

Supporting English language development: Exploring options for students and staff

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AIMS OF THE PROJECT

Aims of the project were:

- To equip tutors/markers with ways to more explicitly describe the language problems encountered in students' written work and provide greater direction to existing resources and strategies designed to improve students' written communication.
- To increase awareness of ways to act on feedback students had received on their assessments.

In doing so our intention was to “make language visible” (Lillies 2006, p. 34) in both feedback and rubric.



TARGETED UNITS: TWO BACHELOR OF COMMERCE UNITS

Marketing unit T1 2017:

Students

Over **1500** students

Assignments

Report (500 words)

Report (750 words)

Report (1000 words)

Management unit T1 2017:

Students

Over **1000** students

Assignments

Report preparation tasks including 500 words discussion

Report (2000 words)

Oral presentation

BACKGROUND

- University education focuses primarily on disciplinary knowledge with language typically seen as a mere transparent medium to facilitate the acquisition of such knowledge (Coffin & Donohue, 2014).
- Universities are now required to support students' ongoing English Language Development (ELD) and this work is part of the Academic Support Units.
- Strategies can include embedding within disciplines, workshops and credit-bearing units among others. At Deakin, ELD is done using PELA (iDeal), unit work, resources.
- Evidence shows that corrective feedback is one way to address ELD (Bitchener 2012) and Podorova's (2016) academic feedback toolkit provides a valuable model for work in this area.
- This model has the advantage of addressing students' own writing within their discipline studies and for markers to provide targeted feedback



SOME FACTORS LEADING TO ASSISTANCE

Unit staff

Factors that led teaching team to seek assistance with Academic and Peer Support Services regarding effective feedback for English Language Development:

- ‘To reduce a percentage of students contacting the teaching team after each assessment asking for further feedback or explanations of the feedback provided’ (P1)
- ‘To improve staff ability to identify common errors and provide clear feedback that would give students direction on how to improve’ (P2)
- ‘To improve the consistency of feedback between markers’ (P2)
- ‘Sessional and new, and are unaware and/or unsure of the most effective ways to inform contemporary students they can improve and develop their English language skills’ (P3)
- ‘Due to the frequency with which students compare their marked assessments and the rights of students to appeal their grades, transparency and consistency in both the marking criteria and the feedback given to these students is essential.’ (P3)



DIFFICULTIES SUPPORTING ELD

What difficulties do you believe/perceive the markers have regarding providing comments to support English Language Development

- ‘Markers had problems articulating what the errors are and then solutions for the errors’ (P2)
- ‘Make a general comment that does not help the student improve’ (P2). This could be addressed ‘through training, providing examples of common errors and ‘statements’ that markers can incorporate into their feedback when they identify these errors.’ (P2)
- ‘Students that need higher levels of English language support (anecdotally) do not utilise all the services available to them at Deakin’ (P1)
- Issues in feedback: ‘too harsh comments and needed to be reined in; not knowing if a marker should correct the student’s grammar or merely grade and guide them; inappropriate verbose in feedback; lack of experience, skills or knowledge to provide suitable constructive comments. Markers also have different cultural backgrounds that impact how they assess and grade work.’ (P3)



JUSTIFICATION FOR EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK PROJECT

Good feedback is key to scaffolding and promotes autonomy (Hyland & Hyland 2006, p. 83).

- **Formative** feedback is necessary to help students scaffold their learning.
- **Feed forward** is an important aspect of feedback to promote independent learning.
- **'Closing the gap'** between their desired outcomes and students' initial performance (Hattie & Timperley 2007, p. 87) using:
 - constructive and specific comments, and
 - professional development for markers to improve effective feedback.



WHAT DID WE DO FIRST?

ANALYSIS OF PAST ASSIGNMENTS AND MARKERS' FEEDBACK

Examples of marker feedback

Word and sentence level

- Well written with some **minor error**.
- **Proof read** your document before submission **for spelling**.
- Take care to proof read and **ensure that each sentence makes sense**.
- Grammar and punctuation errors. **Sentence should read smoothly**.
- **Try to get someone who speaks English as a first language to proof read your work** with you. Your English is good but with a little bit of assistance it will be much better.

Paragraph level

- You write well, however **your paragraphs are too short**. As a result, your writing reads as though it is **a bit disjointed**.
- You could improve this by trying to **make sure each paragraph has a very clear methodology**, the paragraphs are linked, and they have clear transitions.
- A report is much easier to read if presented in relatively short paragraphs. This report consisted of extremely long blocks of text. It would be improved with **thoughtful paragraphing**.
- Although you had what appeared to be a reasonable format - it was **a little haphazard and disjointed throughout**.

