10 tips for effective feedback of student writing

Ena Lee (ena@sfu.ca)
Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University
some assumptions guiding this workshop

- focusing on verbal or written feedback in relation to EAL writing (not EAL speaking, listening, or reading)
- attendees are interested in effective feedback practices as they relate to supporting learners’ language learning trajectories (vs. assessment/measurement purposes)
- attendees represent varying disciplines and varying levels of familiarity with the EAL literature in relation to writing feedback (therefore, the purpose of the workshop today is to provide an introduction to the topic)
- while these tips are particularly useful for EAL writers, many are equally useful for non-EAL writers (i.e., “native speakers”)
in small groups...

- discuss “error correction” and feedbacking of EAL student writing:

  WHY do you think we should correct errors/offer feedback on student writing?

  WHAT ERRORS do you think we should correct/offer feedback on student writing?

  WHO do you think should correct errors/offer feedback on student writing?

  WHEN (and where?) do you think we should correct errors/offer feedback on student writing?

  HOW do you think errors should be corrected/feedback should be offered?
what does the EAL research say about “corrective feedback”? 

- research supports effectiveness of feedback on the broader aspects of the writing (e.g., structure, content, cohesion, etc.); HOWEVER, effectiveness of feedback of language accuracy/grammar in EAL writing, specifically, has yet to be proven conclusively
  - grammar correction tends to be the default focus of most feedback received on EAL writing (due to saliency, expectations, commonsense belief, etc.), though it may not be the most important to the learner’s overall language development (i.e., it can be detrimental: students aiming for “error-free” writing rather than meaningful communication of ideas)

- in the EAL literature, what are the different beliefs about feedbacking EAL writing and why someone should/shouldn’t provide feedback?
The 1996 “corrective feedback” smackdown: Truscott (anti-feedback) versus...

“anti-feedbackers” claim:
- it can discourage students
- teacher feedback can often be unclear and inconsistent (or even inaccurate!)
- the long-term benefits are not clear (e.g., delayed post-tests of writing)
- language accuracy improvement could simply be due to “natural” progress of language acquisition
- it’s a waste of time—time that can better be spent on pedagogical interventions that have been proven more effective in the research
“pro-feedbackers” claim:

- it can discourage students (sound familiar?) – student/teacher expectations
- some research refutes claim of teacher feedback being mired in lack of clarity and consistency
- long-term benefits are inconclusive, yes, but there has been positive indication of short-term benefit (e.g., subsequent revisions)
- difficult to parse what improvement may be due to “natural” language acquisition and what may be due to feedback
- it’s not a waste of time when language accuracy is a very salient issue in EAL students’ realities (school, career, etc.), so developing learner autonomy to meet their continued language learning needs is key
why do you think we should correct errors/offer feedback on EAL student writing?

- it MAY have impact on the overall language learning trajectory of an EAL learner in relation to:
  - learning “correct” English forms
  - developing learner autonomy
  - teacher/learner perceptions about a teacher’s role and responsibilities
implications of the “corrective feedback” debate on today’s workshop

- view the workshop content as tips and strategies, but not hard, fast rules of/answers to feedbacking
- “effective feedbacking” is contextual/situated
  - there are multiple and conflicting factors impacting whether feedback might be “effective” or not, so educators need to be sensitive to and understanding of differing student contexts
  - key workshop strategy is to introduce what the literature has to say not just about the “how” of teaching, but also the “who”, “when”, and “why” so we can develop a more complex understanding of writing feedback to better be able to adapt to diverse learner needs regarding feedbacking (not as easy in large lectures without tutorials, perhaps)
Tip #1: DETERMINE the purpose of your feedback (and be realistic)

- “assessment FOR learning” vs. “assessment OF learning”
  - i.e., “feedback for acquisition” vs. “feedback for accuracy”
- impact on communication
  - fluency vs. accuracy
  - local (does not impact reader understanding generally) vs. global (impacts overall understanding of the idea)
  - negatively distracting to reader (repetitive, stigmatizing)
- content, rhetorical issues (organization, structure, coherence, cohesion), language accuracy
Tip #2: UNDERSTAND the difference between a “mistake” and “error” (and aesthetic preference)

