AALL
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Would you like grammar with that?

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Most Australian universities emphasise advanced communication skills, including writing, among their graduate attributes. However, explicit instruction in grammar and punctuation is patchy, and often framed as remedial. This paper recounts a collaboration between a discipline lecturer, an ALL adviser, and an education technology officer to include instruction in grammar and punctuation in a popular first year, first semester interdisciplinary subject. It discusses the challenges of conception, design, implementation and evaluation of an online resource, the "Writing Skills Assignment", which we created and trialled for this purpose. Each member of the team contributed something essential, drawing upon knowledge or resources that the others lack; for this reason, "learning together" was indispensible to the project.

Key Words: grammar, punctuation, tertiary literacy, graduate attributes.

1. Introduction

The context for this article is an ambient anxiety about young people's command of grammar and punctuation. Stanley Fish (2005), for example, writing in the *New York Times*, complained that "most [high school graduates are] utterly unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence … because they are not being taught what sentences are". This is not new; at Harvard University in 1914, a committee required lecturers in all disciplines "to hand delinquent students over to the English department for correction in a 'writing hospital'" (Russell, 1990, p. 63). Public anxiety about standards of literacy increased, however, with the massification of higher education in the U.S. after World War Two, and elsewhere in the decades that followed. The worry did not necessarily reflect the reality – indeed, a study by Connors and Lunsford in 1988 found that "freshmen are still committing approximately the same number of formal errors per hundred words they were before World War One" (pp. 406-407). It did, however, drive the development of required courses in remedial English in American universities. These were often characterised by dispiriting drudgery and stigma, with little discernible effect on students' competence (Rose, 1985).

Institutions of higher education elsewhere have been wise not to follow this remedial route, but they too must respond to public pressure to improve their students' communication skills, the importance of which is emphasised by government, professional bodies, and employers alike (see, e.g., Fiocco, 1997, p. 177; Ingleton, 1997, p. 193; James, 1997, p. 204). In Australia, the West Review (Review Committee on Higher Education Financing and Policy, 1997) declared that, "In the twenty-first century knowledge will be the most important currency of all" (p. 1), requiring "effective communication skills in all domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening)" (p. 47). Indeed, of the "Top 10 selection criteria for recruiting graduates" cited by Australian employers, "Interpersonal and Communication Skills (written and oral)", cited by 57.5%, leads the next most valued criterion, "Academic Qualifications", by more than 20 percentage points, while skills that might seem more useful, such as leadership, teamwork and

problem solving, trail around 40 points behind (Graduate Outlook 2006, as cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 43). This does not mean, however, that employers are satisfied with graduates' communication skills. Bode (2001) tells us that "the Australian Association of Graduate Employers, surveying 150 of the largest public and private employers, found that the greatest perceived deficiency in graduates is in written English", while, according to the report *Graduate Employability Skills* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), "written and oral communications skills are resoundingly the skills which employers would most like to see more developed in graduates" (p. 43; see also Absalom, 1997, p. 61; Ingleton, 1997, p. 199).

It is not surprising, then, that most Australian universities include communication among their "graduate attributes", adopted in response to the West Review's (1997) urging "to identify the attributes that all graduates ought reasonably be expected to have acquired during their university studies" (p. 46). How far the ideas, values and practices of communication in workplaces and academic settings overlap is questionable; but universities, at least, prioritise a good command of formal written English as an attribute of their graduates. Not many universities explicitly teach the structures of English in their regular curricula, however. Until recently, the assumption has been that an adequate foundation is laid in schools, and that exposure to academic literature will build upon this; Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisers have been employed to support the minority of students who needed additional instruction. As a result, the expertise required to teach about formal written English is located in ALL units. The challenge for universities that wish to make it part of every student's education is to bring that expertise into core subjects in the disciplines through collaborations between ALL and discipline staff. The project discussed in this paper is one such effort, and it is one that exemplifies both the opportunities and the difficulties of combining quite different perspectives towards a common goal.

