The use of tutor feedback on draft essays: exploring the potential to develop students' academic writing and subject knowledge

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Providing feedback on drafts of student essays is an accepted means of enacting a social-constructivist approach to assessment, aligning with current views on the value of formative feedback and assessment *for* learning (AFL). However, the use of this process as a means of improving not only content but also students' academic writing skills has not been widely studied despite a widespread perception that there is scope for intervention. This article explores the developmental potential of a drafting/tutor feedback/redrafting process, with a particular focus on writing skills, on a first-year undergraduate module at a British University. Impact on learning is evaluated via essay data and students' perceptions. The findings of this study suggest that feedback is acted on and that students regard timely, detailed and awareness-raising comments with regard to both content and writing skills as highly developmental. Also noteworthy, however, are the students' perceptions that redrafting is cognitively challenging and time-consuming. There is also evidence suggesting that a high quantity of feedback may have a detrimental impact on less-academically confident students. Questions are raised regarding the use of tutor reformulation and the sustainability of AFL. Finally, some key indicators for improved future practice are presented.

Keywords: essays; drafting; feedback; formative assessment; assessment for learning; academic writing development

Introduction

For those involved in UK higher education, there exists an overwhelming sense of awareness, fueled in part by the publication of National Student Survey results, that a critical look at assessment is a prerequisite for ensuring a quality student experience. According to Gibbs and Simpson (2004, 22) 'there is more leverage to improve teaching through changing assessment than there is in changing anything else.' This ethos has generated important changes in both policy and practice.

Traditional models of assessment, in which students were viewed as passive recipients in the development and communication of standards and marking criteria, are being eschewed in favour of social-constructivist and 'cultivated' community of practice approaches (O'Donovan et al. 2008). In these more recent approaches, students are viewed as active participants who learn through tasks designed to engage them with what is now widely accepted as 'tacit' assessment knowledge and to develop their understanding of what is expected of them (Ibid).

Within this shifting assessment landscape, the terms assessment *of*, *for* and *as* learning have come to dominate. Educators are acutely aware of the need to design assessment which is not only fit for purpose in terms of its alignment with learning outcomes but which also balances the judgmental, summative type characterized by the 'of' preposition with the on-going, formative type, characterized by the 'for', and with the co-constructed, peer-and self-evaluated type characterized by the 'as' and increasingly seen as important for preparing students for life-long learning (Dearing 1997; Dochy et al. 1999; Boud 2000).

There is considerable agreement in the sector that a social-constructivist approach to assessment, which advocates making criteria explicit, discussing and marking exemplars and getting students to engage with feedback in an effort to induct

students into their subject community, is heading in the right direction in terms of improved assessment practice. Similarly, providing formative feedback at the drafting stage of essay writing and getting students to incorporate this feedback in subsequent drafts is widely regarded as an accepted means of enacting a social-constructivist approach and facilitating assessment *for* learning (Sadler 1983; Boud 2000; Taras 2002).

The approach outlined above shaped the assessment practices on a first year undergraduate module in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) co-taught by this author and reported on within this paper. Whilst the particular assessment practice in focus here is not unique, i.e. an essay drafting/tutor feedback/student redrafting process, the dual purpose to which it was put is arguably more innovative. On this module for trainee English language teachers, formative feedback on draft essays was used in a bid to improve not only the students' subject knowledge but also, and in this context arguably of equal importance, their academic writing skills. The use of this process for the latter purpose in particular has not been widely studied either within an English language teaching context or within a more general initial teacher education context. This seems to be a crucial oversight given a widespread perception that students' writing would benefit from focused attention – a perception underpinned by research commissioned by The Royal Literary Fund (2006) which calls for urgent action with regard to students' writing and the provision of writing skills development at British universities.

This paper reports findings gathered from an action research project exploring the developmental potential of a drafting/feedback/redrafting process, with a particular focus on writing skills. Data, in the form of first and second draft student essays, as well as students' subjective experiences of the process collected via questionnaires, were

analyzed in order to evaluate the impact of the process on learning. In the light of the findings and current literature on assessment in HE, questions are raised about the value of the process in terms of sustainable AFL and its impact on weaker student writers. Finally, some key indicators for improved future practice are presented.

