

# **Feedback and Response to Feedback in Teaching Writing to Learners of Arabic or any Second Language: A field report on a pedagogical model<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Most foreign language teachers would probably agree that feedback on their students' written work is essential, but what that feedback should look like, and how it contributes to the development of second language writing skills is not always clear. This paper presents a pedagogical model for providing feedback and encouraging students' uptake of feedback for future written work. Developed in Arabic language content courses at the University of Maryland, the model combines feedback on the content of a response paper with feedback on linguistic form. Students are required to engage with the themes of the course in their written work, to solve problems with accuracy noted in their previous papers, and to incorporate new language suggested by the teacher, or noticed in the texts of the course. They then submit a writing improvement report that presents evidence from successive response papers to illustrate how their writing has improved over time. The model can be employed to develop writing skills in any foreign language, and is easily adapted for lower, pre-content levels.

**Keywords:** Teaching L2 writing; feedback; TAFI; Arabic writing

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## 1. Introduction

In their monograph on the development of foreign language writing skills in collegiate education, Byrnes et al (2010) list several characteristics of instructed foreign language writing. Among them are its “favorable conditions for attentive and reflective student performance..[and]..its opportunity for deliberate and considered teacher feedback that is personal and personalized” (Byrnes et al 2010: 5). However, while the design of engaging writing tasks might increase student motivation to write, attentive and reflective performance is not always guaranteed. Similarly, the efficacy of teacher feedback on the development of writing skills, rather than on the improvement of a single instance of a specific written product is open for debate. Casanave (2004), for example, states that while students might incorporate teacher feedback on language forms into revised drafts of a paper, “this kind of revising tells us nothing about what students have actually learned that might apply to new pieces of writing” (Casanave 2004: 91). Hyland (2003: 180) makes a similar point, noting that effective teacher feedback on writing should point towards other texts to be produced in the future.

In this paper I present a novel pedagogical approach to second language writing instruction that actively encourages attentive student performance in written production, and requires students to illustrate action on past teacher feedback in their future writing assignments. This approach is currently being implemented in a number of Arabic language content courses aimed at advanced learners in a collegiate setting. It is designed to focus student writers on form (Long 1991; Long and Robinson 1998; Nassaji and Fotos 2011; Williams 2004) while also allowing space for creative expression. Students submit papers, receive individualized feedback that responds to content, highlights recurring errors and suggests more complex language as appropriate. Based on this feedback, they are then required to illustrate correct and more complex instances of language use in future response papers. At two points in the semester they submit a writing improvement report in English. It uses

evidence from all papers submitted to date to show how they are responding to teacher feedback and actively improving their writing over time.

## 2. Context

The Arabic program at the University of Maryland consists of three academic years of Arabic classes that typically bring students to the Intermediate High or Advanced Low level of proficiency, as defined by the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). This is followed by a fourth year of Arabic-language content courses, where having completed the lower-division language courses, students study a topic or theme in Arabic. Engagement with the thematic content of the course is an essential element of student participation, in addition to continued linguistic progress. This type of content-based instruction (CBI) falls somewhere in the middle of Met's (1991, 2012) continuum of CBI models, since it combines both content-related and language-related learning outcomes (for an overview of different CBI models see Abasi 2014; Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Byrnes 2005; Crandall 1999). Such courses increasingly feature in four-year Arabic programs at universities across the United States, and they are integral to many study-abroad programs as well.

Written response papers in content courses require the completion of any assigned reading or listening, reflection, and the formulation of an opinion or stance. This level of preparation, where students spend time crafting a written response at home before class, typically makes for a productive class discussion. The approach to teaching writing through response papers outlined in the following sections was developed in an Arabic language content course surveying Arab intellectual history, open to students who had completed third-year Arabic. Students in the course were at or approaching the Advanced level of proficiency in all skills.

### 3. Response papers in content courses

In any second language writing assignment there is a tension between a focus on language use on the one hand, and the expression of the writer's ideas on the other. Response papers ask the writer to express a reaction or opinion, guaranteeing a level of creative freedom not present in grammar drills or the more controlled writing assignments that often occur in lower-level language courses. Hyland (2003) points out that writing is a purposeful communicative activity, and that an exclusive focus on linguistic form and rhetorical function leaves no room for the writer to relay personal opinions and experiences. CBI makes it possible for writing tasks to be meaningful and have an authentic purpose. At the same time, however, a number of studies suggest the importance of training learners to focus on linguistic form, both in the language they encounter and in their own language production. Griffiths (2008) observes that paying attention to grammatical form is a characteristic of successful learners, while Graham (1997) finds that stronger second language students assessed accuracy in their writing based on how they had seen language used in the past. Similarly, in studying learner habits, Gordon (2008) highlights a successful writer who takes note of new vocabulary when reading, notes how it is used, and then uses it in her own writing. While a response paper in particular should provide a forum for creative expression, feedback on form justifies the time invested by the writer and acknowledges his or her overall aims as a learner to achieve some type of linguistic gain. The question is how to provide this feedback in a way that encourages its uptake and implementation in future written work.

