

## Improving Feedback on Academic Writing: Combining Wikis and Screencasts

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Although the importance of feedback in academic writing is undisputed, it can often be lacking in clarity and quality. With the aim of making the feedback process clearer and more rewarding to learners and to build a learning community to encourage interaction and peer feedback, an action research project was carried out with two high-level IELTS preparation classes to combine the use of a class wiki with audio-visual screencasts to provide learners with both a space to share their writing and more meaningful teacher feedback. In this paper, data from said project are used together with previous studies to illustrate the benefits and potential barriers of using these Web 2.0 tools with writing classes. Studies on both tools have shown they are successful in isolation, yet this is the first known study where the two have been combined to enhance the overall feedback process and offer opportunities for deeper learning.

アカデミックライティングにおけるフィードバックの重要性は明白だが、フィードバックの多くは明確さと質の向上が必要である。本研究では、学生にとってより明確で意味のあるフィードバックの提供、また、学生同士のやりとりの中からフィードバックが生まれる学習環境の実現を目的とし、学生間でのライティングの共有の場や教師からの有意義なフィードバックの提供を可能にする「AVスクリーンキャスト」及び「クラスwiki」を併用して、二つの上級レベルのIELTSクラスでアクション・リサーチを実施した。本稿では、本プロジェクトで収集したデータと以前の研究データを使用し、ライティングのクラスにおいてこのWeb 2.0 ツールを使用する際の利点と予測される問題点を概説する。上記のツールそれぞれ単独の使用効果についての先行研究は存在するが、本プロジェクトは、フィードバックの課程を総合的に強化し、より深い学習の機会を提供するために上記の両ツールを併用した知る限り最初の研究である。

The importance of feedback in language learning cannot be underestimated; it is clear how much learners value it (Coffin et al., 2003) and how powerful its impact on both learner motivation (Hyland & Hyland, 2006) and achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) can be. Yet it is also clear that this impact can just as easily be detrimental as beneficial (Carless, 2006; Lee, 2008), with unclear, inaccessible or indecipherable feedback (Coffin et al., 2003; Hattie & Timperley, 2007) leaving learners lacking the support they require to make meaningful progress in their writing.

Teachers are generally no more satisfied with the process; there is usually no guarantee that learners will take the time to read and attempt to internalise the feedback or act upon it in future tasks; and it can be frustrating to have to repeat the same advice to several learners.

With the aim of improving the quality and clarity of teacher feedback, encouraging peer feedback and peer learning, and using teacher time more productively, a small-scale action research project was carried out with two groups of students on IELTS writing preparation courses (see Brereton, 2016). In this study two Web 2.0 tools were used: an online wiki (a “freely expandable collection of interlinked web pages . . . where each page is easily edited by any user” (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001, p. 14), and video screencast software named *Jing*—“a digital recording of the activity on a computer screen accompanied by voiceover narration” (Alvira, 2016, p. 83). The decision to use a wiki was made as it can function as a platform for learners to share their work with each other. This was done with the aim of changing learners’ perceptions of the writing process: instead of viewing it as a private interaction between teacher and learner, they should view each other’s work as a learning resource and were therefore encouraged each week to read at least two of their peers’ submissions and to use the wiki’s comment function to provide constructive feedback.

Teacher feedback was provided using *Jing*, a free-to-download program that enables video recording of a section of the user’s computer screen along with microphone audio recording in a so-called *screencast*. When recording screencasts, spoken commentary on

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learners' work was provided with strengths and weaknesses highlighted and changes suggested where necessary. Once complete, a link to the screencast—accessible by all wiki users—was shared alongside the relevant homework task.

Although previous studies have been carried out on the separate use of both wikis (see Franco 2008; Gielen & De Wever, 2012; Kuteeva, 2011; Sun & Qiu, 2014) and screencasts (see Alvira, 2016; Bianco & McCollom, 2010; Salam & Yusof, 2014; Stannard, 2007; Stannard & Mann, 2018) in language learning, this is the first known study of their being used in tandem.

