

“TEACHER, YOUR VOICE.....” EXPLORING STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF AUDIO FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine students' perceptions of audio feedback for assignments in their writing class. Data were collected through interviews. The findings highlight the fact that the students would like to see more of this type of feedback across their courses. The findings also indicate that providing feedback to students via audio files is feasible despite some pitfalls of this format. Guidance for teachers concerning the effective use of audio feedback and suggestions for further research are presented at the end of the paper.

Keywords: audio feedback, students' perception, writing class

INTRODUCTION

Feedback, defined by Narciss (2008) as “[the] post-response information which informs the learners on their actual states of learning and/or performance in order to help them detect if their states corresponds to the learning aims in a given context” (p. 292), is one of the fundamental tools in teaching-learning contexts. It is an indispensable component of every writing course as it plays the role as “the most important aspect of the assessment process in raising achievement” (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p.20).

In writing courses, high quality feedback may motivate students, inform them of their strengths and areas to improve, and guide them on how to develop (Brown, 2001). Effective feedback has a significant powerful influences on student learning and attainment (Rodway-Dyer et.al. 2011) and that this in turn promotes language improvement (Hyland, 1998; Ferris, 1997) and the learning process as a whole (Balzer et al., 1989; Kluger & Denisi, 1998).

Research shows that high quality feedback should connect to performance in terms of objectives, criteria and anticipated standards (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006) and has to comply with some features: manageability, meaningfulness, timeliness, and constancy (Hartshorn, 2008; Shute, 2008). The first feature (manageability) refers to time the teacher spends on giving feedback. The second one (meaningfulness) proposes that feedback on writing should put more emphasis on content over form to help students focus on the communicative purpose of their written work. The third feature, timeliness, has to do with the promptness with which feedback is given, for example, the sooner a written text is commented on, the better. The fourth one, constancy, refers to the continuous practice of one's knowledge to improve his/her writing skills.

Feedback is central to one's learning experience, and giving feedback on student papers may be the most important activity a writing teacher does. When teachers give comments to their students on writing assignments, they typically do it in the text form (Silva, 2012) and will generally be no more than a few hundred words in length (Hennessy & Forrester, 2014). The provision of written comments on students' assignments appears to be a crucial component of feedback procedure (Nicol, 2010) and that delivering written

comments to students on their papers is perhaps the most time-consuming task of a writing teacher (Bardine et al., 2000; Ferris, 2007).

Feedback has remained one of the least satisfying areas of students' experiences even though there is a lot of published writing about how important feedback is (Gould & Day, 2013). For many students, feedback is often presented in a manner which is unclear, irrelevant, and inconsistent (Glover & Brown, 2006; Weaver, 2006). In addition, feedback is sometimes difficult to comprehend due to teachers' illegible handwriting or florid language (Price, 2007; Walker, 2009). Many students also find feedback provided as impersonal and hard to relate to (Bond, 2009). The time lapse between students' submission and teachers' return of work is also a problem; and as academic workloads increase, the issue of timeliness becomes more challenging (Cann, 2014). When students have negative perceptions towards their teacher feedback, there is a danger that the potential learning benefits related to feedback might not be fully realized (Duncan, 2007; Hounsell et.al., 2008; Marriott & Teoh 2012; Gould & Day 2013).

In response to the issues outlined above and given the context of the use of technology which permeates people's life and work these days, I believe that teachers need to consider the use of audio feedback, defined as "a digital sound file containing formative or summative verbal feedback given by the tutor" (Hennessy & Forrester, 2014, p. 778), as an alternative to traditional written comments. In the past few years, studies have been conducted to find out the use of audio in delivering teacher feedback. In many cases, a growing body of research indicates the benefits and limitations of such alternate feedback mechanism.

Among feedback methods, audio feedback is often overlooked by teachers. As Sommers (2013, p. 22) believes, "even today, audio-recorded commentary continues to fly beneath the radar of most writing teachers". Furthermore, according to Xu (2018), more empirical data is needed to fully grasp the value of having audio feedback, which for the time being remains an under-researched area.