WHAT DID WE OFFER AND PROPOSE?

For students

- 1-1 feedback on assignment drafts
- A workshop on improving written communication to support first task (contextualised)
- Feedforward: Another workshop on increasing awareness of ways to act on feedback students had received on their assessments
- Feedback on next assignment drafts
- Online queries in unit sites

For staff

- PD for markers to improve effective feedback
- PD for markers to be aware of resources available for students
- English language (EL) criterion in assignment rubric
- A comments bank for markers aligned with rubric to describe EL problems
- PD for markers to have agreements/awareness of what is threshold standards, what EL features will they accept as acceptable at this unit?

FEEDBACK GUIDE FRAMEWORK

The feedback guide was informed by the notion of communication competence (Canale 1983), particularly:

- Grammatical competence (concerns with vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, spelling and linguistic semantics necessary to accurately express ideas) and
- Discourse competence (how to use grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken and written text).



FEEDBACK GUIDE TO SUPPORT WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Grammatical competence concerned with well-formedness of language (Murray 2012, p. 236)		Discourse competence knowledge of the connections in a text to form a meaningful whole (Murray 2012, p. 236)	
Word level	Sentence level	Paragraph level	Text level
Word choice/ Expression (ie., avoid slang)	Sentence length; nominalisation to write more concisely; noun groups in sentences	Paragraph length	Report 500 words
Verb tenses in reports	Sentence stages: Theme and New model	Paragraph structure	Report 750 words
Articles	Sentence fragment Parallelism	Linking ideas	Report 1000 words
Subject and verb agreement	Punctuation	Demonstration of critical thinking in an assignment (analyse, evaluate, discuss etc.)	
Spelling	Paraphrasing		



RUBRIC

CRITERIA	YET TO ACHIEVE MINIMUM STANDARD		MEETS STANDARD		EXCEEDS STANDARD	
	Not attempted	Needs improvement	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Excellent
<p>English language use and communication to present knowledge and ideas</p> <p>(Tasks 1 – 3) ULO 2 – GLO 2</p>	<p>There are a considerable number of mistakes, including grammatical errors/punctuation or spelling mistakes.</p> <p>This impacts extensively on the overall comprehension of knowledge and ideas.</p>	<p>There are several mistakes, including grammatical errors/punctuation or spelling mistakes.</p> <p>This impacts considerably on the overall comprehension of knowledge and ideas.</p>	<p>There are some mistakes, including grammatical errors/punctuation or spelling mistakes.</p> <p>This impacts somewhat on the comprehension of knowledge and ideas.</p>	<p>There are occasional mistakes, including grammatical errors/punctuation or spelling mistakes.</p> <p>This impacts at times on the comprehension of knowledge and ideas.</p>	<p>There are very few grammatical errors/punctuation or spelling mistakes.</p> <p>This allows the knowledge and ideas to be consistently communicated.</p>	<p>There are virtually no grammatical errors/punctuation or spelling mistakes.</p> <p>This allows the knowledge and ideas to be effectively communicated throughout.</p>



COMMENTS BANK ALIGNED WITH RUBRIC (EXAMPLE)

Yet to achieve minimum standard: Needs improvement

Your written expression is difficult to understand at times.

Spelling

There were quite a few spelling mistakes such as <please insert>. Don't forget to proof read before submitting.

Vocabulary/Word Usage

The vocabulary used is limited and/or not appropriate for the task. This impacts on your ability to communicate effectively. You will need to develop your vocabulary further.

Grammar

There were a lot of issues with grammar and words missing which affected the writing. For example, <please insert>.

Sentence structure

There were a couple of awkward sentences <please insert>, perhaps due to the placement of punctuation marks. Some of your sentences were quite long. Please allow time to edit and ensure you write concisely.

Paragraph structure

Your paragraphs were quite long- you need to have a separate paragraph for each topic. One idea, one paragraph.
The use of linking phrases/sentences throughout your writing would have made your structure more cohesive.

The communication of knowledge and ideas is considerably impacted by the errors that occur throughout your writing.