- “error analysis” theory in linguistics:
  - “mistake”
    - grammatical rule is known and understood
    - inaccuracy is a “one-off” due to non-language issues (fatigue, anxiety, inebriation)
  - “error”
    - grammatical rule is NOT known nor understood (or is in preliminary learning stages)
    - inaccuracy is repetitive and systematic
- differentiating between “mistake” and “error” has implications for learner’s self-editing skills

NB: also important to understand whether it is an actual grammar issue or an issue of personal aesthetic preference (e.g., ending sentence w/preposition) – danger of appropriating the student’s writing, hegemony of “Standard English”
Tip #3: CONSIDER the learner when determining your feedbacking approach

- the learner’s language level, “motivation”, perception of and receptivity to feedback interconnect with possible “(in)effectiveness” of the feedback:
  - “positive” vs. “negative” feedback?
  - “selective” or “comprehensive” (aka “focused” vs. “unfocused”) feedback?
  - direct, indirect, metalinguistic, or reformulating feedback?
“focused” vs. “unfocused” feedback (aka “selective”/“comprehensive” feedback)

- focused - honing in on one error/one type of error
  - may improve student awareness of, attention to, and understanding (and use) of an error
- unfocused – attending to multiple or all errors
  - may be more effective in the long run (much faster learning if a student is able to handle that amount of grammatical content)

- EAL research does not strongly support one over the other, but some studies have shown more long-term language accuracy gains with focused feedback (due to improved learner “noticing” of and consistent/sustained focus on correcting the error)
direct feedback

example:

many

“In much contexts, students’ success or failure in their academic endeavours on to improve or their future careers may hinge in a large part ^ their ability improving the accuracy and clarity of their written works.” (Ferris, 2011, p. 197)

students (especially those with lower language levels) may prefer this as it is most explicit, but lack of deeper engagement with the error may only garner short-term gains in accuracy (rather than long-term learning)

teachers may prefer this as it can be easier (and may attend most to our feedback “impulses” – somewhat dangerously, perhaps), and some research argues for the application of direct feedback in relation to language phenomena that does not adhere to clear “rules” and which can only be learned through memorization (e.g., [non-locative] prepositions, collocations, idioms, vocabulary, etc.)
indirect feedback

- example:
  - “In much contexts, students’ success or failure in their academic endeavor or their future careers may hinge in a large part their ability improving the accuracy and clarity of their written works” (Ferris, 2011, p. 197)

- students are encouraged to “notice”, reflect, then correct/solve the issue—a more complex cognitive process that may improve long-term learning

- teachers may prefer this as it can be quickest, but it may cause student difficulty and uncertainty depending on the student’s ability to correct the error

- EAL research is inconclusive about the difference in efficacy of direct vs. indirect feedback. Some research shows short-term revision gains with direct feedback, but there is no compelling evidence in regards to long-term gains.
  - raises the question about whether educators should thus primarily rely on indirect feedback (e.g., circles, highlighting, etc.) due to speed
metalinguistic feedback

- example:
  1 “much” is used for non-count nouns, but “contexts” is countable. “many” is the quantity word used for countable nouns.
  2 “their” is referring back to plural “students”, so “endeavour” would also need to be pluralized to grammatically agree with “students”

- “In much contexts, students’ success or failure in their academic endeavour or their future careers may hinge in a large part in their ability improving the accuracy and clarity of their written works.” (Ferris, 2011, p. 197)

- some research indicates that metalinguistic feedback positively impacts long-term language learning, but it is arguably more time-consuming on the teacher’s part (but see electronic feedback). Also, research is less clear on the efficacy of error codes over direct and indirect feedback. Some researchers also question whether lower-level students would be able to benefit from metalinguistic feedback due to its complexity.
In many contexts, student pass and fail in school work and office big dependent on improving grammar and clearness of the writing.

