

Talking about students' writing: a closer look at teacher and student response to audio feedback

Research summary

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Pilot study

- Centre for Applied Language Studies (CALS)
- Pre-sessional course
- 4 EAP (English for Academic Purposes) writing teachers
- 4 writing classes
- 55 students:
 - Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Libya
 - China, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Japan
 - IELTS 4.5 – 6.0+



Why audio feedback?

Claims about audio feedback in:

- EFL/EAP

(Hyland, 1990; Boswood & Dwyer, 1995; Gardner, 2004)

- Wider HE sector

(Ribchester et al., 2007; Rotherham, 2008; Merry & Orsmond, 2007; Ice et al. (2007); Middleton & Nortcliffe, 2009)



Why audio feedback?

- Potential of digital audio to:
 - personalise the feedback process
 - provide better quality, more detailed feedback
 - be more engaging and helpful for learners
 - be more efficient for tutors



Why audio feedback for EAP writing?

- Challenges to the 'process approach' to writing in EAP
- Accommodating learning/cultural preferences
- Motivating learners to return to their texts
- Enhancing existing written feedback systems



Research questions 1

Teacher experience, perceptions and descriptions of practice:

- What are teacher perceptions about providing audio feedback?
- What are teacher preferences influenced by?
- How do teachers use audio feedback, and what are the differences between written and spoken feedback?



Research questions 2

Learner experience, perceptions and descriptions of practice:

- What are learner perceptions about receiving audio feedback?
- What are learner preferences influenced by?
- How do learners exploit audio feedback?



Approach

reduced written commentary
+
audio for detail



Approach



generic 'whole class'
feedback, 2 – 3 mins



individual feedback,
5 – 7 mins each



Methodology: capturing responses

- Students:
 - online student survey - following generic audio feedback
 - online survey - following individual audio feedback
 - two focus groups - end of term



Methodology: capturing responses

- Teachers:
 - meetings, informal one-to-one discussion
 - online survey - end of term
 - follow-up meeting



Teachers' thoughts 😊

Audio can:

- engage and motivate
- vary feedback approaches
- provide more detail
- reinforce learning
- personalise feedback
- allow greater sense of space to comment
- acknowledge effort learners invest in writing



Teachers' thoughts ☹️

Audio is:

- Easy-tech, but... time-consuming
- tiring
- intense
- different thought process to composing text
- ... steep learning curve?



Teacher thoughts ☹️

I did find it more time-consuming which surprised me... I don't know if this would change if it became more part of a teacher's routine. The other thing was that I found it totally exhausting because it was like giving 12 tutorials in one day!

Teacher survey comment



How teachers used audio feedback

- Pointing learners in helpful directions rather than correcting mistakes – ‘task’ comments
- Offering possible examples rather than definitive answers – ‘elaboration’ comments
- Using names, refs to class work – highly personalised



How teachers used audio feedback

- Use of questions and question tags – involves learners
- Positive nature of feedback - high incidence of praise – motivating?
- Signposting comments – need for clarity in audio mode
- Conversational, unscripted approach: ‘um’



How teachers used audio feedback

Generic audio feedback content		Total	Generic audio feedback approach		Total
<i>Code indicates a comment referring to...</i>			<i>Code indicates a comment which...</i>		
L	Language (cohesion/grammar/punctuation/ spelling/vocabulary/style)	32	T	Gives task/action/instruction for learners following feedback	51
O	Organisation	18	E	Elaborates/give examples	45
F	Format	8	S	Uses signposting to aid clarity	38
C	Content/ideas/meaning	6	P	Praises	25
TA	Task Achievement	3	SU	Makes suggestions	17
			LC	Links to work in class (including other classes)	14

Data analysis - example

AntConc 3.2.1w (Windows) 2007

File Global Settings Tool Preferences About

Corpus Files

- Deborah_generic1
- Deborah_generic2
- Emily_generic2.t
- Emily_generic_1.
- Margaret_generic
- Margaret_generic
- Sarah_generic_1.
- Sarah_generic_2.

