Assessment and Feedback in Academic Writing

1. Formative Feedback

When teachers give formative feedback on student writing, they should take time to carefully consider what they will comment on and how. This depends on what stage of the writing process students are in (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). What students should pay attention to first is **global issues**. Therefore, teachers' feedback should first address global issues, like organization topic development and coherence, and the ideas of the paper. When these have been addressed, students can turn their attention to editing sentence-level **local issues**, like grammar and word choice. However, this also depends on the course objectives. If particular grammar points are the focus of your course, then the feedback should match that.

Ferris and Hedgcock (2013, p. 242) provide helpful guidelines for giving student feedback.

1. The teacher should provide formative feedback beginning with **issues that affect understanding the most**.

2. The teacher should not take over the draft by changing it for the student. Rather, teachers should **let students know where something is not clear** and provide direction for how to go about improving the writing.

3. Most importantly, formative feedback should contain **constructive criticism**. This means that the feedback should highlight problem areas in writing in a way that will help students understand what and how to improve. Teachers should give constructive criticism with a positive attitude, and they should include a mix of praise and encouragement about what the student did well.

4. It is helpful to think of formative feedback as part of a dialogue between the teacher and the student. In a student-centered classroom, the role of the teacher is to provide the perspective of the reader. This means to provide **reader-based comments**. By taking a reader-based approach to formative feedback, teachers can promote more effective revision and help students learn to think about the expectations of their audience (Bean, 2011). Below are examples of how feedback comments can be changed from writer-based to reader-based:

Writer-based to reader-based formative feedback comments

Writer-based comments	Reader-based comments
You need to add a thesis statement.	*I'm not sure I understand the focus of this paper. Can you try to make it clear here?*
Your conclusion is weak.	*It's not quite clear to me how the conclusion relates to the rest of the paper.*
Your transitions need work.	*I'm having a hard time seeing how _____ connects to the next paragraph about _____.*
You need more description.	*As a reader, I'm having trouble picturing what this looked like. Can you add more description?*

Task 1: Giving Formative Feedback

Read the sample student essay (see below) written in the context of a university-level ESL course. Students were asked to write an essay explaining their identity, with the following evaluation criteria:

- o **Context**
  - ・A thesis statement introduces the aspects of the topic discussed in the body of the paper.
  - ・The introduction sets the context of the topic and attracts the interest of the audience.

- o **Content**
  - ・The supporting points are relevant to explaining each main idea.
  - ・Development includes description, details, explanations, and specific examples.

- o **Organization**
  - ・Each paragraph has a topic sentence.
  - ・Each supporting point is linked to the controlling idea of the thesis.
  - ・Ideas within each paragraph are developed from a general statement to specific details.
  - ・The Conclusion reinforces the thesis idea and leaves the reader thinking about the topic.

- o **Language**
  - ・Proofreading and careful editing is done to improve correctness.
  - ・Problems with grammar and vocabulary are minimal and do not distract the reader.

In your comment of 100-200 words, you should write a response to the student who wrote the draft below. Be sure to do the following:

- Comment on what makes this essay distinctive (i.e., unique elements of the essay).
- Reference at least one element that is a strength and one element to improve.
- Use reader-based feedback.
- Provide formative feedback rather than summative feedback.

Our Identity

People's identity was made by different elements and affected by various factors. Three of the most important that had affected my identity so far is my curiosity, my parents, and high school journey.

My curiosity is one of the most important factors that had affect my identity. My curiosity had always been encouraging me to try out new activities. I could find my own fun in taking things such as loudspeakers or clock apart, these also gave me an insight of the basics of how everything works.

Both of my parents are typical Chinese parents, they will follow the 'traditional way' of education. My mother was always encouraged me to do more housework and outdoor activities. I had to practice emotion control to calm myself down. Even though I consider my mother to be annoying most of the time, but I now had developed my responsbility to do housework at home.

My high school life had let me find out my value to others. During my high school journey, I had become friends with every single one of my classmates and helped each other out in this challenging environment. I do not think I am what people called as a 'favor man', but I do enjoy helping out others because I could saw my values to others. When my friends thought for me in the first place, I always felt happy being there with them.

I am still in the first stage looking for what is the best identity for me. What makes me happy? What is my personal value? My curiosity, my parents, and my high school journey had the biggest influence on my identity. They had let me understand what can let me feel happy, and what my personal value is in the past eighteen years of my life.

Your Feedback

Example:

Dear Student,
Thank you for sharing your work with me! One strength of your paper is how you clearly organized your ideas into introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs. I also appreciated hearing about how strongly your family relationships influence your ideas about the world. I really liked the line, "I recognized my identity by acknowledging the history of my family." Now, I would like to hear more! What is one story they told you that stuck with you? Specific examples of stories from your family would show readers the kinds of lessons you can learn from your ancestors. I look forward to your next draft!
Amy

2. Summative Assessment and Rubrics

The purpose of summative assessment is to show students and teachers how well the students learned the writing practices taught in the course. That's why this alignment between the course activities and the assessment is very important.

A good summative assessment should help students to focus their attention on the important concepts and processes in the course. And it should provide results that inform students about their success in learning how to write.

A good summative assessment also needs to be given and evaluated the same way for all students. Summative assessments are often used to assign course grades, so teachers must take care to follow consistent procedures when they evaluate responses.

A teacher can use a rubric for marking the final writing assignment in the course to give grades. In this case, the teacher needs a rubric that can be used efficiently and that provides a standard method for assigning grades. The students may not see the rubric, but they should expect that the same clear rubric was used to mark all of the students' papers. And if a student returns after the class to ask about a grade, the teacher will have a good reason for assigning the grade—the rubric!

A teacher might also use a rubric to give formative feedback to students on their writing as one part of the process writing approach. In a process writing course, students write, receive feedback, and revise their writing. A rubric is one kind of feedback that the teacher can give students to help guide their revision of the assignment, or to help them improve on the following writing assignment.

In this case, the rubric should include information to show students the strengths and weaknesses in their writing. Even though a teacher spends more time using such a rubric, the details are important for the students.

So, the alignment of the summative assessment to the course objectives is essential. Knowing how the rubric will be used is important for creating a good assessment rubric. Rubric feedback is an important step for revising in the writing process.

Task 2: Summative Assessment: Practice Rubric Grading

Read the sample draft ("Our Identify") we have already used in Task 1. Use the rubric below to evaluate the sample draft. In your reponse of 200-300 words, first report what scores you gave to the sample draft based on the rubric and explain why you gave the scores you did.

Use the following structure for your reflection.
- Context score
- Content score
- Organization score
- Language score
- Why I gave this rating

Analytic Rubric from University-Level ESL Course

Criteria	Description	Excellent 10 points	Good 8 points	Fair 7 points	Needs work 6 points
Context	A thesis statement introduces the aspects of the topic discussed in the body of the paper. The Introduction sets the context of the topic and attracts the interest of the audience.				
Content	The supporting points are relevant to each main idea. Content development includes description, details, explanations, and specific examples.				
Organization	Each paragraph has a topic sentence. Each supporting point is linked to the thesis. Ideas within each paragraph are developed logically, from a general statement to specific details. The Conclusion reinforces the thesis idea and leaves the reader thinking about the topic.				
Language	Proofreading and careful editing is done to improve correctness. Problems with grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics are minimal and do not distract the reader.				

Your Evaluation and Reflection

References

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