2. A team approach

The project was the initiative of a discipline lecturer, D'Cruz, who wished to develop her students' written communication more explicitly. Believing that correct grammar is very important to students' academic and professional success, D'Cruz invited Chanock, her Faculty's ALL adviser and Bisset, its education technology officer, to collaborate with her in building instruction in grammar and punctuation into her large, interdisciplinary first year subject "Sex, Gender, and Identity". This article discusses the challenges of conception, design, implementation and evaluation of an online resource, the "Writing Skills Assignment", which we created and trialled for this purpose. Each member of the team contributed knowledge or resources that the others lacked, and together we learned how to design a set of lessons to be accessed and assessed online, initially within D'Cruz's subject and subsequently by staff and students in other subjects if the lessons proved sufficiently useful. Development and piloting of the materials was supported by a Learning and Teaching Development Grant awarded by the Faculty.

Our purpose was potentially to offer instruction in grammar to every student as a regular part of their studies, rather than teaching it only to students who consult the academic skills unit. D'Cruz wished to impress upon her students the importance of writing in clear, standard English, and to offer them a program of work to support and/or improve their writing. While Chanock's academic skills unit makes such help available to any students who seek it, D'Cruz was frustrated that so few of her students *did* seek academic writing support; she was also aware that, if all who needed help went looking for it, the academic skills unit would be swamped. In the team's application for a grant, D'Cruz wrote:

> Poor literacy skills evident at first year can limit a student's entire study career. Many students advised to consult [the Academic Skills Unit] do not take up this opportunity, nor do they improve their expression through reading books on grammar or online resources for improving writing skills. Our graduates will apply for jobs with "excellent written communication" as

> an essential selection criterion, yet presently too many university graduates
> do not meet this criterion.

D'Cruz aimed to address this need for written communication skills in her subject, but as she felt that grammatical matters should not take up valuable teaching time at the expense of course content, it was important that the program should involve no marking for tutors, but instead be self correcting. She wished to create an online grammar and written expression program that would form a small component of assessment that students would be able to complete at their own pace. Exercises would be based on the ALL adviser's observations on students' most common grammatical and writing problems. Each exercise would introduce a grammar point, followed with multiple choice questions that would be interfaced with explanations for both right and wrong answers. In this way, she felt, students need not feel embarrassed about learning grammar and would be able to do so in their own space and time.

D'Cruz turned to Chanock for her knowledge of the expression errors common among students at this level, and to Bisset for her expertise in constructing interactive sites for learning online. We three met early on to clarify the purpose and scope of the project, and later to identify and solve problems with the developing resource. Once D'Cruz had initiated the project, Chanock drafted the materials, which D'Cruz then critiqued and Chanock revised, while Bisset made them work online. When the semester began, D'Cruz implemented the resource in her subject, and subsequently evaluated its effectiveness.

3. Concerns about the proposal

We were simultaneously hopeful and cautious about the capacity of online instruction to improve students' writing. For Chanock, as an ALL adviser, this project offered a rare opportunity to reach a large number of students, and to represent written expression as a skill that all students should work on developing, as part of their mainstream university studies, rather than "something that should have been learned elsewhere, taught by somebody else" (Russell, 1990, p. 55). At the same time, it had the potential to raise discipline tutors' awareness of the uses and mechanics of language. If successful, it might even be extended across the Faculty's whole first-year curriculum.

On the other hand, based on her experience of mediating students' struggles with academic language and learning, Chanock had reservations about the capacity of online delivery to guide students in the mechanics of language. She had found that many students need individual, dialogic teaching closely focussed on their own writing, in order to begin to analyse their (mis)use of grammar and punctuation. Indeed, the literature of ALL suggests that students' problems with writing frequently reflect, not a lack of rules to follow, but an uneven appropriation of unfamiliar academic styles. Students who write correctly at school often lose that command at university (Bock, 1988); students who write correctly in first year develop errors in subsequent years, and students often write more correctly in one subject than in another (Taylor, 1988); and "student writers do not make the same mistake consistently throughout a paper" (Nightingale, 1988, p. 70). Taylor (1988) surmises that "students' problems lie less in a simple inability to handle the surface forms of syntactic and other structures themselves than in an inability to control linguistic form in unfamiliar or intellectually taxing contexts of meaning" (p. 64). As Nightingale (1988) concurs, "There is clearly some sense in which the grammatical rule is known, but it often seems to be lost in the struggle to express complex ideas" (p. 70).