Context and rationale of assessment practice

The research evaluated an essay-based coursework assessment on a first year undergraduate module entitled The Principles and Practice of TESOL. Taught one evening a week over ten weeks, this part-time module is attended by a mix of university staff and members of the local community, as well as home and international students studying on a range of programmes. The rubric for the 2,250 word essay asked students to consider 'proficiency' in the skill of speaking, reading or listening and then provide a rationale for a lesson plan based on one of those skills.

The desire to induct the students into the academic community, to help them understand the discourse practices and conventions that exist within their subject discipline (Northedge 2003) was an important pedagogical factor in the decision to provide tutor rather than peer feedback at the draft stage. We recognize that within the teacher-learner relationship the balance of power weighed heavily in our favour as the 'experts', but given the diverse educational backgrounds of the students, we could not guarantee that they had ever been exposed to academic writing within our subject area. Moreover, at such an early stage in their teacher training trajectory, we did not feel that they possessed enough linguistic knowledge nor metalanguage to comment in a wholly productive way on their own or their peers' work.

Providing formative feedback

Tutor feedback took the form of written comments (general before more detailed) on both content and academic writing, in particular organization, academic language, style and referencing. Sometimes this constituted two pages of feedback and sometimes it constituted upwards of four pages of feedback. A brief review of the literature reveals that many aspects of our feedback would be considered 'good practice', whilst a few others might be regarded as more controversial.

On the positive side, our comments are timely, typed, personal, explicit, detailed, explanatory and corrective rather than generic (Falchikov 1995; Higgins et al. 2002; Weaver 2006; Walker 2008; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Fundamentally, our aim in both our content and language comments is to be developmental (Hyatt 2005); in other words, they enable the students to produce an improved version of their work. Thus, in terms of content and organization comments, they look like this: '*why not provide an example here to illustrate your point?*' and '*consider moving this point up to the end of paragraph 4 as it relates to the same topic and would create an ideal bridge into paragraph 5.*' And, in terms of language comments, and as a direct result of our English language teaching background, they look like this: '*this is a comma splice; i.e. you've joined two sentences with a comma. Use a semi-colon (;), a conjunction (e.g. but) or a full stop instead*' and '*this could be expressed more clearly; have you considered rephrasing it this way*?' followed by a partial reformulation of an extract from the student's original text.

Reformulation is a common correction strategy used in English language teaching (ELT) to help students notice the difference between their language use and a native speaker's. It involves a native speaker turning non-native prose into more idiomatic and natural English, without changing the meaning. Reformulation in ELT

has been researched extensively over the years (Allwright et al. 1988; Thornbury 1997; Adams 2003; Tocalli-Beller and Swain 2005) and most recent research shows that comparing drafts to reformulated versions and noticing appropriate and plentiful sources of language can lead to improved writing performance (Yang and Zhang 2010). We were of the opinion that a similar strategy could work with students who are new to their academic community of practice. We felt that seeing 'expert' models and comparing these with their own writing could be beneficial in helping students first of all notice the existence of a 'gap' (Ramprasand 1983; see also Schmidt and Frota 1986), and, second of all, help them fill it by asking them to produce a version that resonates more coherently with current discourse practices existing within and shaping our subject area. Hence, we used reformulation on this first-year module not just with non-native speakers but also with native speakers, where appropriate.

The very nature of our feedback, i.e. reformulated models, is also what makes it contentious. Our comments could be regarded as too detailed, too prescriptive, not allowing for alternative repertoires or, if taken out of the subject-specific context in which they were produced, downright condescending, especially for native speakers. Issues of ownership, identity and, ultimately, power relationships are also worthy of concern, with questions raised as to whether reformulation challenges the student writer's identity, drowns their own voice and ultimately denies him/her a sense of ownership of their work. One principle of good feedback as identified by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006, 3) is that it 'encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem'. The question follows, then, does our feedback have this effect or the opposite?

