

First steps towards electronic marking of language assignments

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This article looks briefly at some of the issues surrounding marking and feedback and provides a guide to the possibilities offered by the facilities on most modern word processing packages for electronic marking. For exemplification purposes only, MS Windows 98/Word 2000 are used here.

INTRODUCTION

Students at all levels and of all ages are now being required more and more often to word-process their work. It is but a small step for them to submit their work electronically as an email attachment. Although this can give rise to problems such as issues of access and alteration of students' work, it is argued here that submitting work via email can yield potential benefits, such as electronic marking, which more than outweigh such issues. This applies equally to those who have frequent contact with their teachers and lecturers as well as to those "distant learners" who have very infrequent contact. This article is therefore concerned with exploring the advantages and practicability of electronic marking both for the student and for the FL teacher.

Inextricably bound up with such a discussion is the question of what FL teachers are trying to achieve by marking work and making corrections. Within this context FL teachers need to continually ask themselves why they are making corrections on students' scripts and what the students are likely to gain from the corrections. Are FL teachers providing the right kind of feedback and are the students making full, if any, use of this? At a given moment is our aim to provide formative feedback or a summative mark? Clarifying these issues also facilitates the practicability of marking electronically.

TYPES OF FEEDBACK

Research carried out at the University of Ulster (O'Dochertaigh and Schmidt, 2001: 30) found during interviews with students that they sometimes 'simply take the assessed piece of work, register the mark and put it in the file without reading the comments'. One possible reason for this may be

that by the time they receive the marked work, their minds have moved on and they are already involved in their next assignment. So learners have adopted 'a summative approach to assessment, *even when lecturers take time to use a formative approach*' (italics added).

If our marking and evaluation of a piece of student language work is 'targeted to enhance learning' (Race, 1999) and so is designed to provide constructive information which will enable the learners to improve their performance on subsequent similar work, then the corrections FL teachers make as tutors and the comments and advice they give must take the form of generally applicable error prevention strategies and be positive in intent. Since simple comparison with other students' work is a classification of outcome and not genuinely part of the teaching and learning process, provision of a relative final mark or grade on the piece of work is almost irrelevant to the teaching aims.

During the language learning process it may be better to provide feedback which will encourage and enable students to produce a second draft of the same piece of work (as encouraged in the National Curriculum assessment framework) rather than to embark immediately on a completely new topic and essay in the hope that there will be enough similarity between the tasks for the corrections from the first piece of work to be applied to the second. Put another way, FL teachers may find it more productive to oblige the students to take more notice of the inaccuracies pointed out in their work by handing them responsibility for at least some of the corrections rather than doing everything for them.

In this context, distinguishing between 'mistakes', 'slips' and 'errors' is important and will further increase the advantages of electronic marking. 'Mistakes' may be defined for the student as 'lower level inaccuracies correctable within the present knowledge of the learner at this stage of the course' and 'errors' as 'higher level inaccuracies which are unlikely to be correctable within the

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grammatical, lexical and idiomatic knowledge of the learner at this stage of the course' (Bishop, 2001). Neither 'mistakes' nor 'slips' are easy to spot by learners. Indeed, self-correction of 'mistakes' may only be possible if the learners have also been given a pointer to which area of grammar or syntax is involved. 'Slips' in the form of spelling faults or 'typos' can often, however, simply be underlined by the marker and left to the student to put right, if they have not been picked up by software spell checkers.

Since, by these definitions, 'errors' cannot be self-corrected even when they are pointed out, it falls to the FL teacher to provide the right level of explanatory feedback. Thus, if the feedback provided for 'mistakes' and 'slips' is codified and consists of pointers only, this leaves more time to provide good quality formative feedback for 'errors' without prolonging the time taken by the teacher overall to mark the work.