Shaughnessy (1977) has shown persuasively how often students' errors show, not an absence of syntactical knowledge, but an unsuccessful application of it, and that we need to look for the "intelligence of the student's error" in order to respect the student's reason for it and explain the correction in terms that make sense to him or her. Rose (2009) illustrates this approach in his account of working with a student, Suzette, who was referred to him for help. Suzette wrote incomplete sentences not because she lacked the rule that a complete sentence must have a subject and verb, but because she thought her subjects and verbs – "she was, she was, she was"

– too repetitive. "Well, it's just not the way people write essays in college. You just don't like to see your paper with 'She…she…she…' … It doesn't sound very intelligent." Suzette did not need Rose to repeat the rule, but to introduce her to "some syntactic manoeuvres that would enable her to avoid repetition" (Rose, 2009).

It is questionable how effective teaching about grammar can be if it does not respond to students' own (mis)understandings of the academic context and appropriate use of language within it. Indeed, much evidence suggests that explicit grammar instruction has no positive effects on students' writing (but can damage their confidence to write) (Cameron, 1995, pp. 88, 105; Elley, 1994; Hartwell, 1985; Nightingale, 1997, p. 67; Wyse, 2001, p. 422). This is not a reason to abandon the teaching of grammar, but it should make us very careful about moving from a dialogic approach, in which understanding is jointly constructed, to online delivery.

We must nonetheless acknowledge that we operate in an environment where time is often not available for what we may consider to be best practice. The challenge, then, is to see whether insights from teaching can be used to inform the creation of learning materials for use in a crowded curriculum by students who have little time to spend on study, and still less to spend on campus. D'Cruz hoped, with her proposal, simply to give all her students a start in learning to become better writers, and with that shared goal, we embarked on designing the resource.

4. The "Writing Skills Assignment"

We began by identifying which structures should be targeted, and how. We aimed to provide tools for editing, rather than composing, an approach that is consistent with advice from second language teaching that explicit "grammar content … should be derived from our understanding of the learning problems that learners experience; … focussing on areas of grammar where learners are known to make errors" (Ellis, 2002, p. 27). Ellis recommends this strategy after reviewing research which showed that explicit instruction in grammar rules has little discernible effect on composition, but does inform revision. Therefore, "[t]he goal of a grammar syllabus becomes not that of teaching learners to use grammar but of helping them to understand how grammar works" (Ellis, 2002, p. 29) and "the focus of the instruction should be *awareness* rather than *performance*" (Ellis, 2002, p. 27). For relevance, we chose the most common mistakes at the first year level of academic writing in our Faculty: incomplete sentences, run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement errors, and apostrophes. This short list, generated from Chanock's observations of students' writing, is also consistent with findings elsewhere (Bourke & Holbrook, 1992; Connors & Lunsford, 1988).

As these errors are so commonly identified, Chanock first considered basing the lessons on some already existing resource, such as the OWL (Online Writing Lab) at Purdue, rather than writing a new resource from scratch. However, a search for grammar advice on other universities' websites found that most relied heavily on the technical metalanguage of grammar instruction, which experience had shown to be unfamiliar or confusing to most of the students who consult Chanock about their writing. A sentence like this one, from the Purdue OWL (2007b) – "A sentence that contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction is called a compound sentence" – seems likely to evoke the shamefaced admission "I was never good at grammar" and the unspoken thought "and I'm about to be no good at it again". Over many years, Chanock had developed ways of talking about grammar using an absolute minimum of metalanguage (*subject* and *verb*), and she thought it best to carry on that way. (The terminological spadework of identifying subject and verb is necessary at the start because, although our students know that sentences have these, in the sense that native speakers know how to use their language, they do not bring the grammatical metalanguage with them to university.)

A further consideration in designing our own material was the difficulty that students experience in applying what they learn from generic examples to genuine writing for specific purposes. D'Cruz thought it important, for this reason, to fashion our examples out of material from her subject, which already belonged to the discourse students needed to use. She did not

think this would limit its potential use by other subjects in the Faculty, for her interdisciplinary subject shares elements of discourse with history, sociology, politics, media studies, and cultural studies.