Other questions surface with regard to the type of learning that we may or may not be facilitating. Davies and Ecclestone (2008, 73) write about two types of AFL – that which operates in the spirit, coined 'sustainable' and that which operates in the

letter, coined 'instrumental'. They argue that 'teacher-centered formative techniques [used] in order to transmit knowledge and skills' operate in the latter. It could be argued that providing too much detail, too much corrective advice and offering reformulations in the way that we do simply creates learned dependence (Yorke 2003; Boud 1995) and does not provide students with the tools to monitor and take charge of their own learning.

Finally, the quantity of feedback provided is also contestable. There is evidence in the literature to suggest that a large amount of feedback can be seen as overwhelming (Brockbank and McGill 1998). In a study conducted by Lilly et al. (2010, 34), students' perceptions were that 'too much was no better than too little'. They wanted feedback to be concise, something that we can never claim ours to be. Whilst we aim not to be verbose, we do explain issues and/or point students in the direction of further reading and this does make our feedback lengthy. It is difficult to reconcile this seemingly unresolved contradiction in the literature between the type of detailed, explanatory comments which act as signifiers of 'good' feedback and which, according to Hyatt (2005), students desire and the sheer quantity amassed by such comments and largely viewed as unhelpful.

Weighting and marking

The essay was weighted 70% first draft and 30% second draft. The criteria used to mark the first draft were: essay content and organization 75% and academic style (including language and referencing) 25%. The criteria used to mark the second draft were based solely on the student's response to the feedback, such that a full response to feedback was worth up to 30%, a satisfactory response to feedback was worth up to 20%, a partial response to feedback was worth up to 10% and a nil response to feedback was

worth 0%. Students could opt out of the redrafting process and knew that doing so would result in their first draft mark out of 70 becoming their final mark out of 100. They were also assured that they would not be penalized for disagreeing with and/or choosing not to incorporate aspects of their tutor's advice provided they justified their decisions on a cover sheet.

Whilst we recognize the arguments put forward by Wiliam (2000) about the muddying of formative waters with a summative draft stage and by Taras (2002, 507) that the appearance of a grade 'interferes with the 'assimilation and understanding' of the feedback, we viewed our second draft weighting and marking scheme as a potentially innovative way of both managing the tutors' workload and incentivizing the students.

Second draft marking could be done fairly quickly and relatively easily given that our focus was on the student's response to feedback *only* and not on any of the issues addressed in the first draft, meaning that we were not re-marking the entire essay. This decision was influenced not only by research literature (Covic and Jones 2008) which suggested that students did not take seriously or did not hand in drafts which were not awarded a mark, but also by our own past experiences using a purely formative approach to first draft essays, which we were convinced had taken us longer to provide feedback on than it had taken the students to write. Previous research on student instrumentality and strategic learning (Elton and Laurillard 1979; Swann and Arthurs 1998; Rust 2002) supports the claim that a mark motivates. For our student participants, all of whom take this module as an add-on to their full-time studies and/or jobs, being a strategic learner may not be a matter of choice but of necessity. Although it would be completely understandable if they handed in a mediocre first draft or no first draft at all, we wanted to avoid this scenario for the reasons that it would not meet the

multiple aims of the assessment and would, therefore, present a real missed opportunity for learning.

Research Method

Cycles of action research were used over two years with two cohorts of students. The evaluation of our assessment process constituted the observation phase of the action research cycle and focused on those issues identified as contentious in the previous section. Thus, the main aims were: to ascertain students' perceptions of the process and hopefully unearth reflections on issues of ownership and motivation in relation to the nature and quantity of tutor feedback; to assess the impact of our process on students' learning and the type of learning that was happening, i.e. sustainable versus instrumental; and to improve our feed-forward approach to essay-based assessment.

Once ethical clearance was obtained, students were approached and all of those taking the TESOL module in the academic years 2008/09 and 2009/10 agreed to participate (n=32). The first cohort consisted of 17 participants and the second cohort consisted of 15 participants.

