws up a typology of written corrective feedback, based on his overview of empirical studies (e.g. Chandler 2003, Ferris 2006). He identifies five basic strategies for providing feedback: direct corrective feedback (CF); indirect CF - in which the teacher indicates that there is an error, but does not provide the correction -; meta-linguistic CF, in which the teacher provides information about the type of error, usually through an agreed code; focused or unfocussed, depending on whether the teacher selects all or just some errors for feedback; and electronic, including the use of specially developed software programmes.

Teachers base their choice of strategy on a variety of factors, pragmatic and pedagogical, such as time available (it is quicker to underline an error than to write the correct form), the type of response required (metalinguistic feedback is more process-oriented than simple correction), and the resources available (electronic feedback may involve costly software packages, and presupposes an electronic workstation for students). In a survey of teachers' readiness to implement new approaches to providing feedback, Lee (2011) found that most teachers were willing to engage with alternative forms of feedback, such as self evaluation and peer feedback, but they may not be encouraged to do so by the institutions in which they work (p. 9). Teachers were asked to identify «feedback practices» not currently used in their school, but which they would consider adopting. At the top of the list (77%) came «asking students to conduct peer evaluation» (p 5), confirming Hyland's belief that teachers, rather than students, appreciate this practice. In his (2003) overview Hyland devotes almost as many pages to peer evaluation as he does to teacher written feedback, and more than he does to teacher-student conferencing (oral feedback). As he puts it,

Collaborative peer review helps learners engage in a community of equals who respond to each others' work and together create an authentic social context for interaction and learning [p 198].

'Peer review' is of course a term more readily associated with academic skills, rather than the secondary school classroom; unsurprisingly, much current research on peer feedback is set in a higher education context

of academic writing. All five presentations on feedback made at the 2012 IATEFL conference in Glasgow (Pattison 2013) reported on higher education learning environments; two of them were explicitly aimed at harnessing peer feedback.

Whatever form it takes, feedback requires a response from the students to whom it is directed. Research on corrective feedback has tended to focus on the nature of student responses, either through descriptions of types of revisions made in redrafts – which, as Ellis points out, tells us nothing about whether the students will be able to apply the feedback when writing new texts – or through longitudinal studies which necessarily focus on single errors or error types. Making connections between corrective feedback and the development of individuals as competent writers in a second or foreign language is a different matter, but it is this link that a process oriented, skills-based approach to teaching writing needs to address.

2 The context of the present study: English for academic purposes in Europe

This paper reports on an attempt to develop a flexible and efficient means of delivering feedback to a group of postgraduate students at the Interuniversity Doctoral School of History, Geography and Anthropology of the Veneto (Universities of Padua, Venice and Verona), and to involve them actively in the feedback process. All participants were motivated graduates who knew they were likely to have to write in English in the near future, and make spoken presentations, in a European academic context. Levels varied from around B1+ to B2+ on the CEFR, and most students had had little experience of writing in English. The course objectives were thus:

- to make students familiar with different types of academic text, and their rhetorical structuring (in part through a contrastive approach);
- to help students, through a series of targeted activities, towards C1 proficiency as defined in the CEFR scale descriptors for written production: academic writing and spoken production: making presentations;
- to give students the possibility to write about their research and to discuss it with their peers;
- to give students the strategies and personal confidence necessary to interact effectively in a European context of English as a *lingua franca*.

The course used a blended approach, with seven three-hour workshops, held at roughly one month intervals through the academic year, and interspersed by an online course using a Moodle Platform, which was used primarily by students to upload writing assignments, and by the teacher

to provide feedback on them. A forum made it possible for students to ask questions about the course and share ideas and doubts about the topics dealt with. Of 19 students who initially enrolled for the course, three left for field research or other reasons, leaving 16 regular participants in the online course, although not all of them could attend all the workshops.

A typical three-hour lesson presented a topic (e.g. «The structure of academic texts», «The nature of formal style», «Finding a voice in the academic community») and then offered short in-class writing (or pre-writing) tasks, usually requiring peer correction or comment. However, writing is essentially a solitary activity, and the major commitment required of students took place in their own time, between lessons, in the drafting, writing, and editing of texts agreed with the teacher.