MARKING ELECTRONICALLY

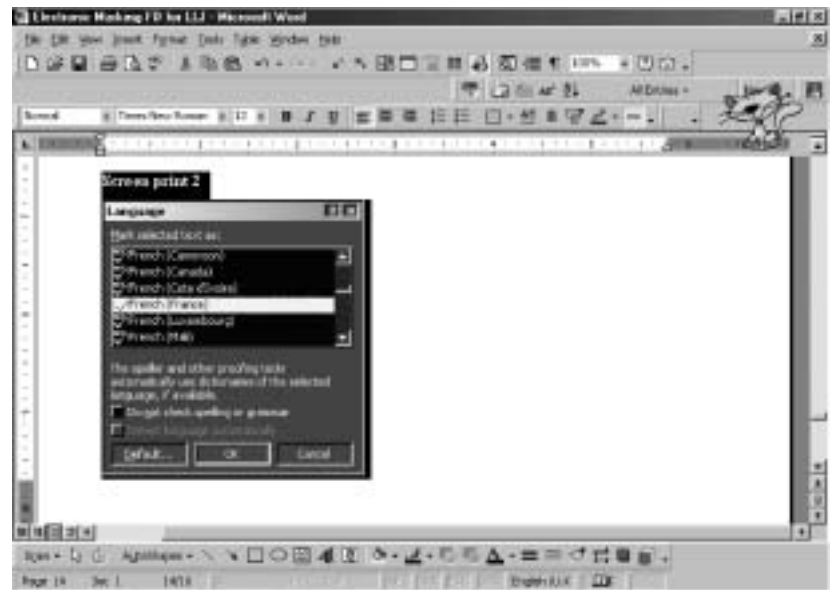
If the concept outlined above of providing two levels of feedback is adopted, then marking electronically becomes feasible since using codes for identifying categories of mistakes may be even quicker to apply by computer than it is to apply to a hard copy. Similarly, the computer provides an opportunity to insert comments which explain 'errors' in a less intrusive way than can be done on hard copy, as is shown below.

Although there are ready-made electronic marking packages now available, it is quite straightforward to construct your own system from the facilities commonly available on your toolbar or amongst the 'buttons'. An advantage of working to your own system is that you can keep it as simple and flexible as possible, adapted to your own needs and priorities, so the examples which follow for the use of the tools are only suggestions. However, to preserve a record of the original submitted work, always make a copy in a new file before starting your marking.

SETTING UP A TOOL BAR

The screenshot 1 shows an example of a Tool bar. In addition to the typical second line, the following 'buttons' have been set up: **superscript**, **subscript**, **underline**, **double underline**, **highlighting**, **insert comment**. These are obtained in the usual way by scrolling down the Add Buttons menu and adding by ticking your selection. Once ticked the feature will then appear on your tool bar as an icon. Other features discussed below but not added permanently to the Tool bar can be accessed by scrolling down from the second line icons as follows: to obtain **Footnotes** and **Auto text**, scroll down from **Insert**; to obtain **Spell Check**, **Word Count**, **Set Language** (see screen print 2 within screen print 1) and **Track Changes**, scroll down from **Tools**. To obtain different colours, scroll down to **Font** from **Format**. Right click on the mouse for **Synonyms and Thesaurus** after highlighting the word.

Screenshot 1



MAKING USE OF THE TOOLS AVAILABLE

1. SUPERSCRIPIT

Superscript can be used to indicate common and oft repeated 'mistakes' and 'slips' by referring to a code which can be distributed beforehand to all students, as in this example:

ac	wrong or missing accent
g	gender mistake
sp	spelling mistake
pp	past participle agreement
ag	other agreements [adj+noun] or article+noun]
vb	verb form mistake [subject+verb or auxiliary+pp]
t	tense
pn	pronoun position
wp	wrong or missing preposition
ww	wrong or inappropriate word used

Many tutors already use code lists of this type for their hard copy marking. The list can be adapted to suit the expectations that tutors have of their students at particular stages of the learning. Simply switch on the **superscript** button on your toolbar and insert the appropriate code letters each time.

Example: le^{ac} meme^{ac} medication^{ac}

2. INSERT COMMENT

For 'errors', where an explanation is provided, the '**Insert comment**' facility is particularly useful. It enables you to indicate the inaccuracy by number and for the advice to be displayed both as a hyperlink and to be printed at the foot of the work when a hard copy is made.

Example: Cette activité je trouve * créative et reposante.