First and second draft essays were compared to determine the extent to which feedback was taken up and the impact take-up had on students' marks. Questionnaires were also used to garner students' perceptions of the process. In 2008/09 two questionnaires were given – one before students had written the first draft and one after students had received feedback on their second and final draft. In 2009/10, it was decided that another questionnaire was needed to elicit students' views on first draft tutor feedback, and, as a result 3 questionnaires were given. From a total of five questionnaires, there were 54 returns (22 from the first cohort, consisting of 17 Q1 and 5 Q2 and 32 from the second cohort, consisting of 15 Q1, 11 Q2 and 6 Q3). The low

response rate on the final questionnaire for both groups can be attributed to a combination of factors, including increased student workload at the end of term, student absenteeism and student withdrawal from the module.

The questionnaires consisted predominantly of open-ended questions asking for students' perspectives on their own writing skills, our assessment process and our feedback. The decision to use questionnaires was a practical one; they could be completed fairly quickly and they were portable. The drawbacks were the dwindling response rate near the end of term and, connected to this, the inability to follow up, via interviews, interesting issues which had arisen in questionnaire responses due to the students' end of term dispersal.

Many of the criticisms aimed at action research apply to this project as well. This was a small-scale study, conducted with limited numbers of participants and within the confines of one module, making it impossible and imprudent to generalize the results. A further drawback of this particular research stems from the part-time nature of the course from which the data is drawn. This one essay (draft and re-draft) is the only evidence of the students' writing we see, which means we cannot comment on whether our process leads to improved essay writing in future assignments either in our own subject area or others. Finally, student responses are likely to be influenced by the dynamics of the tutor-student relationships (Sutton and Gill 2010, 8), resulting in the possibility of students responding more positively than they would if the researcher were not also the one teaching the students and marking their work.

Analysis of the questionnaire data was based partly on pre-determined themes identified in the literature (i.e. sustainable vs. instrumental AFL, motivation and ownership) and on which we wanted to reflect critically with regard to our practice and partly on an inductive approach, drawing on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967),

which involved cycling back and forth between data and theory until no new patterns emerged.

Findings

Essay Data

Take-up and Marks

28 out of 32 students completed the assessment process. The four students who did not complete ended up withdrawing from the module altogether for reasons unrelated to this particular assessment. Out of the 28 students who re-drafted, 23 improved upon their first draft mark, 1 equaled his first draft mark and 4 received lower marks. The biggest improvement was an increase of 10 marks from first to second draft. The average overall improvement was 5.2 marks. Although conclusions from such a small-scale study must remain tentative, there is positive evidence for the take-up and use of feedback, leading to improved versions of the students' work and strengthening the case for the provision of feedback at an early stage (c.f. Handley and Williams 2011).

Where marks decreased or improved only marginally, it was due to students giving only cursory attention to feedback, in other words picking and choosing which advice to attend to, rather than addressing it in a thorough way. This may be a strategic approach, necessitated by other academic and non-academic pressures on their time and eased by the knowledge that their first draft mark was 'good enough' or it may be because some advice was cognitively less challenging and easier to put right than other advice. For example, almost all of the students attended to and showed improvement in the language and organization categories whereas issues of content, such as the application of theory and explanation of underlying principles, was more hit and miss in terms of treatment. Evidence from the questionnaire data does not lead us to believe that it was a result of the students' lack of understanding of our feedback. According to this

data, students perceived tutor feedback to be *'detailed', 'helpful', 'explicit', 'clear',* *'thorough', 'fair'* and *'constructive'*.

Questionnaire Data

A number of interesting themes emerged from the questionnaire data and are presented below.

A positive process

The general tone of the students' responses was overwhelmingly positive, with students appreciating the tutors' efforts and the opportunity to get timely feedback:

> Brilliant! The feedback is very useful. Almost like instant feedback.

> Extremely beneficial as it allows you to see where you can improve.

> I think it's a good idea because you know if you're heading in the right direction with the essay before you hand in the finished product.

> I feel it is a good idea. I like to know what I have done well and where I can improve. I often receive feedback but don't get chance to act upon it and improve my mark! I think it will make me feel happier with my work, although it's extra work.

Obviously for the student above 'extra' work is tolerable as long as it results in better marks, a sentiment echoed by another student:

> More work in one way but could lead to better final marks so beneficial in the long run.