### The Study

#### Context

The study was carried out with two successive groups of learners on IELTS preparation courses at a language school in Tokyo. A basic profile of these groups is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Group Profiles

| Category                | Group 1                        | Group 2                        |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Frequency of class      | Once a week                    | Once a week                    |
| Time period             | 10-week period,<br>Spring 2015 | 10-week period,<br>Summer 2015 |
| Number of learners      | 14                             | 15                             |
| Nationality of learners | 13 Japanese<br>1 Saudi         | 14 Japanese<br>1 South Korean  |
| Class level (CEFR)      | B2                             | C1                             |

Note. CEFR = Common European Framework.

A needs analysis (Appendix A) was carried out in the first lesson of each course to ascertain learners' prior knowledge and experience of the IELTS exam, their desired IELTS band, their motivation for taking the IELTS exam, and their perceived strengths and weaknesses. This found that their prior knowledge of the IELTS exam varied: 13 learners had sat the IELTS test before and a further four learners had previously taken IELTS preparation courses, but the remaining 12 had no experience of preparing for the exam. It was also clear the majority (27 of the total 29) felt writing was a major weakness of theirs;

indeed those with prior IELTS test experience all scored noticeably lower in the writing section of the test than in the other sections (Brereton, 2016). As is typical with these courses, full IELTS writing tasks were assigned as homework at the end of each lesson, albeit with much of the planning for writing tasks carried out in the lessons themselves. Learners then had 1 week to complete their homework, that is, until the next lesson.

#### Data Collection

At the end of each course, learners received questions (Appendix B) on their perceptions of the use of the wiki and the screencast software. They were allowed time to make notes before being invited to participate in focus groups of three to four participants to discuss their responses to the questionnaire, as the nature of group interaction can elicit more valuable responses than from one-to-one interviews or questionnaires (Gladman, 2012). With students' consent, the discussions were audio recorded and detailed written notes on each student's responses were also taken. At the end of each session, I listened to the recordings to ensure my notes were accurate and made any necessary modifications.

#### Data Analysis

Data collected from end-of-course questionnaires and focus groups were analysed using Brown's (2014) seven steps for results analysis (p. 102): first, data were organised into a useable form (for this study, a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used), before being "organised and reorganised" until clear patterns, both general and specific, began to emerge. I then discussed these with a colleague to gain fresh insights and to clarify my own ideas. I then considered the data from multiple perspectives using needs analysis results to minimise interference from my own perspective, paying particular attention to differences in students' prior IELTS experience, apparent motivation, and also looking at how regularly they interacted with other students on the wiki. Finally, I looked for data that "directly contradict[ed]" the trends I had found, in what Brown termed "negative case analysis" (p. 108),

### Results

#### Class Wiki

The clearest indicator that the class wiki was beneficial in the learners' eyes comes not from focus groups, but from wiki data. Learners in Group 1 accessed their wiki an average of 126 times over the 10-week course, and those in Group 2 averaged 144 times over the same period. Taking into account that the welcome page and the learner's

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own writing page make up two of these pages each time the learner completes their<sup>1</sup> homework task, this still suggests that learners were accessing several of their peers' writing tasks each week.

This is also supported by the high levels of interaction seen on the wiki among learners in both Group 1 and 2, which often led to lively and interesting discussions about a range of areas, as can be seen in the selection of comments (taken from both groups) in Table 2.

Table 2. Selection of Learners' Comments on their Peers' Work on the Wiki

| Category           | Comment   |
|--------------------|---|
| Paragraph cohesion | "The structure using 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand' is also great. I often make structures using firstly, or 'One..., Another...' but your essay is more sophisticated."<br>"Your revision is much better than the previous version because the sentences in the third paragraph are connected more relevantly." |
| Essay organisation | "I like your great introduction because it's the answer for this essay's question. To show your clear statement in the beginning makes it easier for me to know what you're writing in this essay."   |
| Lexis              | "I like the collocations you use...I'll make a model of your vocabulary."<br>"You used phrases [from] class, I think this [is] the most effective way to improve English skills."   |
| Register           | "Your phrase, 'it is doubtful whether', is more elegant than mine."   |
| Content            | "I like...your sharpshooting opinions on why English should be spread."<br>"I thought you used a good example, especially the second one."  |
| Task completion    | "I wonder if [that is correct]...because the table just illustrates the figures of one moment..."<br>"I'm really confused whether I should have answered about recycling or whole environmental issues, what does everyone think?"  |
| Writing speed      | "Good work! It's an unbelievable speed to write!"   |
| Lessons            | "It was nice to talk to you today. I still smiled to myself when I confused basketball and baseball."   |

One of the clearest, yet perhaps unexpected, benefits of using a class wiki cited in the focus groups was the positive impact on learners' motivation. Student A summarised what was a common theme in the focus groups by saying:

I was really motivated by the wiki and enjoyed seeing so many samples of work. It was good that we could discuss our writing in class . . . it helped [us] to [get to] know each other. When [I was] tired and didn't want to write an essay, I found others uploaded essays already, and I thought I have to write.