The resource, which we called "Writing Skills Assignment", took the form of an Introduction plus seven lessons each followed by a brief quiz, which students would complete in their own time, for up to 10% of their semester grade. The lesson topics were: "Subjects and Verbs"; "Subject-Verb Agreement"; "Incomplete Sentences"; "Run-on Sentences"; "How to Join Sentences"; "Commas"; and "Apostrophes". Each lesson was comprised of segments including explanation, practice, answers, and a summary.

5. Technical aspects: Bisset's domain

While Chanock and D'Cruz were responsible for developing the content, Bisset showed them how to use the tools available in the Learning Management System (LMS) to structure the resource. The breakdown of each topic into two parts, the lesson and the quiz, correlated to the functionality of the existing LMS software. The "learning modules tool" was used to deliver the lesson component, while the quiz Q&A and feedback sections were developed within the "assessments tool". This tool allowed students' answers to be graded automatically and the grade integrated into the Grade Book with its associated student records for tracking and reporting on students' performance. The entire project was also constructed with the technical objective of being easily exported and imported into other subjects within the LMS while maintaining associated automated functions and integration into the Grade Book for those subjects. To allow the materials to be adopted more widely across disciplines, it was important to develop a resource that was not only easy for students to navigate, but also required little effort for subject coordinators from other disciplines to incorporate in their subjects.

The learning modules were structured sequentially via a table of contents so that students would follow a logically determined path through it. The modules, in simple HTML format, also incorporated built-in navigation links and the ability to incorporate assessments for each of the lessons. Within each of the modules the lesson component was further broken down into easy to read, logical sections of information (the sequence of explanation, practice, answers, and summary), for efficient access to manageable text.

Using the assessment tool within the LMS allowed us to provide immediate, although limited, feedback to students on their answers, in the form of an explanation as to why each response was right or wrong. It allowed multiple attempts, with the highest grade of all attempts being recorded on the Grade Book. (This did mean that students could get the right answer by memory, whether they understood it or not; but they would at least know that it was something they needed to learn, and we planned to gauge understanding by monitoring their writing for the subject.) In order to keep the grading automated, the types of questions were restricted to either multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank or matching types of questions. As students received immediate results, they could use this feedback to self-correct their subsequent attempts.

6. Imparting a dialogic flavour to a monologic mode of delivery

Although the format of online delivery does not lend itself to engaging with students dialogically, as face-to-face teaching does, we did our best to replicate some of the functions of dialogue in our use of language and design, in the following ways. (The quotations below are not referenced as the materials are accessible only to staff and students of La Trobe.)

6.1. Tone

The Introduction to the site sets the tone, offering a practical, rather than normative, sense of what is "right" about getting grammar correct. It acknowledges the lack of enthusiasm many students feel for the mechanics of language:

I would prefer to spend the next hour or so

      a) learning about grammar

      b) learning about punctuation

      c) learning about grammar and punctuation

      d) doing just about anything else you could think of

Nonetheless, it asserts the utility of attending to the mechanics:

> We hope you'll do it anyway. Your ideas are more important than your expression, but if your expression doesn't meet expectations, your readers get distracted and their attention wanders from your ideas. It's like having parrot poo on your windscreen – the traffic is more important, but the splash is more riveting.

6.2. Engagement

In the absence of dialogue, we hoped somehow to engage the students in thinking about why each kind of error could be problematic, rather than simply inform them of what was wrong and what would set it right. D'Cruz suggested setting a problem, wherever possible, for the student to think about before proceeding to the explanation and subsequent practice exercises. For example, to introduce the topic of subject-verb agreement (after establishing the meaning of *subject* and *verb* in an earlier lesson), we began with this:

> Can you see anything wrong with the sentences below?
>
> a) Citizenship have not always been easy to get.
>
> b) Elections is held every three years.
>
> c) The decision are final.
>
> What is the problem?