The purpose of this study is then to contribute to the growing body of literature on audio feedback. This paper reports on a small study exploring the perceptions of university students studying at an English Department of a private university in Surabaya, Indonesia, towards audio feedback provided by their teachers. Currently, the teachers in the department use a standard feedback sheet pre-printed with headings on different aspects of student writing, namely content, organization, language, and mechanics. The teachers can also write comments on the assignment itself. Many students at the department have said that this current practice is ineffective, hence, the consideration of alternative feedback mechanism is timely. This study thus attempts to explore the perceptions of students who received audio feedback from a teacher in one of their writing classrooms. Using audio files is clearly an attractive option if it means giving better feedback and getting students' more positive responses.

METHOD

The study was conducted in the first and second semesters of 2020/2021 academic year within two different writing courses for English Department students who were in their 3rd year. The two courses were taught by the same teacher and attended by 25

different students. Within each course, the students were asked to submit four writing tasks depending on the course objectives. Before each submission, the teacher asked the students to submit their draft. This was done to give the students an opportunity to practice and to give the teacher a chance to provide feedback. The students submitted their writings via *Google Classroom*.

The teacher of these two courses volunteered to participate in the study. She had over 15 years of experience in teaching writing classes and was skilled with the use of the technology. The teacher had no prior experience of giving and receiving feedback in audio format. Therefore, before the first course started, I had offered her a guidance on how to create an audio file using *Talk & Comment* but I did not prescribe how long each audio recording should be. The free online application allows its users record their voice from the widget inside their browser, and share the generated link that will then turn into a play button for playback.

For this study, it was decided that audio-only feedback would be provided for each draft developed by the students as the intention was for the audio feedback to replace the written comments. I asked the teacher to address the same generic issues related to language, mechanics, organization, and content which had been set out on the standard feedback sheet.

The feedback process required a review of all student submissions to attain an understanding of the overall quality of work, followed by an evaluation of each individual submission. The process of evaluating each student's draft took 30-60 minutes and included the teacher viewing the student's work several times, recording, reviewing the audio feedback, and returning the draft to the student. Each audio recording lasted for one to five minutes and was delivered in English.

None of the students in these two writing courses had previously received feedback in audio format. Therefore, the teacher informed the students in advance as to why audio feedback would be used, how to get the teacher's voice remarks, and how to resolve any potential technical challenges.

At the end of each writing course, after all scores had been released, all students were invited to share their experience in using the audio feedback. The benefits of the study and why the students were asked to share their experience were all explained in advance. The students were not incentivized or induced to participate; and their participation was voluntary. There were 12 students in total who were willing to share their experiences.

A semi-structured online interview via *Zoom* or *WhatsApp* was conducted with each student participant (interviewee). Each interview lasted on average 30 minutes, was conducted in English or Indonesian in face-to-face mode, and audio-recorded (with permission). The semi-structured mode was selected as it provided a more open platform to discuss the students' perspectives in depth. Some questions asked were:

1. Did you have problem in getting the audio feedback?
2. Did you understand your teacher's spoken comments?
3. Were you able to improve your writing as a result of the comments you received?

In general, the interview questions tried to examine student perceptions of the audio feedback that they had received in their writing class.

All students' (or interviewees') responses were confidential; and there was no way to identify any individual responses. In addition, the participants were assured of data confidentiality, in that the data would be solely utilized for the purposes of the research and would not be shared with third parties.

The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and some parts in Indonesian were translated into English for the purpose of analysis. Then, the English version of the transcripts were read and coded before salient themes and patterns were identified and grouped together. The interview transcripts were basically analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Several issues emerged from the qualitative data analysis. Those are presented in the subsections below.

Perceived Benefits

All students in this study were very positive about the use of audio feedback. All students said they would like to receive more feedback in this format because of three major benefits as described in the following subsections.

Better Engagement

The students interviewed viewed audio feedback as more personal and indicated an increased feeling of personal connection with their teacher through audio feedback.

"I believe the teacher would say the same things in her audio files and in what she wrote as her written comments. But there was this distinction when she used the audio feedback.. yes, she was really saying those words" (Student 1)

"The teacher feedback seems alive while text might feel dead". (Student 5)

"It was good just like having a one-to-one discussion with the teacher... as good as sitting down with the teacher for an individual discussion. I guess this is something that all teachers should use in their classes." (Student 10)

Some students also said that their teacher's voice created an impression that she was interested in the student's work.