Although she appeared motivated by the ability to access a range of sample tasks and corresponding feedback, she, like many others, also referenced the wiki's role in building collegial rapport, which also engendered some gentle peer pressure to complete homework.

The greatest source of apprehension among learners in both classes stemmed from the knowledge that peers would be reading their work. Indeed, such was the apparent initial anxiety that the use of pseudonyms was suggested to mitigate this. Despite this, this option was taken up by only one learner (Student B) from either class, and only on the first submission. At the end of the course, she commented, "the key is participation . . . it's fair to post my writing because everyone shares." Student A's comment supports this and suggests that, in contrast to this initial concern, the fact that peers read their work appears to have also been a motivational factor in actually encouraging learners to complete their writing tasks.

One unanticipated issue that emerged in Group 1 focus groups was the lack of handwriting practice caused by submitting all writing tasks online. As a result, learners in Group 2 were encouraged to handwrite a first draft of their task on paper before typing up their draft to submit. Feedback from Group 1 also led to the introduction of teacher-written sample answers and an overview of feedback on the wiki rather than in the lesson, as two of the four Group 1 focus groups mentioned that a record of this would be helpful to view alongside their own work.

As learners submitted weekly tasks, a welcome benefit of this study was the accumulation of a resource bank of previous tasks, which made it simple to access and reference learners' previous work or encourage them to read a peer's work. On occasions when learners misinterpreted the task, they could be referred to peers' responses, and specific peers' work could be recommended for review as a follow-up task for particular aspects, such as cohesive devices. This helped reduce my own preparation time, as model answers and supplementary materials were already prepared. Theoretically, suitably anonymised and with learners' consent, these tasks could be used to create a long-term database to the benefit of learners past, present, and future.

## Screencasts

Screencast feedback was extremely well received by learners in this study, with all learners in every focus group claiming it was clearer and easier to understand than traditional teacher feedback. A number made direct comparisons with previous experiences, including Student C who commented that “in previous courses, it was sometimes unclear why my writing was corrected, but [screencasts] made it easy to know why it was a mistake” and Student D who said that “in the past I felt isolated in my studies but the [screencast] feedback made it very easy to understand the [suggested] changes.”

Most learners said they watched their own weekly screencast and supplemented this with at least “two or three” (Student E) of their peers’ screencasts. Although four of the 29 learners said they only had time to watch their own screencast, three other learners claimed to watch “every video . . . uploaded” (Student F) and Student G said he was “disappointed when [he] logged on . . . but the screencasts were not [uploaded].” This learner was an outlier in his enthusiasm for the study, however, accessing wiki pages over 600 times more than any other learner.

The free-to-use version of *Jing* limits screencast recording time to 5 minutes; a slight majority of learners suggested longer videos would be beneficial. Although theoretically possible, this could significantly add to teachers’ workloads given that, alongside the 5-minute screencast, a few minutes is commonly required to read learners’ work prior to recording and it then takes more time to upload the screencast and share the link on the wiki. Indeed, the main barrier to my own long-term usage of screencasts was the additional demands on my time that they created, particularly when the number of writing classes I was teaching increased. However, as other studies have shown that screencast feedback can actually reduce time spent on feedback (Hynson, 2012; Warnock, 2008), this clearly depends on context.

## Discussion

### Class Wiki

In peer feedback it is noteworthy that, although learners were complimentary about a wide range of aspects of each other’s work, feedback on grammatical accuracy or range was conspicuous in its absence. Indeed, this focus on more global issues is often the case in peer feedback (Paulus, 1999) and should be encouraged. When compared to feedback on local errors, global feedback “has the greater power to stimulate learning” due to its ability to “feedforward” into future tasks (Yorke & King, cited in Carless, 2006, p. 14).