6.3. Connecting with the "intelligence of the error"

At the same time, we included in each lesson an acknowledgement of a writer's likely reason for having problems with the structure or punctuation in question (the "intelligence of the student's error"). For example, following the invitation to think about errors in subject-verb agreement (above) we wrote:

> In all of those, the numbers don't "agree" – the subject is singular, and the verb plural, or vice versa. Subject and verb must be in "agreement", either both plural, or both singular.
>
> You wouldn't be likely to write any of those sentences, would you? And yet, this failure of agreement is one of the most common errors in university writing, in journalism, and in administrative documents – all places where writing is taken seriously. Why is it so common?
>
> In the sentences above, the subjects and verbs were next to each other, but a lot of sentences are longer and more complicated, and the subjects and verbs are separated by more words in between. Look at the sentences below:
>
>> Citizenship, eagerly sought after by many migrants, have not always been easy to get.
>>
>> Elections for the office of Prime Minister of Australia is held every three years.
>>
>> The decision of the judges are final.
>
> In each of those, the verb still agrees with the word closest to it. The problem is that this is not the subject.

Practice:

Think – then choose the right answer:

1) What has not always been easy to get?

Migrants?

Or citizenship?

2) What are held every three years?

Australia?

Or elections?

3) What is final?

The judges?

Or the decision?

Go to NEXT page for answers

Similarly, in explaining incomplete sentences, we recognized that writers often create these in an attempt to solve the problem that their sentence is becoming too long – a problem that does need to be solved, even if inserting a full stop is not the solution. Run-on sentences, in turn, are also written for good reason – in this case, the belief that a sentence comprises a complete idea (so the writer keeps going until the idea is complete). The resource acknowledges these good reasons for unsuccessful sentence structure, and then goes on to show the user how to solve each problem using formally correct construction.

We hoped, by trying to connect with our users in these various ways, to minimise the distance between resource and reader, and to make the material more relevant and more appealing.

7. Implementing the assignment

During the pilot, we planned to use the resource in two ways. First, from the beginning of the semester the students were given up to seven weeks to complete the assignment at their own pace. Their grades were recorded, so that we knew whether, and when, each student had completed it. However, the quizzes would not, in themselves, show us that students had learned what we set out to teach and would be able to use this knowledge to correct their writing. For that, we needed a further way of integrating the focus on grammar with the students' work for the subject. Secondly, therefore, while hoping that they would apply what they were learning to their first essay (due in Week Four), we planned a more closely monitored application to the second essay, due later in the semester, by which time all students could be expected to have done the grammar assignment. A sample of 42 students (i.e., those taught by D'Cruz rather than by her casual staff) were given the opportunity – if their essays manifested errors that were addressed in the resource – to use the resource to correct those errors and resubmit the essay, for a further possible 5% added to their mark. If they had not seen how the lessons in the resource connected with their own writing up to then, we hoped that this very specific application would make its relevance clear; and we wanted to see whether the resource was actually effective in informing their corrections.

Some completed the online skills assignment before they wrote the first essay, but most completed it after getting that essay back. Our evaluation, therefore, has focussed on what students thought about the assignment, and what they learned from it, by the end of the semester.

8. Evaluation

8.1. Aims of evaluation

As the writing skills assignment was a pilot project potentially for the Faculty's whole first-year curriculum, we were evaluating it on three levels. First, because we wanted to understand

students' use of the assignment in the context of their own ideas about their needs, we enquired into students' own perceptions of their grammatical skills and whether they thought that improving their written expression was an important part of their study career. Secondly, we wanted to gauge whether the online mode of delivery was an effective tool for *beginning* the process of developing better written communication for the majority of our students. Thirdly, and above all, we wanted to know whether some learning had actually taken place – even if on the small scale of simply identifying which writing skills students needed to improve. We evaluated the project in three ways: through questionnaires given to individual students; through two focus groups; and through monitoring the progress of particular students' assignments before and after completing the online writing skills assignment.

8.2. Attitudes reflected in the questionnaires

Eighty-three students, roughly half of the number that regularly attended, responded to questionnaires distributed in tutorials at the end of semester. Of these, 74 agreed that improving sentence structure and punctuation was a high priority in their study career. Four left this question blank, and 5 did not agree. There were no students who identified their written expression as poor, while 23 rated themselves as satisfactory, 40 as good, 17 as very good and 3 as excellent. When asked if they thought that it was a good idea to have a grammar exercise as part of first year assessment, 65 agreed, 4 disagreed, and 7 were indifferent (the rest left the answer blank). Most importantly, when asked if they had learned something from the quiz, 53 responded yes, 11 said no, 8 said that the exercises reinforced or refreshed what they had already learned, and the rest left the answer blank.