For future assignments:

- Use the spell check function
- Proof read your work carefully. To get help with this, go to <http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/study-support/academic-resources/editing-and-proofreading>
- You might want to seek assistance from a Language and Learning Adviser (LLA) or Writing Mentor to talk about developing your vocabulary. Follow this link to see LLA: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/studying/study-support/ask-us>
- You might want to develop your academic English skills in Clarity English and iDeal. Go to <http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/study-support/language-and-communication>
- To develop your paragraph writing skills, refer to the following: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/studying/study-support/academic-skills/essay-writing>
- For resources about linking ideas, go to: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/studying/study-support/academic-skills/essay-writing>



Use of the Language Marking Rubric and the comments bank provided:

Unit Staff

- ‘Incorporated some of these elements into our marking guide’ (P2; P3); It was very useful, as I am no expert in how to do this (P3)
- ‘Yes but not exclusively:
 - blended it with what we had already and together they really helped
 - The Academic and Peer Support Services team co-created some seminar activities that the unit teaching team utilised in seminars to help the students learn about academic writing requirements which was also very successful.’ (P1)



QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

Overall:

- ‘It has been a wonderful collaboration to date that I have promoted to my colleagues.’ (P2)
- ‘It was really successful in my unit and we will continue with our collaboration’ (P1)
- ‘Assisted us in both developing a comprehensive marking guide and with our training sessions, this has improved both the consistency of feedback across markers and the quality of feedback to students.’ (P2)
- ‘As a result, a reduction in emails from students querying their feedback have been reduced.’ (P1; P2)
- ‘Only concern is that while I believe that this collaboration should occur in every unit, I do not believe the Academic and Peer Support Services team have the staff or the resources to work across all units.’ (P1)
- ‘Providing a resource to assist staff improve students’ academic and English language development, through improving effective feedback practices that are bespoke to each unit, is an excellent way to assure and improve the quality of written work done by both staff and students.’ (P3)

In the future:

- ‘I like what we did. This included identifying the training needs of the markers by talking to them then training them and recording this training for use by future markers.’ (P3)
- ‘Ongoing staff development as well as increased promotion of student services. However, in my experience, students that require the support will still not attend the services available.’ (P1)



Markers:

- 50% of the markers felt confident giving feedback about English language and 50% felt somewhat confident:
 - 'I found it a bit too tough if I was too much concerned about English skills. The focus should be around the knowledge of the students' discipline area.'
 - 'English language is not my mother tongue'
 - 'Making sure that the feedback I provide is 'useable'. I am sometimes unsure whether what I say is really useful to the student.'
- 100% of the markers found the pre-workshop resources on feedback were clear and helpful
- 66.67% agreed that the workshop content, delivery and activities helped them to improve their confidence as a marker but 33.33% responded 'somewhat agree'.
- All markers answered that they would recommend the workshop to others

Markers' comments:

- 'It is always helpful to be reminded of how best to provide feedback - a great refresher.'
- 'At the moment I get the feeling that it is simply provided by the marker to justify the mark and for students it provides a means to challenge the mark if they are not happy with it. In cases where marks are consistent with expectations comments are usually ignored. In my view there needs to be a separation between the feedback and the mark (recognising of course that the two are linked). Looking at alternative ways to make feedback meaningful to the student thus ensuring that it will enhance their development.'
- 'They were really wonderful. My colleagues and I really learned a lot and were able to use the new skills we developed in the weeks after the workshop and this resulted in fewer student queries compared to last trimester. So, anecdotally, this indicates to me that the workshop was a huge success.'

OUR REFLECTIONS

- LLAs may contribute to formative feedback to better scaffold learning and improve ELD
- LLAs may help to ‘close the gap’ between students’ initial performance and the desired outcome (Hattie & Timperley 2007, p. 87) by collaborating with the teaching team to provide effective feedback to students’ work
- ELD needs to be made more visible in future



CONCLUSION

The project addressed some of the key concerns the Units' teaching team encountered in terms of providing effective feedback:

- Markers' lack of ability to identify common errors
- Markers' lack of knowledge about effective feedback to improve and develop students' English language skills due to them being sessional, new and from different cultural backgrounds
- Inconsistent feedback between markers

Key outcomes of the project:

- Improved consistency of feedback between markers and quality of feedback to students
- A reduction in queries from students regarding their feedback
- Increased collaboration between LLAs and teaching team in development of resources

WHERE TO NOW?

- Unit staff are interested to continue and build on this work
- We have to ensure that all our colleagues can do this work as part of what we do in our Faculty teams
- To provide PD for staff for delivering effective feedback in general not just to support ELD

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