In addition, given that the motivation fostered by the sense of belonging to the online community of a wiki has previously been documented (Franco, 2008) and, as attitudes to learning situations have a major impact on learner achievement (Masgoret & Gardner, 2000), it follows that peer interaction on wikis has the potential to have a powerful effect on learning.

One potential barrier to the success of wikis was the time demands on wiki participants. Teachers must be aware of learners’ other responsibilities. Although in this study, learners were encouraged to comment on at least two of their peers’ homework, this was not compulsory. Given that learners attended lessons only once a week, it seemed unreasonable to expect more learner commitment; indeed it may have adversely affected participation if this had been a compulsory condition of their participation.

Time pressure can also be felt by the wiki administrator, as time is required for planning, preparation, monitoring, and maintaining. In this study, this was not perceived to be a major issue: The initial planning and preparation took approximately 1 hour prior to each course beginning and involved registering the wiki at pbworks.com (the platform I chose to use), creating a brief welcome page with course information, and drafting a simply step-by-step guide on how to use the wiki, which was distributed during the first lesson. During the courses themselves around 15 minutes every day was spent monitoring wiki contributions and interactions, but my role was primarily as a passive observer. It is envisaged, however, that the management of multiple wikis with multiple classes simultaneously could place large demands on teachers’ time.

### Using Screencasts

The positive response among learners to screencasts strongly echoes Stannard and Mann’s (2018) findings, who described the multimodality of screencasts—the presence of both the teacher’s voice and typed comments—as a major factor in learners’ preferences for screencasts over more traditional methods, although it has also been shown that learners prefer the conversational nature of screencast feedback, as they are able to better gauge teachers’ reactions through voice tone (Silva, 2012). These factors mirror the ideal feedback scenario of a face-to-face meeting between teacher and learner yet without the same time commitments. Indeed, it could even be argued that screencasts may even be more beneficial than “one-shot feedback” provided face-to-face, which cannot be repeated, rewound, or revisited. In contrast, screencasts allow a long-term record of feedback and enable learners to build personal feedback portfolios, developing their awareness of their progress over both the short- and long-term.



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The conversational nature of screencasts also strengthens the perception that it is a two-way dialogue rather than a top-down transmission, which in itself encourages learners to build ownership of their work and promotes self-reflection (Coffin et al., 2013; Nicol et al., 2010). Attempts in this study were made to strengthen this perception by encouraging learners to reflect on their performance and leave comments or questions regarding their work below their writing tasks, which were directly addressed in my screencast. This also gave learners a genuine reason to listen to their feedback, which could then be used in revising and making future drafts.

One barrier to the successful implementation of screencasts is that learners with weaker listening skills are at a disadvantage (Salam & Yusof, 2014). Although this was not an issue in this study due to the learners' relatively advanced level of English, it is clear that this could be problematic for less proficient listeners, although further research may be required into lower level learners' perceptions of screencasts.

In addition, despite consistently positive feedback from studies on screencasts, it would be interesting to discover their effectiveness in other contexts. Learners in this study were highly motivated due to their desire to reach their target IELTS score and were willing to dedicate significant time towards this goal, yet those in other contexts with different motivational factors may not have sufficient incentive to watch screencasts and would not be in a position to benefit from any feedback.

## Conclusion

This study began with three main aims, and it appears evident that, in the eyes of the learners, the use of screencasts certainly improved the quality and clarity of teacher feedback. The wiki exposed learners to far more example tasks than they would traditionally have viewed, and enabled them to exploit peers' work as a learning resource, such as helping learners to improve their vocabulary and cohesive devices. In doing so, learners also provided their peers with valuable feedback on their work and facilitated active discussions regarding learners' writing. These discussions also helped foster an online community, which also led to increased motivation and perceptions of gentle peer pressure.

The final aim, to use teacher time more productively, was only partially met. My time was certainly used more productively and I was undoubtedly more engaged and enthusiastic, providing feedback knowing that it would be accessible to more learners and that they valued it more highly than traditional feedback. However, although this was feasible when teaching only one writing course, this soon become an unsustainable project when the number of writing courses increased.