8.3. Focus groups: how the resource was used

The two focus groups numbered sixteen and thirteen students respectively. Focus groups consisted of volunteers from D'Cruz's tutorial classes, and the sessions were also facilitated by her. The sessions were conducted in the week following the questionnaires, so that discussion could pick up some of the issues raised in student responses to the questionnaires. The feedback sessions occurred in the final two weeks of semester at a time when D'Cruz felt that students were comfortable enough to be open with her about their thoughts on the quiz. Each session began by asking students to talk about their attitude toward the quiz before they did it. The conversation was open ended, with D'Cruz pausing at crucial moments to tally responses to specific issues. Eleven in the first group and twelve in the second said that they found the exercises useful, while one student in the second group felt that the assignment was "a waste of time"; she said her writing was already excellent. The level of honesty in discussing attitudes toward the quiz appears high, as participants did not try to conceal their mercenary approach toward study. Sessions were also conducted at a time in which students' responses could not affect their grades. In both groups the overwhelming majority of students said they approached the assignment as something "to get out of the way"; most students went straight to the quiz sections before reading any explanations. This approach was not surprising. If students think they have already acquired these skills, they might have felt the assignment redundant and so impulsively approached the task as something to "get over and done with". Quite a few minutes of focus group discussion were taken up with students laughing at themselves for caring more about getting the 10% mark than improving their grammar. This attitude was reinforced in individual feedback sheets where students expressed that they were motivated to do the exercises because they were graded (rather than, as we had hoped, from a desire to improve their writing).

Interestingly, however, the motivation for the grade opened the avenue for students to identify their own issues with writing. One student remarked that it was only when she repeatedly got an answer wrong that she went back to the explanation to help her get the mark. Upon reading the explanation, she learned that she did not know as much about grammar as she had thought. She consequently decided it was worth reading the other grammar modules. During this process she became more focused on improving her own sentence structure so that she could do a better job

in the next essay; thus, the writing assignment became a means to a more fruitful end, rather than what was initially perceived as a mundane exercise to get an "easy" 10%.

8.4. Focus groups: technical issues identified

Both focus groups identified technical issues that could be improved in the assignment. The particular Learning Management System (LMS) that delivered the assignment online was quite "fiddly" to use, as some students put it. Students said that the assignment would be a more effective learning tool if a window with the instructions could be kept open at the same time in which they were completing quizzes. They also wanted "quicker" navigation from one quiz to another when they were going back and forth from different sections. A few technical hitches were experienced in the first few weeks of semester, where some students were unable to correct their answers when they got it wrong, but these were soon fixed.

8.5. Monitoring students' performance

Our hunch was that one half to two thirds of our students would need to attend to grammatical issues in order to improve their written expression (and this proved accurate when their assignments were marked). Such students provided us with a ready made pool from which to assess what *actual* learning had taken place through engagement with the assignment. All essay assignments in "Sex, Gender and Identity" are marked with a grid that, among other categories for writing assessment (such as quality of evidence and research), provides a key for identifying what writing issues need to be addressed in order to improve expression. Each of the "common mistakes" that Chanock addressed within the writing skills assignment were given a code that would be placed in the margin wherever an error occurred (e.g. RS would be placed in the margin next to the bracketed words that marked a run-on sentence).

After receiving their first essay back, D'Cruz's students were given the option to correct their errors to attain up to 5% more on their grade. For many this would mean the difference between a C (60-69%) and a B (70-79%) grade. Of a possible 42 essays, 27 were sent back with the option to correct grammatical errors. Students were asked to revisit the writing skills assignment to help them with their error correction and were given one week to make corrections. Only 14 students took up the option (but by this time a few who were given back their essays had dropped out of the course). Of these 14, only 2 had sufficiently addressed their errors to receive the full 5% upgrade. The errors that remained uncorrected were mainly run-on and incomplete sentences. The essays were sent back this time with error corrections made by the tutor.