In fact, and unsurprisingly, bettering marks was a theme expressed by a number of other students:

> Being able to redraft my essay was a fantastic opportunity. I have never been given this opportunity before and I feel it will help to improve my marks.

> I feel this is a good way to do an essay as often I have received a mark and by the feedback given it would not have taken much to bring my mark up.

> This will help me to improve the final grade.

Yet, for other students, the value of the process was expressed in terms of the opportunity to learn and reflect:

> I think it is a good way to learn and reflect on what I have written.

> This way I will have to reflect on it and aim and try to improve it by working on it again.

> It will be huge work. But it will be a good learning process.

All in all, then, the feed-forward approach to essay-based assessment is perceived to be a positive one by the students but for varying reasons. Whilst many indeed are interested in achieving better marks, some want a measure of their progress, others want timely reassurance and yet others express a desire to learn for the sake of learning.

Developmental Potential

In terms of the utility of this approach in developing students' writing skills, two distinct advantages emerge from the data: heightening students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and giving them the opportunity or possibly the incentive (or both) to address the latter.

Heightening Awareness

The data point to an improved metacognitive awareness, including an increased understanding of where to concentrate future efforts, as evidenced by the following quotes from the same student:

> This has come as one of the biggest surprises to me as I thought that my grammar, punctuation and spelling were quite good, but obviously not, as I scored the lowest in this section. This is now a personal aim to improve my punctuation, especially if I am to teach it!

> Finally, I went back through my final draft checking the grammatical and punctuation errors to make sure that I had not made the same mistakes again.

When asked to think about the impact of the feedback on their academic writing beyond this particular assignment, many students were able to extrapolate key areas for improvement, suggesting that tutor feedback has the potential to impact on learning and future writing performance.

> I think feedback shows that I need to express myself more clearly.

> I definitely need to improve my referencing.

> I learnt to remember to make notes about which bits of reading have given me which bits of information and reference them properly, to think about the order in which I talk about things, and maintain that order throughout the essay and to check where my apostrophes are!

Noticing and Attending to Problems

Giving the students the opportunity to revisit their work and to notice and address problematic issues in their writing that may have remained unnoticed or possibly noticed but never remedied, is also perceived by many of the students as beneficial and as contributing towards their learning:

> Going back over the essay, I have seen myself the areas which need improving.

> Being given this second chance to read over things really helped, as you don't always spot things first time.

> There were aspects of my essay which I thought were fine but brought to my attention could have been written better.

The comment below points to clear benefits, for one student at least, of providing feedback at the stage where it can be used in a targeted and purposeful way:

> Even though I always read feedback and refer back to it frequently, it's not the same as actually having to re-do the task. I'm sure I will understand and remember the feedback and the topic much much better as a result.

Overwhelming and potentially threatening

Four students commented negatively on the quantity of feedback:

> It can be challenging to incorporate ALL the feedback.

> Maybe a little less on the feedback…draw out a few major points to focus on.

There are a lot of suggestions in making the second draft!

Whilst the quality of feedback was, as mentioned above and reiterated below, considered to be high, the sheer volume of feedback does appear to have a detrimental impact, especially on one student.

> I must admit that I found the feedback great but the expectation to incorporate all of it into the essay very worrying.

> Scared! Overwhelmed! There is so much to change I am worried that I will lose my voice in it.

This was a student who disclosed in her responses to our first questionnaire a lack of confidence in her subject knowledge and in her academic writing skills. Based on her academic performance throughout our three modules, we would consider her to be a relatively weaker student/writer. She goes on to comment on the nature of the feedback:

> …it seemed like we were just regurgitating what the tutors wanted us to say rather than putting our own words. I felt as if the essay had none of my own words by the end of it!

In contrast to this, however, is the sentiment expressed by an academically confident and capable student writer:

> I did wonder at the beginning of the process, whether it would just end up with a class writing exactly the same essay, i.e. you would be producing little clones of yourself, but I now feel that there is still plenty of 'individualism' that remains in the 2nd draft.

Time-consuming and cognitively challenging

A recurring them in the data is the time-consuming nature of redrafting and it seems logical that this theme should coincide with perceptions of redrafting being arduous:

> I think it has taken longer to redraft this essay than write it first time round!