Although not an explicit aim of this project, it is clear that learners were participating in order to see increases in their IELTS scores. This is very obviously a major limitation in judging the impact of this study on learning outcomes. As learners were not required to sit the IELTS exam, there is very little data in this regard: Only Student A is known to have taken the test immediately after the end of her course; her writing score increased from 5.0 to her desired score of 6.0. Despite this, the use of wikis to promote collaborative learning and peer feedback and the use of screencast feedback to offer clearer, multimodal, long-term feedback clearly has powerful implications for learning potential on writing courses.

For replications of this study, demands on teachers' time should be carefully considered. Although wikis and screencasts have distinct benefits and can be used in isolation, I feel they complement each other well and should be used in tandem when possible. However, screencasts, although arguably the more revolutionary tool, can also be very time-consuming, especially for those unaccustomed to them, and practice may be required before teachers feel comfortable with the process. As with the use of any technology, the overriding factor in teachers' decisions to use wikis or screencasts with their classes should be their students' needs and learning preferences (Dashtestani & Stojković 2015, p. 452). However, as this paper has aimed to show, it is certainly worth re-examining traditional approaches to feedback on learners' writing. The benefits of interactive wikis and screencast feedback cannot be ignored.

## Note

1. In this paper, I have chosen to use the pronoun *their* as a singular pronoun of indeterminate gender.

## Bio Data

**Peter Brereton** is a program manager at Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class and is also a Delta Local Tutor and external assessor. He has worked in Germany, France, Latvia, Spain, Australia, Ireland, and the U.K., and has been in Japan since 2012. He holds a Delta and an MA in TESOL, and his current interests include feedback methods, teacher professional development, and academic management. <brereton.peter@gmail.com>

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## Appendix A

### Beginning of Course Needs Analysis

|  |               |         |            |
|--|---------------|---------|------------|
| Why are you taking IELTS?  |               |         |            |
| What is your target IELTS score (if known)   |               |         |            |
| When would you like to achieve this by?  |               |         |            |
| Have you ever taken the IELTS exam before?   |               |         |            |
| If so, what were your previous scores?   |               |         |            |
| Speaking   | Reading       | Writing | Listening  |
| Are you planning to take the IELTS exam in the future? If so, when?  |               |         |            |
| What do you feel are your <u>strengths</u> and <u>weaknesses</u> in English? Why?  |               |         |            |
| Speaking   | Pronunciation | Writing | Vocabulary |
| Listening  | Reading       |         |            |
| What are your aims from this course? Is there anything in particular you'd like to focus on (e.g., <i>speaking fluency</i> , <i>improving vocabulary</i> , <i>organising writing part 2</i> , <i>reading faster</i> , etc.)? |               |         |            |
| By the end of this course I'd like to be better at...  |               |         |            |
| How much homework do you expect each week? What kind of homework would help you most?  |               |         |            |
| How much self-study do you do between classes? What exactly do you do?   |               |         |            |

Thanks for taking the time to fill this out. I really appreciate it.

## Appendix B

### End of Course Focus Group Discussion Questions

#### A: First Impressions: Wiki

- How did you feel about the Wiki when it was first mentioned in Week One? Positive? Negative? Why?
- Looking back from Week Ten, did your experience of the Wiki match your feelings from the beginning of the course? How/why (not)?

#### First Impressions: Jing

- How did you feel about Jing when it was first mentioned in Week One? Positive? Negative? Why?
- Looking back from Week Ten, did your experience of Jing match your feelings from the beginning of the course? How/why (not)?

#### B: Participation: Wiki & Jing

- How did you generally use the Wiki and Jing? (E.g., writing your own tasks, reading other people's, listening to your voice feedback/other people's feedback, commenting on people's writing, reading the sample answers, learning new vocabulary/expressions etc.)

#### C: Advantages/Disadvantages

- What have been the advantages of using the Wiki, in your opinion?
- What have been the disadvantages of using the Wiki, in your opinion?
- Overall, do you feel that the Wiki helped you with your writing? How/why (not)?
- What have been the advantages of using Jing, in your opinion?
- What have been the disadvantages of using Jing, in your opinion?
- Overall, do you feel that Jing helped you with your writing? How/why (not)?

#### D: Future improvements : Wiki and Jingo

- If you could repeat this course with the Wiki and Jing, would you do anything differently? What? Why?
- How do you think the Wiki/Jing could be improved?
- Is there anything else about the Wiki/Jing which you would like me to know?