# 7 Effective feedback for language assessment

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## Abstract

The provision of effective feedback is challenging and remains a much-criticised element of the Higher Education (HE) student experience. This case study examines innovative approaches to providing feedback for modern foreign language assessment, based upon a small scale study at the University of Manchester (UoM). We identify problematic areas in current practice, and propose creative solutions not only to help staff produce clear, useful feedback in a sustainable way, but also to raise student's awareness and guide them in how to make the most of our provision, in turn becoming efficient language learners.

Keywords: feedback, intercultural competencies, language, sustainability.

## 1.    Introduction

Providing effective feedback remains a much-criticised element of the HE student experience. Feedback generally comprises: indicating errors, correcting errors, recognising progress and mastery of skills tested, indicating ways to progress and resources to consult, providing encouragement, enabling self-reflection, and action planning. This article examines feedback for language assessment, based upon a small scale study at the UoM. Problematic areas in language practice

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were identified, and solutions based on the self-regulated model (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011) proposed. These were tested in French studies to help staff produce clear, useful, and sustainable feedback and guide students to become efficient learners.

## 2.      Challenges and context

With an overall score of 3.7/5, feedback at the UoM shows low National Student Survey (NSS) results. The fact that this reflects a national phenomenon demonstrates the problematic nature of this area of HE teaching and learning (Carless et al., 2011; HEFCE, 2018; Morris, 2017).

Providing feedback is all more challenging in academic departments where the staff make-up is inherently multicultural. The staff body in the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures is made up of 27 language tutors, ten nationalities, and a mainly British student cohort; in this scenario, providing feedback becomes an exercise in intercultural competency. Time constraints imposed by the departmental work allocation model and the time brackets within which feedback must be released to the students add to the challenge.

This study is underpinned by a notion articulated in Carless et al. (2011) according to which feedback must be sustainable: it must have an impact beyond the task and help students become self-regulated learners. This idea that to develop 'internal feedback' (self-reflection enabling action and progression) students need to understand 'external feedback' is echoed in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). Furthermore, writing feedback has to be 'sustainable' for tutors. French tutors at UoM have thus produced a series of feedback forms containing task-tailored grading criteria and ready-made comments to be highlighted as appropriate to allow for faster turnover. These provide advice on how to improve in particular areas and include references to where students can find information and improvement activities and are centred on Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) advice to orientate feedback towards the task, not the person.

French Language Teachers (LTs) employ error indication as opposed to correction at advanced levels. After returning an assignment, students are invited to rewrite in light of the feedback received. Students return the corrected version to be marked a second time and are asked to complete a self-reflection including an action plan. In this multi-stage approach, feedback is dialogic and interactive (Carless et al., 2011).

This approach can only work if students are guided to receive this feedback, however. To prepare students, we have systematically embedded a variety of exercises into the language curriculum, as it is vital that students understand exactly what is expected of them, and also how they are marked (Ivanic, Clarck, & Rimmershaw, 2000; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001).

These include self-correction techniques designed to enable students acquire effective reflexes with systematic checking. This can be done by students independently but also in dialogic, class situations: students exchange written productions and discuss their work in relation to the marking criteria. They thus engage in understanding the assessment criteria and in applying this knowledge to their own work.

## 3.     Method

In order to better understand notions of good feedback practice, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven international LTs and nine British students. We invited all participants to reflect upon the following themes: language used, length, format, and the role of positive and personal comments.

## 4.     Findings

Our goal is to enable tutors to write useful feedback and to guide students in understanding and acting upon feedforward provided; the emerging points from the interviews are summarised below.

- **Language**: both staff and students expressed a preference for receiving feedback in the target language. Staff feel more comfortable expressing nuance in their own language. Students appreciate the extra comprehension practice provided, and report that critical comments feel more acceptable when filtered through a foreign idiom. All concede that English comments are more helpful at lower levels.

- **Length**: all agreed that comments should be between three and eight lines; any less suggests a lack of care and more might not be read.

- **Format**: whilst students prefer comments to be typed for legibility, staff mostly prefer to handwrite feedback, particularly as language corrections involve much annotation, including underlining, arrows etc. Word processing packages do not allow such flexibility and clarity. Marking language papers electronically is also more time-consuming.

- **Positive comments**: all agree upon the role of praise with tutors attempting to strike a balance between praise for achievements and clear indication of work still required. Most use the 'sandwich' method of positive, negative, positive comments, leaving the students on a good note. Students appreciate this method, reporting feeling disheartened when comments focus purely on mistakes.

- **Personalised feedback**: all appreciate the efficiency of ready-made feedback and feedforward comments (to be underlined or highlighted) but students also want personalised comments, especially on how to improve, perceiving this as quality assurance, yet also confidence boosting.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has used the idea of a self-regulated model as defined by Carless et al. (2011) as a basis to explain the work done in UoM to improve feedback

and enable students to become independent learners. Staff and students have commented positively on the gradual modifications implemented, stating they are helping students to become effective and responsible learners (2018 end of year questionnaires and semi-formal discussions). For example, this method helps students to become self-efficient by comparing individual performance with a standard (Sadler, 1989) and then taking action to close the gap.

This case study shows promising developments in the area of feedback for language assessment which will be taken forward in further trials.

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