"Audio feedback is more personal and sympathetic than written feedback. I can sense my teacher's sincerity in expressing her thoughts on my writing draft." (Student 8)

"In my view, the most important feature of audio feedback is related to the voice tonality used by the teacher. It gives the feedback a more human touch and improves my confidence". (Student 4)

However, it is also important to note that a student found it harder to deal with criticism or negative feedback when it was spoken.

"I did not want to hear what I had actually done wrong. Actually hearing my teacher telling me my mistake is worse than seeing it written down." (Student 9)

The findings are in line with the results of previous studies which showed that students perceive audio feedback to be more personalized resulting in the higher degree of engagement between teachers and students as individuals (Rowe, 2011). The findings also

corroborate the findings of several previous research which indicate that the voice delivered via audio feedback may be used to communicate meaning and personal connectivity (Rust, 2001; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Parkes & Fletcher, 2019).

As Sipple (2007) mentions, audio comments are usually more extensive, more thorough, and more helpful in the content delivered to students. By using audio feedback, teachers could be more verbose in their remarks, leading to detailed explanation or clarification. Teachers could speak to each student as if they were in a face-to-face conference while delivering audio feedback, as opposed to having to reduce their feedback into a single sentence in the margin when offering written feedback. Tone, pronunciation and emphasis also add to the depth of this means of communication (Rust, 2001; Swart & Hertzog, 2018).

Audio feedback is viewed as transmitting more than mere words (Middleton et al., 2009; Parkes & Fletcher, 2019). It can present learning conversations in a more personalized way. Other feedback methods may not be able to accomplish this.

Better Quality

All students interviewed for this study agreed that audio feedback provided opportunity to receive more feedback.

“We got a lot more feedback. The teacher can say a lot into two minutes” (Student 2)

“With written feedback, it might be a circle with a question mark, but with audio feedback, the teacher told us exactly what it was. I learned a lot within 10 minutes of feedback”. (Student 1)

As a rough estimate, Ice et al. (2007) observe that the audio feedback took the teacher 3.81 minutes per assignment, while written feedback took 13.43 minutes per task. With more new applications or software, Lunt and Curran (2010) notice that one minute of audio feedback is equal to six minutes of writing feedback. For teachers, it clearly takes less time to provide audio feedback than written feedback. However, it does not mean that teachers provide less quantity of feedback. Trimmingham (2009) found in their research that teachers were in fact giving more, and higher quality, feedback to each student. Similarly, a large scale American statistical studies comparing written and audio feedback have found that using the latter reduces the time required by “approximately 75%”, and that “this reduction in time was coupled with a 255% increase in the quantity of feedback provided” (Ice et.al., 2007, p. 19).

All students interviewed for this study also admitted that audio feedback they received was clearer and easier to understand. There were more details on complicated concepts and the teacher’s vocal emphasis conveyed the highlight of particular points or issues.

“I found it was easy for me to understand where the teacher wanted me to go with my paper. I had a chance to improve my writing.” (Student 3)

“I don't see any problems with the audio feedback. In fact, it was more detailed than most feedback I've gotten before. Please use again and ask other teachers to do so.” (Student 7)

The results of previous studies (e.g. Ice et al. 2007; Merry & Orsmond 2008; Parkes & Fletcher, 2019) also showed that the majority of students found audio feedback to be both clear and easy to follow. A study by Swart and Hertzog (2018) highlighted the fact that more than 90% of their subjects (students) had a clearer understanding of how to improve their grades in the future, and indicated that the feedback was enough for them to spot mistakes. Clearly, audio feedback is valuable and essential to enhance one's learning.

Practicality

All interviewees commented that receiving audio feedback is quick and easy. *Talk & Comment*, the online application that the teacher in this study used, helps audio feedback be efficiently created, delivered, and received.

“The audio comments were embedded into our documents. I like it. It is an efficient and quicker way of receiving feedback “. (Student 6)

“The most useful feature is that I can access the feedback wherever and whenever I want to.” (Student 4)

It is also worth noting that some students interviewed reported that they often did not read written feedback. However, they all reported that they were comfortable with audio feedback.