These texts were intended to sample from a range of text types and to be directly related to the students' research. They included writing an abstract, writing a book review, and preparing a PowerPoint presentation. The first task, however, required students to think about ways in which they could help themselves to develop writing skills. It invited them to consult and compare some of the many online resources for academic writing, and to write a short (300 word) overview. A timeline was arranged for first draft, online feedback, and redrafting, but the form the feedback was to take had not yet been decided.

3 Using the Moodle platform to provide colour-coded feedback

Since its appearance in 1999, the Moodle platform has continued to grow as a free educational resource, and is currently used to deliver more than 7 million courses in 232 countries, counting around 68 million users, 1.3 million of whom identify themselves as teachers (retrieved 2013/05/12 from https://moodle.org/). It is a particularly popular adjunct to university foreign language teaching programmes, in which it can be used as an action research tool (Brine et al. 2007) in addition to offering support for conventional classroom instruction (Brandl 2005).

As well as receiving students' work (e.g., in the form of Word documents), the platform allows teachers to intervene, correct or manipulate the work, and repost it, adding an evaluation if needed. The students' work opens in a page with the familiar Word toolbar, which offers the teacher a range of tools to work on the text.

From the outset it was felt that a form of indirect corrective feedback with minimal meta-linguistic information would be most useful for motivated PhD students. It would provide a stimulus for students to think about how language is used in context, it could lead to multiple linguistic solutions, but it would also require further teacher feedback, offering further language learning opportunities.

The highlighting facility in the toolbar offered an extremely rapid means for indicating the words or phrases which needed attention. An infinite number of colours is available, of which forty appear on a dropdown menu. For a teacher in a hurry this facility offers an enormous advantage over applying an error code of abbreviations, such as those described in Ellis (2009), e.g. ww = «wrong word», prep = «preposition». Such a kind of traditional correction is likely to take even more time when working on an electronic page than with pen and paper, since the first task would be to isolate the offending word or phrase from the rest of the text. Highlighting, in contrast, can be applied almost instantaneously. The question facing the teacher was the degree of delicacy for each category; in other words, how many colours should be used, and what information would they encode?

In the end only three colours were used, while a fourth type of error, the omission of a word, such as an article or a preposition, was indicated by the symbol Δ . This meant that the error categories would be extremely broad. An explanation was posted on the forum (Table 1) with a sample piece of colour-coded text. The post continued (Table 2) with a commentary on the errors.

Table 1. Forum post with sample colour-coded feedback

Feedback on written assignments

In the box below is an example first assignment on «the top three websites for academic English». It's my intention not to 'correct' your work (as a proofreader 'corrects' a manuscript) but to give you feedback which I hope will be useful and enable you to redraft your work, and make it more presentable.

I've used colour-coded highlighting, as follows:

Yellow indicates a formal error, such as incorrect grammar or spelling;

Green indicates a lexical error;

Acquamarine indicates an inappropriate phrase, which might be due to reasons of discourse, style, or structuring conventions;

 Δ indicates that something is missing; this might be a punctuation mark (such as a comma $_{\cdot}$) or an article.

Have a look at the example piece of writing and try to work out what corrections need to be made. Then have a look at the second page, where I have singled out some of them, and suggested changes.

Internet for academic english

During the last decades internet has become increasingly widespread in people's personal, professional and academic life. As for many other subjects of study, even for Δ english language and academic english Δ it represents today an important source of information and suggestions. However Δ it is important to read internet's data carefully because they can be sometimes useless, imprecise or even wrong. We know in fact that it is important to focus on some important aspects when we write an academic text: cohesion, coherence, vocabulary and structure. The lack of one of those aspects can imply an improper academic text. Internet can help people and scholars working in a correct way, but it is very important to use this source after having already a knowledge about the rules and the purposes of academic english.