It should not be assumed that continued improvement of second language writing skills will result automatically from repeated response paper assignments. Littlewood (1997) argues that individual learners differ with the regard to the attention they pay to the language they use to express their ideas, with some focusing entirely on the content of their message. For this reason, second language writing development not only requires tasks that strike a balance between writing to express ideas and writing to consolidate and build upon the writer's existing linguistic repertoire. It also rests on effective teacher feedback that acknowledges the writer's communicative purpose while continuing to further linguistic

proficiency, paired with a mechanism that encourages a response to, or action upon that feedback in future linguistic production.

The goals of the course in which this approach to teaching writing was developed were divided into content goals and language goals. For the former, by the end of the course students should have demonstrated an awareness of the major developments in Arab intellectual thought since 1800, including but not limited to Islamic Modernism and Salafism, and should be able to draw on what they have read to participate in informed discussion of current developments such as the emergence of radical groups. The language goals require students to write in Arabic with increasing complexity and accuracy as the course progresses, to build the ability to speak on a variety of abstract topics at the paragraph level and beyond in class discussions, and to gain experience of planned public speaking, achieved through in-class presentations. Students engaged with a variety of authentic written and oral texts at home, and were required to submit weekly response papers in Arabic of approximately 250 words. The syllabus contains the following instructions on response papers:

*Papers should show that you have not only completed the reading, but that you have thought about how it is relevant to the course. Your responses can be varied. For example, sometimes you may like to pose a set of questions that occurred to you as you read, other times you may compare two different opinions. A major aim of these papers is language improvement. Vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures that you consider 'high-level' or sophisticated should be italicized. Language that is 'high-risk', meaning that you have tried your best but are not sure whether you have got it right, should be in bold.*

These instructions provide a great deal of freedom in composing the paper while keeping the writer focused on the language he or she uses. The point of requiring students to italicize instances of sophisticated language forms is to focus them on complexity, and to make them sensitive to language they encounter that would be useful in written compositions. The aim of allowing

them to highlight language that they are unsure of encourages risk-taking and hypothesis-testing without embarrassment.

#### 4. Feedback on response papers

Written feedback on response papers follows a consistent format. Ticks indicate instances of successful complex language use, while underlining points out lapses of accuracy that the student should be able to spot. Short responses to content are given in the margin, complimenting certain points, agreeing, questioning, and so on. At the end of the paper, a comment in Arabic responds to the paper as a whole. It might compliment the writer's approach to the issue, state further thoughts or questions stimulated by the paper, point out contradictions or areas overlooked, or suggest relationships with other authors covered in the course to date. The point is to show engagement with what the writer wants to say.

Following this comment on the content of the paper, is the heading 'For Next Time....', under which are highlighted recurring errors noticed in the paper, and perhaps some correct models. For example, a comment may state in English that there are several incorrect attempts at relative clauses in the paper, explain what is wrong, and give a correct example in Arabic. The final heading is 'Useful Language'. This section consists of vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures that struck me as being appropriate but lacking in the paper. They are given in Arabic with an English gloss. An authentic example of the feedback given under these headings is provided below. I have not translated the Arabic (unless I also translated it for the student), since this is not necessary to demonstrate the purpose of the feedback.

For next time:

1. To negate *عندي* use *ليس* (not لا)
2. After *أن* the verb case is *منصوب*, so no *ن*:  
*يريدون أن يذهبوا*
3. For a more formal style use *من اللازم أن* (not just لازم)

Useful language:

1. على سبيل المثال = by way of example/for example
2. في منظوري الشخصي = in my personal view/opinion
3. خلاصة القول إنَّ = in summary (good for introducing your final sentence)

Class activities make use of the feedback on the response papers and provide an opportunity to discuss content and plan future writings. They combine a focus on the written product with process-oriented tasks where students plan out, draft, and review what they have written. One popular activity involves the exchange and activation of useful vocabulary and expressions from teacher feedback. Before returning the response papers in a given week, I type up a list of the linguistic items I have suggested on each paper. In class, students receive their papers and are given time to read the feedback. They then sit with a partner and give an example of their new expressions in context, perhaps several times, before the partner guesses its meaning. Pairs are switched and the activity is repeated until all students have worked together. I then distribute the list of expressions that the students have just exchanged and learned, with an English translation, so that they have a written record. Students work in pairs to plan and produce a piece of writing in class using the new language. An alternative is that they begin writing and then hand their work to another pair, who continue it, pass it on, and so on. Writings are posted on the classroom walls at the end of the activity, allowing time for reading and further comment on language and content.