The comment which could appear in the hyperlink in this case might be: "*move this phrase to *. The word order as it stands is better reserved for a spoken register.*"

"using codes for identifying categories of mistakes may be even quicker to apply by computer than it is to apply to a hard copy"

The advantage of **'Insert comment'** is that students can 'hover' on the word with their cursor to make the hyperlinked comment appear immediately above the word(s) highlighted. They can also read the comment in the list at the end of the hard copy if they print off the corrected work using the **'print comment'** facility under **'options'** on the **Print** screen. The advantage over **'tracking'** (see below) or over hard copy correcting is that it leaves the original work cleaner looking (i.e. less 'red ink' or comments in the margins) and easier to read.

Audio comments can be inserted, but this does take up a lot of memory space and increases download time unless both teacher and student have a fast internet connection.

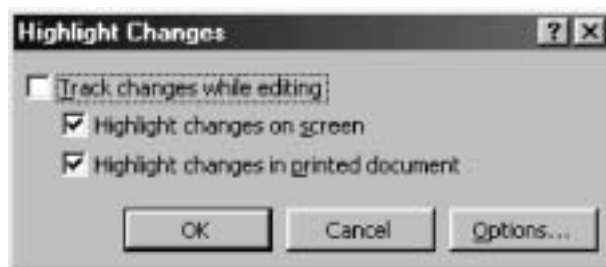
3. FOOTNOTES AND SUBSCRIPT

These can be used for other sets of codes if needed. They might be related to a particular theme. For example if you are encouraging the use of adjectives in a particular piece of work then a **subscript** 'adj' at each missed opportunity would make the point. If you want to make a particular comment about style, then the **footnotes** might be better, especially if you wish to draw attention to a repeated error, since you can insert the same reference number. In this case make sure the **'autonumber'** is turned off so that you can enter the number you want.

If **'Footnotes'** are used to make comments, they might better be reserved for a different and longer, more detailed type of comment, rather than the short comment easily contained in a hyperlink.

4. TRACKING

Screenshot 2



You may prefer to delete inaccuracies and to correct work within the text. Here **'tracking'** comes into its own, since students will easily see what you have changed and what they originally wrote. However, if this is done too often it makes the text hard to read afterwards and may demotivate the students on first sight of their returned work.

5. TICKING

Just as on a hard copy the tutor may wish to tick features of a piece of work this can be easily done on the soft copy, by setting up a ✓ using the symbols list and a **'short cut'** or a **'macro'**.

Showing such positive marks can be very motivating, especially since the other techniques outlined so far have minimised the visual impact of the faults on the page.

Example: J'ai commencé ✓ à ✓ faire mes études ✓ du français ✓ il y a deux ans. ✓

6. UNDERLINING, DOUBLE UNDERLINING AND HIGHLIGHTING

These may also be useful for indicating 'slips' and 'typos' or for other purposes to suit the tutor. Their significance can be added to the code list for the students.

In addition to the above, the following features are useful for markers:

7. SPELL CHECK

This is useful for a final check for missing accents and some of the spelling errors.

8. WORD COUNT

This feature may be useful if you have prescribed a definite length for the piece of work you are correcting and want to do a quick length check on the work submitted.

9. SYNONYMS AND THESAURUS

You may wish to suggest a synonym to a student. One way to provide yourself with a choice is to use the Synonym and/or Thesaurus features provided on your computer. Highlight any word in the usual way in the text you are marking and then **'right click'** on the mouse. Select **Synonyms** from the drop down menu and then **Thesaurus** if need be. Select the word you want and either click **'replace'** or use the tracking to cross through the original and then type in the replacement you have selected.

10. USING COLOUR

If your students have colour printers then judicious use of colour may be another way of highlighting mistakes and errors. It is probably best not to resort to covering the work in a bright red however!

SENDING THE CORRECTED WORK BACK AND KEEPING A COPY

When you are ready to send back the marked work, write a short email message and attach the file of corrected work in the normal way. Before you attach the file it is important to make sure too that the **'print comments'** facility and tracking boxes are activated.

Press the **Options** button (usually in the bottom left hand corner of the Print screen) to obtain the **Include with document** properties.

FINAL ASSESSMENT AND OVERALL FEEDBACK

This article has concentrated mainly on the concept of formative feedback for corrections and on electronic ways of delivering it. It would therefore

**“Footnotes’
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be inconsistent with this philosophy to report back to the student simply by providing a relative final overall mark. Such a mark is usually judged by reference to criteria grid descriptions (content, structure, language accuracy, range etc.) or even to a single overall grade descriptor. Even when these grids are available to the student, they are often couched in language which does not have much meaning for them since the interpretation is related to a subjective judgement of the standard expected of a learner at a particular point in the course.