“Sometimes, I find that the written comments are a bit hard to follow. I mean when the teacher puts comment that applies to a sentence or word... their placement in blue on the side of the margin ... well, it confuses me sometimes. I like the audio format better”. (Student 12)

According to Lunt and Curran (2010), students are up to ten times more likely to open audio files online compared to collecting written feedback. This may be due to the fact that students these days are more accustomed to hearing information than reading it, perhaps as a result of their daily extensive use of multimedia technology.

All students in their interviews said that that they re-accessed or re-listened to their teacher audio feedback several times. The audio feedback enabled them to pause, rewind, and listen again to areas or items that were difficult to understand.

“The best benefit is that the audio feedback can be paused especially for sections that are hard to difficult to understand. It gives me some time to think or do a Google search”. (Student 9)

“I would listen to it and write my own notes and then I would go back through it a second time looking at the notes I had written. I like it.” (Student 10)

In their studies, Merry and Orsmond (2008) and Middleton and Nortcliffe (2010) also found that when students listened to their feedback more than once, they engaged the feedback multiple times by, for example, taking notes and interpreting the teacher's remarks. As Hepplestone et al. (2011, p. 120) claim the use of audio feedback allows students to “receive [the feedback] in privacy, enabling them to respond to their feedback in different ways and at different times”. Students learn at their own pace as often as they wish; an important foundation for learner autonomy.

As discussed on the previous paragraphs, audio feedback has a feature on practicality which is different that written feedback. This makes audio feedback has potential for improving the quality of feedback delivered in writing classes.

Perceived Technical Challenges

Many students interviewed for this study agreed that they experienced initial technical difficulties when trying to access their audio feedback. The primary problems were identified as the degradation of the audio quality due to background noise, and depending on the internet connection, the sluggish opening of audio files.

“There were some issues with the quality of some of the comments since the sound was not very audible”. (Student 3)

“Sometimes the audio feedback took quite a long time to load on my home computer because of the poor internet speed.” (Student 8)

Other studies such as Merry and Orsmond (2008) and Hennessy and Forrester (2014) indicate similar problems. However, once these concerns are identified and worked through, they are relatively easily resolved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that overall, the students responded very positively to audio feedback. All students said they would like to receive more feedback in this format.

There is a need to anticipate some potential issues in advance. The following list suggests good practice for teachers that would like to try bringing audio feedback into their classrooms.

- a. Use a reasonable quality microphone or headset with a USB connection. Test the audio equipment before proceeding.
- b. Find a quiet place to record. This is to ensure that the teacher’s voice is clear.
- c. Ensure that the comment is well-paced. Spoken feedback should not be rushed.
- d. A scrip might not be necessary. People pause, stumble, and say ‘errr’ in real life, therefore it is not an issue if they do so in the recording.
- e. Personalize the feedback by, for example, referring to the student by his/her name.
- f. Stay positive by praising good points of the work submitted and adopting an encouraging tone especially when the comments are addressed towards the parts that need improvements.
- g. Listen to the feedback and double check the content and voice before sending it to the students.
- h. Inform the students beforehand as to why audio feedback is being used, how to get the teacher’s voice comments, and how to address possible technical issues.
- i. Try out audio feedback to begin with small cohorts either with small groups of students or for a component of a task, and see how it goes.
- j. As people say, practice makes perfect. It might take a while to record the first time, but it will get easier and faster over time.

While this study examined students’ perceptions towards the audio feedback that they received in their writing class, future research in this area might look at the relationship between the use of audio feedback and the users’ satisfaction levels. Further examination of how students with varying abilities or performance levels engage with audio feedback might also be useful. A better understanding of the value of audio feedback on different types of assignments and at different times within the course is also needed. In

addition, a study measuring grade differences between students who received audio feedback versus written feedback might shed light on the type of feedback that students more readily implement.

Despite of its importance, feedback is still seen as an often underemphasized component of teaching (Brown et al., 2003), where “day-to-day effective assessment and feedback practice is rarely reported in the literature” (Hepplestone et al., 2011, p. 124). Ongoing research across schools, universities, and courses is clearly needed to test the potential of feedback especially the audio feedback.

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