## 5. Response to feedback

An important element in this approach to teaching writing through response papers is the writing improvement paper. After Syverson (2014), this assignment requires students to document progress in their writing and to provide examples that illustrate how they have taken action on feedback. The assignment consists of all response papers produced to date, accompanied by a short report in English that states what the student has done to improve his or her writing, backed up with evidence from the graded papers. Students receive the following instructions for preparing the report.

*This report should evaluate your progress in improving your writing throughout the course so far. It should show the extent to which you have made an effort to increase the complexity of your writing by using vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures that are new to you, and that you have responded to feedback on previous writings by working to solve problems with accuracy and by incorporating suggested lexical items. The report must be submitted together with all of your graded response papers to date, with my comments. The report itself can be a short bulleted list, and should point to specific examples in your response papers, eg:*

*- I have expanded my vocabulary using several new words. These are highlighted in yellow in my papers.*

*- After paper 1 I decided to stop using the expression بالإضافة إلى 'in addition to', and in subsequent papers I used more sophisticated alternatives. These are highlighted in orange in papers 2 and 3.*

*- In paper 1 and 2 you pointed out a consistent error with relative clauses. Paper 3 shows that I have fixed this. See the examples highlighted in blue.*

*The basic point is that I can see, quickly and without having to search for it myself, what you are doing to improve your writing.*

I typically notice a marked improvement in complexity in the response papers submitted after the first writing improvement report is turned in, presumably because in preparing the report the students focus on the extent to which they are consistently incorporating more sophisticated language into their writing, and then begin to do this more consciously. To achieve this benefit as early as possible the first writing improvement report is assigned three weeks into the semester. The second report is due at the end of the course.

The flexibility of this assignment, in that students are free to highlight any aspect of their writing that they have been consciously

improving, encourages them to not only remedy grammatical and lexical errors, but also to incorporate and flag complex expressions and grammatical structures. Student comments in their reports include giving specific instances of new language, for example *mabhada t-tariiq li* ‘to smooth the way for’, highlighting a widened range of vocabulary, for example by replacing overused *muxtalif* ‘different’ with *mutanawwi* ‘various’ and *mutaddid* ‘diverse’, error correction, such as correct usage of *bi-sabab* ‘because of’ when earlier uses were flagged as problematic, and being sure to distinguish between infinitival *an* ‘to’ and the complementizer *anna* ‘that’. In addition, stylistic elements of a reading text, such as how the writer begins a piece, transitions between ideas, reinforces a point and so on, may be noticed by a student, used in his or her own writing, and then pointed out in the writing improvement report (cf. Hirvela 2004). Examples include use of *la-qad* ‘indeed, verily’ to add emphasis to a point being made, particularly at the beginning of a paper, and placing verbs before their subjects whenever possible for a more authentic Arab style.

The grade for the writing improvement report is awarded based on the extent to which the student has responded to feedback on his or her written Arabic and continued to write with increasing complexity and accuracy. The simple scoring rubric below allows a maximum score of thirty points, with a score of zero through ten possible for each subskill.

	None	Acceptable	Impressive
Evidence of accuracy problems solved	0	7	10
Suggested expressions/vocabulary/structures used appropriately	0	7	10
New language from texts and class activated	0	7	10

It is important that students are aware of this rubric not only as they prepare the writing improvement report, but from the very beginning of the course so that they can build these elements into their written work over time.