In many contexts, students’ passing and failing in school and careers may largely be dependent on improving grammar and clearness of their writing.

A merging of direct feedback and complete or partial re-write that can encourage improvement in content or rhetorical aspects rather than focusing solely on language accuracy. But research seems to still indicate that at least for short-term revision gains, direct feedback was more impactful overall.
Tip #4: MOVE TOWARDS learner autonomy

- if longer-term language learning goals are paramount, feedback strategy should take into consideration how it can eventually assist a learner to self-edit/self-correct
  - teach self-editing skills (proofreading skills, seeking additional help, etc.)
  - integrate self and peer review into curriculum fundamentally
  - systematic reduction of teacher feedback with each subsequent writing piece
Tip #5: COMPLEMENT your feedback with other resources

- develop individualized learning plans that include checklists, follow-up, incremental revision - charting a student’s progression to note improvement or where further focus is needed

- identify self-study resources
  - SFU Student Learning Commons – EAL resources (consultations, workshops, static resources, etc.)
  - CELLTR website
Tip #6: INTEGRATE other feedback methods

- encourages meta-awareness in students and can also contribute to learner autonomy
- aside from peer-feedbacking, consider screen-capture recordings, appointments (in-person or virtual) with think-alouds
- OR, a merger of all of the above:
  - think-aloud screen capture recording via Jing/Camtasia: [http://screencast.com/t/l4aXRUA2xf9](http://screencast.com/t/l4aXRUA2xf9)
  - embedded hyperlinks
  - developed over time and can be built on continuously
  - allows careful crafting in advance about what it is you may want/need to say while keeping things fast and simple
  - creates a different type of interaction and relationship with the learner
Tip #7: BE AWARE of conciseness, clarity, and consistency

- avoid comments such as “vague” or “awkward”
  - based on “native-speaker” intuition, but is not specific in terms of identifying the issue and there are no concrete suggestions for action
- avoid feedback overkill or imbalance of positive and negative
  - research supports quality, not quantity (issues of affect and pedagogical focus)
  - learning can happen through both positive and negative
- create clear rubrics or checklists
  - helps learners to focus on what you want them to focus on
- offer statements and suggestions rather than questions (especially abstract or “indirect request” questions which can cause confusion)
  - from “is it possible that...?” or “can you give an example?” → “consider/review XYZ...” or “please give an example”
Tip #8: SUMMARIZE feedback

- include an end note that distills your overall feedback
  - helps student and instructor focus on the key issues in the writing as it specifically pertains to the needs of the student and of the situated context of the text (i.e., instructors can stay better focused while feedbacking the writing; students will know where to most focus their energies)
  - e.g., identify top two strengths and top two weaknesses with specific examples and suggestions
  - write the summary note first to avoid unnecessary redundancy/repetition (i.e., more time efficient)
Tip #9: DEVELOP a post-feedback process

- requiring revisions, writing reflections, or just practicing as necessary
  - “input” vs. “output” – which is more important?
    - research is inconclusive in regards to whether or not subsequent revision contributes to language learning gains
    - requiring revision is a very contested idea due to debates about whether input (i.e., “noticing”) is the key factor impacting language learning or whether output (i.e., “language production”) is what is key (or whether it is equally both)
  - writing labs, office hours, writing groups, etc.
  - focus a class or part of a lesson on addressing your most common observations taken from across all student writing (can be helpful to non-EAL students as well – e.g., sentence structure, advance punctuation, cohesion, etc.)
Tip #10: REFLECT on your EAL feedbacking practices and REFINE as needed

- professional development - critical reflection on practice
  - continued refining based on everyday observations, communicating with students, and research
    - does my approach work with the course goals, assignment, student, myself?
  - seeking feedback on your feedback/feedbacking process from students
    - what are their perceived needs, wants, preferences, etc.?
    - what feedback strategies do they find most helpful, useful, clear, etc.?
  - action research
revisiting initial questions:

WHY do you think we should correct errors/offer feedback on student writing?

WHAT ERRORS do you think we should correct/offer feedback on in student writing?