> The only problem I have had is just the amount of time that I have had to spend.

> Whilst I appreciated the benefits of this process, I think if I was doing a degree and this process was used for every essay I did in the three years, I might find it a bit taxing!

> Parts of this were easy (e.g. typos, grammar errors etc.). Other parts were quite hard, like the need to re-arrange the order of some of the paragraphs. I had to read and re-read your comments and my essay and concentrate on what was needed.

> It's a hard thing to do but really worthwhile.

What is interesting, however, are students' perceptions about redrafting stretching their cognitive capacities and pushing them towards a deeper understanding of the issues presented in the feedback:

> It requires a bit of thinking and integrating. It requires the understanding of the feedback and additional thinking on our own.

> It was good to be forced to comprehend and utilize the feedback. With a normal process, I would have just read the feedback and thought 'oh yes I understand what she's saying there' and that would be it. But the fact that I found incorporating the FB into the second draft quite hard shows that it requires a deeper level of understanding.

Especially noteworthy here is the acknowledgement of one student that the feed-forward process challenges her in ways that a typical feedback approach would not.

Discussion

The fact that students view the process as positive, despite the amount of time and effort involved is perhaps not all that surprising in the light of Sutton and Gill's (2010, 8) observation that 'one of the signifiers of tutor care is the creation of bespoke feedback'. The students on this module are getting pages of detailed feedback that may indicate to them an unprecedented level of tutor care and involvement in their development. With the consumerism of HE, students may come to expect a value for money approach to feedback (Higgins et al. 2002); the irony is that with resources being stretched to the limit, this level of feedback is certain to become unsustainable (c.f. Wingate et al. 2011).

For this reason, as well as for the reasons that some students perceive the quantity of feedback to be overwhelming and the redrafting to place a large burden on

their time, it would make sense to heed the advice of Lunsford (1997) and Nicol and Macfarlane Dick (2006) and limit the feedback. We could, for example, choose to comment on only 5 content-related items and a similar number of academic writing issues. Or, better yet, in terms of fostering sustainable AFL vis-à-vis increasing student autonomy by getting them to become self-assessors, we could get the students to decide where our efforts should lie. Although this practical and pedagogical solution might bring us closer to a more sustainable AFL, it is not wholly satisfactory in terms of fulfilling our aims of developing students' writing, as it is conceivable that many linguistic, stylistic and more general convention errors would go unnoticed by the students and remain unnoticed throughout their academic career and even beyond.

Whilst many would view the systematic correction of errors and the enacting of tutor reformulations as a 'mechanistic' approach to learning (Marton and Saljo 1997 cited in Norton 2004, 689), contributing to an instrumental version of AFL, it could be argued that some version of this has a place, especially on teacher training programmes, with students who will one day have to help their students 'express themselves correctly and appropriately' (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency) across the curriculum. Ecclestone (2006, 13) writes that 'instrumental learning is an important first step in building confidence and progressing to deeper forms of engagement'. It seems reasonable to suggest that essay feedback, which involves students in noticing - language, style, referencing, discourse - and addressing these issues in a re-draft is a prerequisite for a more sustainable AFL, for without an early focus on linguistic form and appropriate discourse practices, students may have no foundation on which to develop their language use and their writing skills and on which to make comparisons between future and past performances. It might also follow that making comparisons

between past and future work would be aided by an increased metacognitive awareness, as evidenced in the data.

The meaning making that comes from reading and interpreting tutor feedback and the cognitively challenging nature of incorporating feedback is where a feed-forward approach has good potential to contribute to a more sustainable version of AFL. The data illustrate that students are developing 'both subject knowledge and insights into the learning process through deep engagement with feedback…' (Davies and Ecclestone 2008, 72). Whilst both a typical feedback and a feed-forward approach start with students constructing meaning from their reading of feedback, the feed-forward approach involves the students in making decisions on how feedback relates to their own understanding and on ways to use the feedback, something which cannot be guaranteed with a typical feedback approach. This, combined with actually *doing it* rather than just thinking about it, is what makes the approach valuable in terms of its developmental potential for both subject content and academic writing skills.