Concordance			Concordance Plot	File View
Hits		Total No. of Word Types:		
Rank	Freq	Word		
1	181	you	←	
2	171	the		
3	116	and		
4	114	to		
5	112	of		
6	83	um		
7	80	your	←	



Generic audio feedback

...it forced me to be more focused in identifying general trends in the writing of the class as a whole and therefore seeing how effective particular lessons/exercises were.

Teacher survey comment



Individual audio feedback

I really liked having the 'space' to say more. I feel that I gave fuller feedback than if I was writing, i.e. more praise, more suggestions for re-phrasing, more advice in general

Teacher survey comment



Students' thoughts 😊

Audio:

- provides helpful detail
- is comfortable to listen to
- is motivating and friendly
- has greater impact - personal nature resonates



Student survey comments

Categories for free comments: learner individual audio FB survey	Total comments
Helpfulness of audio e.g. detail provided	33
Opportunity for listening practice/can listen again	12
Other/miscellaneous comments	12
Friendliness of audio/personal/motivating/enjoyable	8
Preference for both written and audio feedback	7
Thanks/project is useful	5
Preference for written feedback	1
Clarity/helpfulness/depends on the teacher	3

Helpfulness of audio

*My teacher asked me
what do I want to say... or ...?
So, I was able to think both meaning
then I could show what I mean
clearly.*

*If I feel good
with the feedback, I will be
more ambitious.*

Student survey comments - individual audio feedback



Personalised feedback

I think that it directly impact on myself... so about me, it impacted on myself, more than written... because it was directly for my situation.

The teacher made audio feedback for only me, so I feel I should listen carefully. It encourages me to rewrite essays.

Student survey/focus group comments



Accommodating learner preferences

*Feedback not only useful
for the level I think... it's useful for the
person... some persons who remember by ear
– yes, like me. I remember all (teacher's)
spoken comments, but sometimes
I forget when I see it.*

Student focus group comment



Listening v. reading

- Happy to listen again – and again
- Control over the process
- Authentic listening practice – teacher’s voice as model for non-native speakers

*I listened more than
three times: because I
enjoyed my teacher’s
comments*

Student survey comment – generic audio feedback



Student thoughts about audio ☹️

But some...

- Like to hold paper version
- Still want 'something' written down
- Have weak listening skills
- Find delivery too personal – feel shy
- Can't scan audio file for revision
- Acknowledgment of novelty factor



Caution because...

*But I also do prefer
the normal feedback.*

*I like to have it in
my hands. That is more
comfortable for me.*

*I think spoken
feedback it is not enough
we need beside that write
the feedback.*

Student survey/focus group comments



Caution because...

Sometime if your teacher talks to fast, it might hard to follow.

I prefer the writing feedback because if I don't have a good skill in listening I will listen more than two times.

Some students feel shy when the teacher talk with them directly.

Student survey/focus group comments



Conclusions

- A ‘judicious mixture’ of feedback modes advised (Ferris, 2008)
- Teachers should adopt feedback methods which motivate learners to re-visit texts after assessment (Hyland, 1990)
- Importance of understanding the role of local, individual context (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Goldstein, 2005)



Conclusions

“thanks a lot. go a head. perfect work.”

“I think it is a great project that you work on it and it is really important and very useful for improve our writing ability. thank you.”

“thanks very u too. cos the individual spoken feedback just great and helps me a lot, I would like to continue if it is possible in the future. thanks again.”

Student survey/focus group comments



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Resources

- **Audacity** - audio editor and recorder <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>
- **Olympus digital voice recorder** with USB interface
- **VoiceWalker** - transcription tool
<http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/projects/transcription/tools.html>
- **Bristol Online Surveys (BOS)** software
- **AntConc** - concordance programme
http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/antconc_index.html
- **Wordle** - <http://www.wordle.net/>

