

Marking and Feedback

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Aim

To discover what makes formative marking an effective learning tool, by investigating the patterns of teachers' feedback and children's perceptions of that feedback.

Dimensions of this Case Study

The nature of feedback comments, both communicated and received, were studied in eight classes across the subject and age range in an 11-18 comprehensive school.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- It was found useful to categorise comments made by teachers when marking work as *organisational, encouraging, constructive, challenging* and *'think'* comments.
- The majority of written comments reflected work back to pupils to encourage them to think again.
- One-quarter of written comments were categorised as constructive or challenging.
- A large proportion of written comments related to aspects other than the stated learning objectives of the task.
- Pupils recalled about one-third of the written comments accurately.
- Pupils recalled proportionately more of the 'constructive' feedback and more of the feedback relating to the learning objectives.
- The proportion of feedback, which is constructive and relates to objectives, is greater in oral feedback than written.
- As more lengthy oral feedback is given, less of the earlier comments are retained.
- Individual verbal feedback, as opposed to whole class feedback, improves the recollection of advice given.

Background

When teachers set written tasks and mark their pupils' responses, a dialogue is set up between teacher and learner from which both sides have much to gain. Formative marking feedback should help learners to improve, increase pupil motivation and inform teachers.

Much has been published about how to grade pupils' work but relatively little is written – except in passing – about formative response.

Most, if not all, teachers mark and give feedback on pupils' written work without guidance or training in how to do so. Researchers have established that formative marking helps pupils, but what makes it effective remains elusive.

This project investigated the nature of the feedback comments communicated and received during marking of a task. By carrying out 8 case studies across the subjects and age groups in an 11-18 comprehensive school, the project explored the comment teachers fed back on written work and investigated what pupils made of it.

The data for the studies came from scrutiny of feedback comments, lesson observations, discussions with pupils, and interviews with teachers.

The Findings

Types of feedback comment

Five types of written comments were identified. For the first three types, official published sources – TTA, OFSTED and HMI reports – indicate that, in order to help children improve, feedback should be *encouraging*, *constructive* and *challenging*.

Additionally, our research showed that teachers make comments which *organise* pupils' work, for example, comments about presenting work in an orderly way, or making arrangements to get unfinished work completed.

Teachers also frequently use comments which are intended to make pupils *think again* about what they have written.

Out of more than 1100 written feedback comments examined in the case studies, the proportion of comments was:

Organisational	5 per cent
Encouraging	20
Constructive	17
Think	48
Challenging	9

Teachers said they used *encouraging* comments to motivate and give confidence. One-third of the encouraging comments also specified which aspect of the work was done well ("Good choice of examples"), the rest being general praise ("Well done, pleasing work").

The highest proportion of written feedback comments were *think* comments. These were usually short phrases, a brief reaction to something written. Examples of this type were "needs more explanation", "unnecessary", "too many numbers", "which?", "not much different really", "vague", etc. They reflect the work back to the pupils, leaving them to think further about their work. Some 'think' comments might be regarded as a sub-category of challenging comments.

Constructive comments ranged from points of information to explanations of how something should be done. ("Imagine walking round the shape and adding up all the distances you travel"). They performed actual teaching to take pupils forward from their present assessed position.

Together with *challenging* comments, ("Is this the only conclusion you could reach?") which extended pupils and showed high expectations of what they might achieve, they accounted for one-quarter of the total comments written.

Learning Objectives

Marking comments were also scrutinised for giving feedback on the learning objectives of the task set. It was common for all the teachers seen in the study to go outside the main objectives and comment on a range of other faults. In every case study, the majority of feedback comments was on matters other than these objectives. This may be significant in relation to the fact that pupils retained more of the feedback which did relate to learning objectives (see over page).

The proportion of comments relating to the stated learning objectives was only 35%, implying that two thirds of feedback is not about the main focus of the task.

When they did comment on their stated objectives, teachers made more use of the constructive and challenging type of comments.

Pupils' perceptions of feedback

In each of the 8 case studies, a group of pupils was asked to discuss the feedback they had received. What they said was matched against the exact comments found on their written work.

On average what pupils recalled corresponded with approximately one-third of the teacher's written comments. Pupils recalled proportionately more of the feedback that related to the learning objectives, and more of the 'constructive'-type comments.

Some pupils had noted very little about their feedback. Pupils sometimes picked up the message wrongly, by not recognising praise when it was given, so that encouraging comment would not necessarily have its desired effect.

Teachers felt that the effectiveness of feedback depended on the motivation, concentration and effort of pupils. One said that marking works "...if pupils read the feedback properly..." but it appears from the evidence that some do not know how to do so.

Brief comments were especially susceptible to misunderstandings – for example, pupils saying that they should improve on something though it had not been faulted. Pupils remembered more of the comments that were written at length. The majority of the short phrase or single word 'think comments' were not recalled.

Verbal Feedback to the Class

In the case studies teachers also gave the class verbal feedback. Whereas in written feedback the proportion of comments classified as '*constructive*' had been relatively low, it increased in verbal feedback from 17% to 60%. Conversely, the number of comments '*to prompt thought*' fell to just 6%. Teachers were taking the opportunity explicitly to teach pupils how they could improve their work.

When later asked about the verbal session, pupils recalled twice as much of the feedback from the second half of the session as the first half, suggesting that the more teaching points were made, the less likely that earlier points would be retained.

The quantity of what was said prevented precise matching against pupil perceptions. However, successful communication took place where pupils had taken notes during feedback; where a model answer was given; or where pupils were first re-focused upon the task.

Individual Verbal Feedback

In one of the 8 case studies, a teacher gave individual verbal feedback at the front desk as he returned each pupil's work. In these feedback sessions, the points made orally were pertinent to the individual's response to the task, and related precisely to each learner's starting point.

Later perceptions of the feedback were far more accurate than with oral feedback to a whole class. In 60% of cases there was a correct match between what was said and what the pupil thought was said.

The research found pupils remembered constructive-type comments better, and those which related to the learning objectives. Potentially, this has implications for future practice.

Further reading

Black, Paul, & Williams, D., (of Kings College, London) *Into the Black Box* (1998).

Note: This is a major review of 600 formative assessment studies carried out throughout the world. They found that, across the age groups and in a range of circumstances where formative assessment was used, it was accompanied by an improvement in standards.

Cole, Peter, & Chan, Lorna, 'Feedback and Correctives', chapter 6 in *Teaching Principles and Practice*, Prentice Hall, USA (1994).

Dunsbee, Tony, *Mark My Words*, NFER-Nelson (1983).

Gipps, Caroline, *Beyond Testing*, Falmer Press (1994).

Horton, T., ed, *Assessment Issues*, Hodder & Stoughton/Open University (1990).

Rowntree, Derek, *Assessing Students: How Shall We Know Them?*, Harper Row (1987).

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