Here I would like to list the three most interesting websites for the subject I'm talking about.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab offers a complete guide for the most important aspects of general and academic writing: grammar, punctuation, structure, arguments, rhetoric and vocabulary.

The online writing resources website of the Central European University of Budapest lists links to some specific issues of academic writing and speaking, such as citation styles, bibliography and the correct use of sources in a paper or a thesis, until the publication.

The Brown University Writing Center website after a review of the main aspects of writing, focuses on the production guidelines of a variety of academic areas. This last source is an interesting one because it allows to analyze the writing strategies in the context of a specific subject.

More than a ranking $\underline{\alpha}$ this short list is intended as a three steps guideline which faces the aspects of academic writing and speaking starting from the basics until the specific contexts' production.

Table 2. Forum post with sample and suggested corrections

Internet for academic english [WE NEED A CAPITAL E]

During the last [EITHER «RECENT DECADES» OR «THE LAST DECADE» – BETTER, «OVER THE LAST DECADE»] decades internet [«THE INTERNET»] has become increasingly widespread in people's personal, professional and academic life. As for many other subjects of study, even for Δ [«THE»] English [CAPITAL!] language and academic English [CAPITAL!!] Δ [DON'T FORGET THE PUNCTUATION. WE NEED A COMMA HERE] it represents today an important source of information and suggestions [PERHAPS «HELP»]. However Δ [COMMA] it is important to read internet's data [NO POSSESSIVE 'S' HERE, IT SHOULD BE «DATA FROM THE INTERNET» OR JUST «INTERNET DATA»] carefully because they can be sometimes [THIS IS

A SYNTACTICAL ERROR; 'SOMETIMES', AN ADVERB OF FREQUENCY, COMES BEFORE 'BE'] useless, imprecise or even wrong. We know in fact [DON'T USE 'IN FACT'; IT'S NOT NECESSARY, IT ISN'T THE EQUIVALENT OF ITALIAN «INFATTI»] that it is important to focus on some important aspects when we write an academic text: cohesion, coherence, vocabulary and structure.

4 What is an error? The limitations of feedback

It was anticipated that the broad categorizations might cause students problems in identifying the error, and inevitably there were cases of one error being substituted by another, e.g.:

- considering productivity as a neutral [...] element of capitalist mechanisms allowed to spread more easily American techniques of production to [...] European countries;
- considering productivity as a neutral [...] element of capitalist mechanisms permitted to diffuse modality of production created in America to [...] European countries.

However, most corrections, especially those syntactic and lexical corrections which could be easily checked in a dictionary or an online resource such as the British National Corpus, were easily dealt with, e.g.:

- ... created the bases of a decisive phenomenon which...
- ... created the **basis for** a decisive phenomenon which...

But there were problems for the teacher too, who had to make decisions about the nature of the error, and indeed, what constituted an 'error'. In the first case, it was difficult to decide which category some errors belonged too; whereas others clearly belonged to more than one. For example, a wrong choice of word, in an incorrect form (e.g. wrong tense) was both a lexical and a formal error. With other errors, such as rhetorical and other discourse errors, and the use of cognates which occupied a grey area between 'helpful cognate' and 'false friend' – and of which there are many occupying the academic interlanguage between Italian and English – it was sometimes hard to choose between flagging the error as lexical or using the vaguer inappropriateness indication. By the time the second task was set, the acquamarine code had dug itself in as a default setting in the case of teacher doubt.

The second difficulty concerned the identification of error in the context of writing for a European (and not an English native speaker) academic audience. Over the past decade a huge amount of research has been carried out in the field of English as a lingua franca, much of it in academic

contexts (e.g. Mauranen 2012). This has focused primarily on strategies for negotiating meaning, such as accommodation and code-switching, but it has also identified formal features which deviate from a native speaker model, and which seem to recur in 'academic ELF' contexts, such as (to take just one emblematic example) the verb *to discuss about, based on an analogy with talk about and speak about. Is this an error, or simply a transparent alternative for discuss? This question needs to be addressed in the context of the stated course objective, to prepare participants to interact with fellow historians from other European countries using English as a lingua franca. The decision taken in this case was to highlight such 'borderline' usage (using acquamarine) but to return to it in a follow-up workshop, since it would provide useful input for a reflection on the nature and scope of 'lingua franca' English.