At first sight, we could conclude that while students said that they had learned something in their questionnaires, this did not translate into practice. Yet it would be too hasty to regard the assignment as not useful on this basis. As one student remarked in the focus group, the pattern of her own errors became apparent to her only *after* receiving comments and error corrections by her tutor. The explanations on run-on and incomplete sentences in the online resource made better sense to the student, *after her own errors* were corrected by her tutor in her own essay. This concurs with Chanock's prediction that learning is better attained through some form of dialogue. While this student did not succeed in correcting her own errors after they were highlighted in the first essay, she fared better in writing complete and grammatical sentences in subsequent essays. In fact, there were fewer errors in the majority of all students' subsequent essays. We do not attribute this improvement solely to our introduction of the grammar assignment, but it formed part of our resources for giving formative feedback on students' performance, and valued a focus on form.

Our feedback from students and monitoring of their work suggest that the writing skills assignment became a more useful tool for them after they had received feedback on their first essays and after they had realised that there were issues that they needed to address. It seems that the *timing* of doing the assignment (after errors are identified in first essay) is crucial for gaining the most value from the resource. The importance of timely feedback is emphasised by (among others) Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002, p. 55), Gibbs and Simpson (2004-5, pp. 18-19), and by Brown (2004-5), who notes that "Timing of assessment is a … key issue, since the

responses given to assessed work need to allow opportunities for amendment and remediation of errors" (p. 83). Jenkins (2004-5), meanwhile, points out that *online* feedback is immediate, available for self-access, and allows students to monitor their own learning.

The assignment therefore works well as a tool for identifying common grammatical mistakes, which can prompt students to recognise how a better command of language can enable them to write more clearly and effectively in general. The quiz works best when students can examine their own essays in the light of the explanations and questions set out in the writing skills assignment. The quiz was never intended to solve all problems students have with writing in one hit. It was intended, however, to instigate a desire to attend to grammatical issues as part of learning to be better able to express complex academic content in writing. In the words of one of our students: "the assignment was good for learning what you need to learn".

9. What next?

Because students do find they have more to learn than they anticipate, it is useful to keep the quiz online, even after formal assessment is completed. The grammar error codes have been retained on subsequent assignment marking sheets so that students are encouraged to keep accessing explanations and exercises in the resource. The quiz is also posted in the second semester course, for those who continue with the Gender, Sexuality and Diversity stream. It would be desirable to have such online exercises at each year level of study in order to factor in the increasing complexity of subject material. As noted earlier with reference to Taylor (1988), students might not encounter difficulty with writing in first year, but may do at second year. If they consistently receive feedback with error codes, they should be able to identify the patterns of their own mistakes. We will, therefore, look at extending the resource, both within our Faculty and across year levels.

It would be desirable to maintain the opportunity for students to receive an extra 5% of their grade after error correction, but realistically this would present too much marking time for tutors. However, if error coding is applied consistently throughout an undergraduate degree, and if there is a reference site such as an online quiz that is readily accessible and tailored toward specific subject matter, then we are opening more options for improving writing skills within a tightly resourced learning environment.

10. Conclusion

The evaluation (in section 8 above) will help us to improve the resource, and suggests that this is worth doing. As a mode of teaching and learning delivery, the online writing skills quiz can be said to have accomplished the modest goal we set out to achieve: a means to *identify* grammatical problems for those who need to improve their written expression. Further, the resource allowed tutors to direct students to a readily accessible site, which was specifically designed to address the error correction that was highlighted in their essays. Identifying issues and locating the means by which to address them may serve as the beginning of a learning process that will hopefully sustain the desire to communicate effectively in written expression.

And what did we "learn together" through collaborating on this resource? Organisationally, the project brought together staff in different areas whose expertise could add to one another's pedagogical repertoire. Technically, the chance to work with an education technology officer was a valuable professional development opportunity for teaching staff whose acquaintance with technology for online delivery was at an early stage. And pedagogically, we succeeded in combining our ideas towards a shared goal: to provide a resource which is proving to be of some use to students trying to understand the mechanics of formal writing.

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