

GIVING FEEDBACK

Using Screencasts to Give Feedback

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Levels	<i>High beginning to advanced</i>
Aims	<i>Improve grammatical and lexical accuracy</i> <i>Improve organization and rhetorical features</i>
Class Time	<i>Some, for discussion</i>
Resources	<i>Internet-capable computers</i> <i>Student texts in digital format</i>

A perennial question faced by teachers is how to provide students with effective feedback on their writing. Recent technological advances have made available a new vehicle teachers can use to provide students with feedback: screencasts. Whereas a *screenshot* is a snapshot of a computer screen, a *screencast* is a video recording of the activity on a computer screen. Screencasts typically allow users to record voice narration to accompany the video. Thus, if you receive students' writing as Microsoft Word files, blog posts, or in another digital form, you can use screencasts to provide powerful, easily understood feedback.

With traditional written feedback, students might read the teacher's note "Your thesis statement should be moved here" in the margins of a paper. A student viewing screencast feedback might watch the teacher highlight the text of the thesis statement in yellow and then cut and paste it to its new location while hearing the teacher's voice say, "Your thesis statement should be moved here." Screencasts are much more similar to face-to-face conferences than written feedback alone.

One of the most perplexing challenges faced by second language writing teachers is how to provide effective corrective feedback to students. Should grammatical errors be corrected at all? If so, which errors should be corrected and how should they be corrected? Indeed, the research examining the efficacy of teachers' correction of students' grammatical errors is rather underwhelming (Truscott, 1996). However, students generally expect teachers to provide them with such feedback (Hyland, 2003), and most teachers feel a need to at least attempt to help students improve the accuracy of their writing.

In order to maximize the effectiveness, observe several principles when formulating your feedback. First, resist the urge to mark all errors in a text as you read it. Rather, use your knowledge of relative error gravity (Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984) to prioritize structures for feedback. Furthermore, do not waste time providing feedback on structures which require complex explanations or for which learners are not prepared (e.g., late-acquired structures which students are unlikely to grasp at their present proficiency level).

PROCEDURE

1. Download and install screencasting software. An Internet search for “free screencast software” will turn up a number of options. The program I have used and can recommend is Jing, and it is available for free download at www.techsmith.com/jing.html.
2. Receive students’ work in digital format. Submitting writing assignments as Word documents is perhaps most common, but any format that can be viewed on a computer will work.
3. Read students’ work and decide what to comment on. I make it a habit to read papers one time before going back and highlighting sections on which I want to comment. I find it helpful to distinguish comments about linguistic accuracy from comments about content and organization by using different colors. For example, grammatical errors might be highlighted in green, while comments about organization might be highlighted in yellow.
4. Plan what to say. It is helpful to take a moment before starting to record in order to think about what to say, how to say it, and in what order to say it. Taking the time to plan saves having to go back and re-record because you find yourself giving jumbled or confusing feedback.
5. Record your feedback. After opening the screencast software and the file containing the student text to be commented on, follow the recording procedure for the software you have chosen. For Jing, this is as simple as choosing “capture a video,” pressing the record button, and beginning to speak and “gesture” using the mouse. Jing has a 5-minute limit for any one screencast, and although it is possible to continue commenting on a student paper in a subsequent recording, 5 minutes is generally enough time to provide ample feedback without overwhelming.
6. Store and share your screencasts. You can simply store screencasts as files on your own computer. These files could be emailed to students or posted on a course management system such as Blackboard or Moodle. However, I prefer to upload files to screencast.com. This option allows you to provide students with feedback by sending them an Internet link. Students can then

view the feedback at a time and place that is convenient for them and refer to it repeatedly. Note that there are storage limits and bandwidth limits for screencast.com's free allowance. For most users, the free allowances will be adequate. However, for a small fee, these limits can be raised significantly.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

The first use will likely take more time than traditional pen-and-paper feedback, but most users soon find that screencast feedback takes no more time than traditional feedback or is perhaps even faster. If screencasts are helpful, it will be well worth the initial investment of time and effort.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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