5 Refining feedback: self-reflective comments and peer review

From the outset it seemed desirable that the online feedback should be supported by a follow-up workshop, in which students discussed the changes they had made, or raised doubts. At the same time, this discussion would need to be focused, not overly time-consuming, and useful to the class as a whole. A three hour workshop was thus arranged after the third writing task («Write a 500 word review of an article or book which is of paramount importance to your research») by which time students had become familiar with the colour-coded feedback.

They were invited to edit their texts before the workshop, to indicate their revisions **in bold** and to select a maximum of three or four of them, recording their justifications or doubts in a kind of think-aloud gloss, e.g.:

- «I've chosen this verb ['enter'] because they entered (on the altars)
 physically and metaphorically»;
- «maybe I can omit this 'which'?».

Redrafted texts, complete with glosses, were uploaded onto the platform. This element of self reflection has similarities with Schumm Fauster and Campell's (2013) approach to student directed feedback, which was intended to shift the parameters for provision of feedback to the students, and which required participants to submit 'feedback questions' to teachers; the difference being that in the Schumm Fauster and Campbell study students were required to submit their questions with the first draft, thereby anticipating potential language problems and errors. In the present study, the questions were focused on the editing process.

The second draft, complete with the student's questions, was brought to the workshop in which participants reviewed each other's texts in pairs, questioned some of the corrections made, and in some cases offered alternative solutions. As well as making the session more participatory, this peer review stage was useful in that it helped to identify common problems, which could then be addressed in a final teacher-led overview. The workshop ended with an identification of recurring problems, the intention of which was to focus attention away from the specific errors and onto the writing process itself, with the potential reader in mind.

The kind of residual errors which were left unresolved after the online feedback and peer review tended to be of a higher order than single word grammar and lexical errors. Most of them were of a rhetorical-organizational nature:

- structuring devices (such as on the one hand) and pronoun reference;
- reporting verbs and the (over) use of according to;
- functional academic language: exemplifying, generalizing, conceding;
- use of hedges and boosters, 'academic voice';
- · construction of noun phrases;
- · connotative use of language in academic discourse.

The use of hedges and boosters, for example (Hyland 2000) took up the theme of 'finding an academic voice' which had been presented in an earlier lesson in the course. The latter two problems generated the most discussion. Complex noun phrases often needed unpacking; typically students avoided post-modifying of phrases, perhaps out of fear of negative transfer from Italian, or by over-generalizing a rule about possessive s:

- «The second part purpose is a realistic description of...» («the purpose
 of the second part»);
- «a realistic description of woman's function» («the function [or 'role'] of women»).

Even more pervasive, but less visible, was the use of connotation, whereby lexical items were assigned connotations which extended beyond the dictionary definition(s), e.g.

• signs of an intimacy between the actors involved in the relationships

where 'people' would have been appropriate. This, too, is a transfer error (*The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* has the entry: *actor: someone who performs in plays and films, especially as their job*) which led to the reflection: in a context of European academics, would the word have passed unnoticed? Given that the context was clearly not the theatre, would this lexical choice not appear simply as belonging to an en-

hanced, more 'academic', register than, say, 'people'? A quick check with the British National Corpus (which gives random fifty hits for the search item), however, in which *none* of the hits could be interpreted with this extended meaning, settled it, and as a result students agreed that it was better to seek an alternative.

6 The post-feedback questionnaire

The feedback process ended with a questionnaire for students to complete (Table 3) in which they were invited to look back over the online colour-coded feedback they had received and comment on its effectiveness. Of the eleven who attended the workshop, all agreed that it had been «helpful» or «very helpful», although, predictably «not always effective». Four claimed that they had felt confident about «almost all» of the corrections they had made on the basis of the feedback, with five students feeling confident about more than half of them. All students agreed that their second draft was an improvement on the original, but more significantly nine students claimed that they had learnt «probably quite a lot» about the writing process in the redrafting.

