Case Study 3: Ipsative Feedback at the University of Westminster

Mansfield, K. and Paterson, R.

Ipsative feedback compares a student's current performance to any previous performance(s) and encourages students to achieve their personal best (Hughes 2017). At the University of Westminster (UOW), we previously found that when receiving feedback from lecturers on written assignments, students often did not fully comprehend the feedback, felt disheartened or simply did not read it. According to Hounsell (1987:117) "...[if] feedback fails to connect, it comes to be viewed as insignificant or invalid, and so is not given considered attention. At the same time the activity within which it is offered is seen increasingly as unrewarding". Therefore, if students do not understand the discourse or language of their feedback, they are in danger of becoming disengaged from learning. With this emotional impact of negative feedback in mind, we wanted to readdress the type of feedback given to our students.

There are numerous principles of good formative assessment. According to Reap (2010), good formative assessment can: clarify what good performance is, help learners self-correct, have a positive impact on learning, help learners reflect on their performance, encourage dialogue around learning and boost motivational beliefs and self-esteem. Giving good feedback can encourage the learner to act on areas of weakness and create a self-directed strategy for development and also aid the learner to self-regulate their own learning. With Reap's (2010) principles in mind, we decided to change the way we give our student's feedback on their written assignments. We realised how important it is to adjust the language we use when giving feedback and to involve the student in a dialogue about their learning.

Background to the research

Our research was carried out during the 2017-2018 academic year on the Academic Language for Disciplinary Study (ALDS) 4 module. ALDS 4 is an elective module taken by undergraduate students starting their studies at the university. The module is typically chosen by students that recognise they have language difficulties or who feel they need help with their academic writing, reading and/or presentation skills. In this module there are three assessments: two written and one oral. For both written assignments, students are given the opportunity to submit a 1st draft to their tutor and then when submitting their final submission, they are asked to complete a Coversheet. Our research focuses on the first assessment (self-reflection essay) and the new procedure of the 1st draft and coversheet.

A total of 71% of the students (n=68) submitted a draft of Assessment 1. The general process for all draft written work is as following: the students email their tutor a copy by a set deadline, the tutor then gives feedback throughout the body of the text and then a general comment at the end. This year we paid particular attention to the language used throughout the whole feedback process. Instead of being direct, demanding and what some might conceive as rude by saying "wrong word – confusing", "Don't understand" or "Re-write", ways in which the student could improve were suggested. We did not correct as we had done previously, but we forced the students to review their errors and consider why and how they could improve them.

Here are some of the examples of the feedback given throughout the main body:

Example 1

"This paragraph is *a bit* confusing – *I'm not sure* what the main point is" and then later in the essay "This is a *much better* paragraph – much easier to follow your point"

Example 2

"This sentence is too long – *consider* breaking it up into two or three shorter ones"

Example 3

"*Great word, but* a little old-fashioned. It's not really commonly used"

Example 4

"This isn't really adding much *but you could* add WHY (in general) it is important then in the rest of your writing you add some evidence"

From the examples above, it is important to note that more tentative language is used (example 1), more suggestions are made (examples 2 & 4) and praise is given to students who show ……. (example 3). Overall, the feedback is more positive as it avoids negative imperatives and incorporates modal verbs to suggest possible changes.

The general comment at the end of the essay gives the student an indication of how they have achieved and also where necessary, asks the student to engage with the grade related criteria / assignment task. Here are some examples of end of essay feedback:

Example 1

This is a good reflection. Plenty of ideas and personal reflections. Well done - just take care with your grammar.

Example 2

What you write is good, but have you followed the guidelines in terms of the criteria? (together with this was a copy of the criteria with the parts the student was missing highlighted)

The students with these general comments then have an idea of what it is they have to do to improve.

The students have a few weeks to make any necessary changes / improvements before submitting their final essay submission. Together with their essay, students are asked to complete a coversheet which contains a series of questions asking the student to enter into a dialogue with their tutor. The coversheet asks those students that submitted a draft to reflect on the key points their tutor selected as areas of improvement in their formative essay, and to state the action they took to respond to these areas. It asks the students to consider what they felt they did well and what areas they still think they need to improve. Finally, it asks student if they would like any further feedback on their final submission and if they do, what kind of feedback they request.

The aim of coversheet is to get students to engage with feedback and see how they responded to the areas suggested for improvement in their first draft. The coversheet asks

the student to think about what they did, how they have improved and what they still have to improve in the future. The coversheet is therefore unique to each student and the feedback they ask for is tailored to their needs.

Findings

We found that students that submitted a 1st draft gained on average a 6% increase (59 vs 65) in their grade. This is a correlation not causation. It could be that students that were more engaged from the beginning are more likely to get a good mark. It could also be that the stronger, more organised students are more likely to submit a first draft than the less able, less organised. There is however a link between submitting a first draft and getting some initial feedback and getting a higher grade. We believe however that feedback of some type is crucial to gaining a higher grade and that some types of feedback are more effective than others. Providing more encouraging feedback motivates students, and therefore, teachers need to aim for just the right type of feedback and the right amount.

Here are our practical considerations for all modules regarding feedback:

❑   Important to explicitly tell students the aims of feedback

❑   Share your assumptions regarding feedback

❑   Feedback rationale should be introduced as part of step-by-step guidance in coursework

❑   Encourage a dialogic approach in giving feedback

❑   Incorporate more ipsative feedback

❑   Devise strategies to engage weaker students

References

Hounsell, D. (1987). *Essay writing and the quality of feedback. In Student learning: research in education and cognitive psychology*, Edited by: Richardson, J., Eysenck, M. and Piper, D. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Hughes, G. (2017). *Ipsative Assessment and Personal Learning Gain: Exploring International Case Studies*.London: Palgrave Macmillan

Re-engineering Assessment Practices in Higher Education (Reap) (2010) [online] Available at: https://www.reap.ac.uk/ [Accessed 17 May 2018]