An alternative way of reporting marks, which is more consistent with the formative aims of the correcting, is to supply 'frequency ratings' (see Bishop, 2001) for different categories of faults. For example, by checking the total number of (self-correctable) 'mistakes' made by students and dividing this into the word count the teacher can analyse the work in the following way:

In this essay the student made one 'mistake' every 12 words.

Similarly:

one 'slip' every 15 words.

one (not self-correctable) 'error' every 22 words.
one correct expression every 5 words.

Such statistical information can be further broken down if required and enable the advice to the student to be very focused. For example, based on the above a teacher might comment:

Potentially excellent work, well judged within your linguistic level, but marred by mistakes and slips which bring the overall mark down. You need to pay more attention to your checking procedures, especially with regard to accents and spelling.

The students will be able to judge in draft two or in a new piece of work how much they have improved in the mistakes and slips categories by comparing their ratings. Further analysis of types of inaccuracy or of positive features (by use of the P) can be made depending on the time available to the teacher, leading to comments such as:

You used adverbs appropriately only once every 25 words. Try to bring in adverbs more frequently in your next piece of work/draft.

"An alternative way of reporting marks ... is to supply 'frequency ratings'"

Example of work marked using some of the techniques outlined above

J'aime aussi faire la cuisine. ✓ En fait on me trouve le plus grand nombre de journées dans la cuisine, au^e fin de l'après-midi, créant^{op} un repas. Mon mari fait bien la cuisine ✓ et le weekend on partage cette activité, ✓ particulièrement^{op} les jours quand on accueille des visiteurs.

J'aime la natation ✓ et j'en fait^{op} presque tous les jours ✓ pendant l'été, mais pendant l'hiver j'ai moins d'énergie. ✓ Nous aimons faire des randonnées ✓ à la campagne^{op} ou au bord de la mer. ✓

De temps en temps ✓ nous allons en France pour passer le weekend. ✓ Nous avons un ami avec une maison à St.Omer et il nous permet d'y rester. Ce temps là^{op} nous aimons explorer le Pas de Calais ou rendre visite à nos amis qui habitent à Tourcoing ✓ près^{op} de Lille.

Je fait^{op} mes études^{op} tous les deux ans ✓ donc l'année prochaine ✓ j'aurai plus de temps de poursuivre d'autres intérêts. Nous venons d'acheter ✓ un nouveau ordinateur et maintenant je peux envoyer des messages ✓ aux amis en utilisant le mail et je peux faire des recherches sur l'Internet. ✓ [187 words]

Comment [G.M.B2]: Page: 12
Anglais: suggest le plus souvent

Deleted: es

Comment [G.M.B3]: Page: 12
Follow the pattern of les jours on le jour op.

Comment [G.M.B4]: Page: 12
the present tense of this verb is accueillir, suggest nous accueillons or nous recevons

Comment [G.M.B5]: Page: 12
Deter: qui a or qui possède or qui est propriétaire d

Comment [G.M.B6]: Page: 12
De more specific: e.g. résidence secondaire

Comment [G.M.B7]: Page: 12
Suggest: Quand nous sommes là

Deleted: s

Comment [G.M.B8]: Page: 12
For people who rarely visit it, for places not visited

Deleted: visites

Comment [G.M.B9]: Page: 12
This adjective changes to nouvel before the vowel in a following masculine noun

Deleted: les

Comment [G.M.B10]: Page: 12
suggest à nos amis or à des amis

“the main gain for the FL teacher and the students will be the speed of turnaround between production and feedback”

CONCLUSION

Although much of the above can equally well be achieved on hard copy in the traditional way, some features, such as leaving the original in a much ‘cleaner’ state and the ease with which the ‘ratings’ can be calculated, are advantages provided by the technology. In addition, the main gain for the FL teacher and the students will be the speed of turnaround between production and feedback. The impact on the students of such rapid feedback may lead to them taking more notice of the lessons to be learned. More research is needed to compare the benefits, if any, of speedy feedback over any diminution of its effectiveness for learners which delay might lead to. Finally, the student can work directly on the annotated draft and ultimately produce a near perfect one which is a good boost to any learner’s morale and motivation.

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