## 6. Pedagogical benefits

The use of response papers in this way provides each student in the course with a unique individualized program targeting idiosyncratic errors and identifying areas for improvement. It also acts as a form of learner training (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990, 2011), by encouraging students to notice language in the input they receive and to use it in their own personal output. Williams (2004) points out that writing can facilitate language proficiency in a variety of ways, by strengthening connections between form and meaning, by encouraging increased monitoring, forcing syntactic processing, and by helping learners notice gaps in their knowledge that they are then motivated to fill. More generally, ever since Rubin (1975) advocated studying what makes a successful language learner, and then teaching the strategies they use to other learners who do not have them innately, researchers have sought to map out the characteristics of good second language learners. Sheerin (1997) and Nunan (1997) call for pedagogical practices that foster independent learning and shift the responsibility for progression to the learner. The strategy of focusing on form and then reproducing what is noticed is valuable. In fact, Kumaravadivelu (1994) suggests that production as opposed to comprehension may be the trigger that forces learners to pay attention to form (see also Swain: 1985, 1995). Requiring students to continually integrate new language into their production helps to break the association between accuracy and linguistic improvement assumed by some learners.

It should be noted here that this proposed model does require a considerable time commitment from both students and teachers, particularly when class sizes are large. However, because the model provides a specific linguistic focus for each writing assignment, it can also function to make both writing and grading less burdensome. Rather than combing through a paper and highlighting

every error, the teacher can look for general trends or gaps in the student's writing and note these instead. By picking a few ways that the student can improve as a writer, the teacher does not become bogged down in making an individual piece of writing perfect, and saves time in the process. From the student perspective, since the writer knows that he or she will be assessed on integrating grammatical structures or vocabulary highlighted in previous assignments into a new piece, he or she can complete a draft and then check these specific points. The assignment becomes less random, and perhaps more motivating, because students receive direction on what language should be included and how it should be used.

Initial feedback from students on their experience with this methodology suggests that they see the benefits. In official student evaluations of courses where I have used the writing improvement paper, the workload for the course has consistently been evaluated as appropriate. Students overwhelmingly agree that they have learned a lot from the course, and that the teaching has been effective.

Students have not submitted a single negative comment on this approach to teaching writing, while comments that suggest they enjoyed it include, 'I was pushed to use my Arabic at a considerably higher level, both in speech and in writing,' '... the most beneficial course I have taken in college,' '...an amazing teaching style that is adaptable to suit all students and challenges everyone at their own pace,' 'I enjoyed the responsiveness and feedback and how the assignments were designed well to help you progress from the feedback,' and '[the] teaching style is incredibly conducive for student comfort and success.'

## 7. Conclusion

There are essentially two types of feedback that teachers can provide for second language writers: a commentary on the content of a draft, or on the language used to convey that content (Casanave 2004: 69). Hyland (2003: 184) suggests that this distinction between content and linguistic form is to some extent artificial because the successful articulation of meaning relies on the ability to select

appropriate language. This is certainly a valid point but it is important to note that from the perspective of the learner in a collegiate classroom context, the teacher functions as a reader for the writer to address. A teacher's response to the content of student writing serves to motivate dialogue, and to foster, reward, and maintain engagement with the themes of the course. At the same time, when a course aims to improve students' expressive abilities in second language writing, a focus on form can target both accuracy and linguistic complexity. A longstanding question in this regard is whether feedback on form is effective at all (Truscott 1996), and if it is, then what does effective feedback look like? Part of the approach to feedback outlined in this paper is a writing improvement paper that focuses students on the feedback they receive and requires them to act on it in subsequent written work. As such, while the efficacy of the feedback ultimately still relies on the extent to which an individual student takes it on board, a mechanism for encouraging and measuring attentiveness and reflection is built in to the course. The focus is shifted away from the evaluation of particular instances of writing, which can encourage reliance on tools like Google Translate to achieve perfection, to an assessment of whether or not the writer makes an effort to improve over time. The feedback and the improvement report that students produce form an individualized dialogue in which the writer receives suggestions to improve his or her writing in general, in line with Hyland and Hyland's (2006: 206) assertion that "although the information in feedback is a key factor in learning to write, it is effective only if it engages with the writer and gives him or her a sense that it is a response to a *person*, rather than to a script."

For Arabic in particular, the skills targeted by this approach may also provide students with a means to develop as writers of Arabic dialects. Høigilt and Mejdell (2017) discuss a rise in what they term contemporary mass writing in the Arab world, much of it in vernacular, rather than formal Arabic. Increased literacy, combined with the advent of social media, means that people now write in Arabic dialects for public consumption not only online but in magazines, newspapers, and literature. This fact presents a challenge for learners of Arabic who seek to make written contributions in these areas, since teaching materials to guide them in the conventions

of writing in a dialect are scarce. When students are trained to read source material, notice the language points, and reproduce it accordingly, they are provided with a skillset that is not limited to formal Arabic or indeed any one register, but which enables the use of the language as a whole.

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