WHEN (and where?) do you think we should correct errors/offer feedback on student writing?

WHO do you think should correct errors/offer feedback on student writing?

HOW do you think errors should be corrected/feedback should be offered?
food for thought...

- our pedagogical goals for feedback should focus on *progress, not perfection* (the latter which is not tenable nor supported by linguistic research--especially if looking at only short periods of time)

- language learning is a life-long process, and it is impacted by many factors. Everyone at SFU (staff, faculty, and students) is implicated in the academic success (or lack thereof) of an EAL learner
  - *socioacademic relationships*: “a category of social interaction with peers and with faculty that proved to be critical to the students’ sense of satisfaction with their educational work and sometimes even to the possibility of doing that work.” (Leki, 2007, p. 14)
    - example: “effective feedbacking*”
*the possibilities and limitations of “good intentions” in teaching/learning...

From: [Redacted]@sfu.ca>
To: janepan
Sent: Thursday, January 8, 2015 12:46:54 PM
Subject: Fwd: To be distributed: CELLTR Workshop: 10 Tips for Effective Feedbacking of EAL Student Writing - January 30

Dear Ms. Pan,

I received the notice about this workshop in the fall and again today. While the workshop seeks to fill an important need for many of us, i.e., that our students learn to write clearly in English, and that we as instructors learn how to assist them in the development of this skill, I must pass on how dismayed I am that even in the title of the workshop, there is an error in the English. "Feedback" is not a verb, and "feedbacking" is not a word. Thus, I think I will continue to pursue my own strategies for assisting students with their journey towards clear and correct communication in written English.

Best wishes,
“on writtenness” (Turner, 2018) and “error correction”: why critical (self-)reflexivity matters (Lewis, 2018)

“I will continue to pursue my own strategies for assisting students with their journey towards clear and correct communication in written English.”

- what is “clear and correct communication” referring to?
  - what is unclear and incorrect?
  - how is “clear” and “correct” being determined?
  - why does understanding “clarity” and “correctness” matter?
when we offer “language/linguistic” feedback, what else might we (inadvertently) be commenting on and/or assessing?

- linguistic prescription vs. linguistic description
- linguistic hegemony vs. linguistic productivity
  - “Standard English”, classed/raced/gendered English vs. “language in use” (and global, translingual, transcultural flux)

“appropriateness-based approaches to language education ‘are implicated in the reproduction of racial normativity by expecting language-minoritized students to model their linguistic practices’ along white norms while simultaneously ‘perceiving these students’ language use in racialized ways’.” (Lewis, 2018, p. 151).
thank you!

- please fill out a brief survey to assist CELLTR in developing and improving CELLTR services and resource offerings

questions?

comments?

(Ena Lee; ena@sfu.ca)
Hello,

Thank you for your email regarding the upcoming CELLTR Workshop, "10 Tips for Effective Feedbacking of EAL Student Writing".

Like you, all of us at CELLTR hope that these EAL workshops can, indeed, help meet the important teaching and learning needs of staff and faculty in regards to assisting English language learners at SFU. For that reason, I am disappointed to read from your email that the title of the workshop may be discouraging you from participating in something that may be of teaching relevance and interest to you.

I understand from your message that you believe there to be a grammatical error in the title of the workshop. As you have pointed out in your email, the use of the word "Feedbacking" in the workshop title is not a verb; rather, in the title of the workshop, the word "Feedbacking" is being used as a noun (known as a "gerund" or "gerund verbal"). Therefore, the workshop title, "10 Tips for Effective Feedbacking of EAL Student Writing" is, in fact, one noun phrase with two embedded prepositional phrases (each consisting of a preposition and another noun). The "-ing" in the gerund is a derivational affix (which is an affix that changes the word class) and is a grammatical transformation that adheres to correct morphological rules of the English language (in this case, the creation of a noun to describe an act/action as in "Text messaging is a common form of digital communication" or "tips for feedbacking").

I hope the above helps to clarify the grammatical construction of the CELLTR workshop title.

Best,
Ena