The cognitively challenging nature of re-drafting is also reported on by Niven and Meyer (2007, 18), although here framed in negative terms, as their findings suggested that feedback which is not specific enough, which does not point students in the direction of their next step, can lead to confusion and frustration. Our data suggest that with the right type of feedback, it is possible to stretch cognitive dimensions in positive ways and push students towards deeper levels of understanding. The extent to which feedback and redrafting can serve these purposes is certainly worthy of further investigation perhaps using think-aloud-protocols during students' reading and incorporation of feedback.

Whilst the evidence from the stronger and weaker writer about perceived individualism and ownership is intriguing in that it appears contradictory, it is also

cautionary. The message from the weaker writer is that we have appropriated her text and denied her of her own voice. A comparison of the feedback given to both of these students does not point to significant differences in terms of quantity, clarity or level of instruction. However, there are clear points of divergence with regard to two aspects of the feedback – the use of praise and the use of hedging or, to use Lea and Street's (1998) terminology, 'mitigated modality'. Whereas we have responded to the stronger student's writing with repeated acknowledgements of her efforts and of the knowledge and skills she demonstrates in her writing, there is less of this in evidence in the feedback to the weaker student/writer, which we know can lead to feelings of insecurity not only about one's writing, but also about oneself as a student and as a human being (Ivanic et al. 2000). There is also less hedging in the feedback provided to the weaker student/writer. So, where the stronger student/writer gets 'I wonder if you want to …' and 'I think it might be a good idea to…', the weaker student/writer gets 'Leave out this point' and 'Now mention this…', thereby transforming the function of the feedback from 'advising' to 'commanding' and no doubt reinforcing the authoritative position of the tutor in the tutor-student relationship.

The extent to which these differences in the provision of our feedback account for the two divergent perceptions conveyed in the data is unclear; it seems just as likely that the weaker writer's comments are a reaction to the use of reformulation, another technique which may emphasize the power imbalance between tutor and student. Rather than de-mystifying academic writing and inducting those on the periphery into our community of practice, it seems highly plausible that we are making the process and practices that exist within it even more inaccessible by giving these students the impression that their words are not good enough.

Whatever the reason or, more likely, reasons for the two different perspectives, the data have provided substantial food for thought in terms of good practice, including the need to: monitor closely the tone taken with weaker writers; reflect regularly on the type of student-tutor relationship being created and; work ultimately towards a more inclusive assessment practice – one which builds on the understanding that effective formative assessment depends on students becoming self-assessors (Tanner and Jones 2003).

With this important criterion in mind, two immediate options for improving practice present themselves. The first involves students marking their second draft, ideally in collaboration with a peer with whom they could openly discuss, question and, crucially challenge tutor feedback and negotiate a mark that took into account important decisions about the prioritization of feedback, thereby acknowledging and giving credit to learners who exercise autonomy out of choice or, equally valid especially in today's economic climate, out of necessity. The second involves students marking a piece of academic writing from an English language learner as a final step in the process. This would allow for the freer application of new knowledge and would help to put ownership back into the hands of the students. Such a task would also serve as a positive and authentic measure of the students' own learning.

Conclusion

If faculties and departments are looking for ways to develop their students' academic writing whilst enabling assessment for learning then embedding the provision into first year programmes through the use of a first draft/tutor feedback/redraft process is one way of doing it. This research, although limited in both size and scope, has illustrated that detailed, developmental feedback from the tutor has the potential to heighten

students' metacognitive awareness and help them to develop an understanding of what is considered accurate and appropriate language within their subject discipline, while re-drafting can stretch their cognitive capacities, pushing them towards a deeper understanding of the subject content and the feedback itself. The drawbacks are the time-consuming and potentially costly nature of such a process. If this approach, or a version thereof, is considered worthwhile, then discussions about time, costs and workloads will be important but may become overshadowed by debates about who might be best placed to provide the feedback – subject tutor, academic writing specialist or both. Regardless of the exact form of the provision and who is involved with it, a key indicator of success will be the extent to which weaker writers feel their voices are valued.

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