In response to the final, open ended, question inviting students' opinions about the value of the generic indication of a problem, as opposed to explicit error correction, a large majority were in favour of the former, although most added the proviso that it required a follow-up session. As one student engagingly wrote, «It's a very good strategy but in my opinion effective only if followed by an explicit correction of errors: Double work for you, doubly useful for us». Of the two students who would have preferred explicit correction, one admitted that maybe this was because she was "just used to that".

Colour coding proved effective for another reason, too: it presented students with an immediate visual idea of what needed attention, and why, providing «a sort of statistical overview» in the words of one student. The predominant colour was yellow: on the third and longest task (a 500 word review) students made an average of 15 structural/formal errors, 5 lexical errors, and 8.5 other errors; the predominant colour was thus yellow, but the 'yellow errors', as we have seen, were also those most easily corrected in the redrafting.

Table 3. Post-feedback questionnaire

Please circle A, B or C (Qs 1-9) and write a short answer to Q 10.

1 How helpful was the feedback?A Very helpful B Helpful C Not helpful

 3 How many highlighted words or phrases did you correct on the basis of the feedback? A Fewer than half	2	How many of the suggested changes were easy to understand? A Fewer than half B 50-80% C More than 80%	
 back? A Fewer than half		A rewel than half b 50-5070 C More than 5070	
 4 How many of the corrections you made do you feel confident about? A 50% or fewer B More than half C Almost all of them 5 How effective was the colour coding in identifying the type of problem? A Very effective B Not always effective C Not effective 6 How would you classify most of the changes you made to your work? A Grammar B Lexical choice C Something else 7 How do you feel your redrafted work compares with your original draft? A It's not very different B It has improved C It's much better 8 How long did it take to redraft your work? A Less than an hour B Less than two hours C More than 2 hours 9 How much do you think you learned about writing in English during the redrafting? A I don't know B Not much C Probably quite a lot 10 Please write a short comment on whether you think explicit correction of errors or an indication of problem types (e.g. by colour coding) is the most useful 	3		
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teedback for vour writing, and why		rors or an indication of problem types (e.g. by colour coding) is the most useful feedback for your writing, and why.	

7 Conclusion: A feedback 'continuum' to enhance the process-based approach to teaching writing

The study we have reported on in this paper is clearly a small-scale one, both in terms of student numbers and scope, and it is exploratory in nature. Nor could it have been otherwise, given that this was the first blended course of writing taught by the researcher, and the first such course provided for students. It set out to explore a number of questions, not necessarily related, ranging from the identification of error to the nature of feedback, from time management to the nature of academic English, and how best to integrate online and traditional teaching and learning strategies.

However, the underlying aim was to make feedback relevant to the real language needs of students. Unlike many other learning environments,

where written assignments may have little relation to real life needs but are primarily intended as opportunities for practising already acquired lexis and structures, participants could see the relevance of the course for upcoming professional commitments. This made collaboration urgent, but also stimulating and motivating for students. It meant that they kept to deadlines, completed the tasks, and were keen to explore new routes for feedback.

The two stage approach made possible by a blended course undoubtedly facilitated the teacher's task. From the teacher's point of view the use of colour-coding proved to be a remarkably simple and rapid tool for providing multiple feedback; once the error has been identified, a drag and click take less than a second to highlight it. This system, perhaps, could be refined and more effectively encoded; one respondent, in the questionnaire, suggested that a fourth colour could have been used for structuring devices.

However, such simple feedback is not enough; when it comes to writing, personal and interactive feedback, explanations and advice, through peer or teacher comment, are necessary. This emerged clearly in the questionnaires, as it did in the workshop. The progression from impersonal (on line) to peer to teacher feedback reported on in this paper reflects a process-based approach to teaching writing and could perhaps offer a tentative model, or rather, a starting point for a model, for integrating different types of feedback in a complete process which engages learners in different ways, in a continuum of feedback which takes them from a reflection on language as system to focusing on the ultimate beneficiary of a written text - the reader.

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