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Video feedback in English for Academic Purposes: building connections with international students while learning online

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The challenge

The transition to online teaching and learning in higher education called upon practitioners to investigate new ways to support and connect with their students. It also prompted a wave of investment in training on learning technologies, inspiring experimentation when communicating asynchronously with learners. The loss of face-to-face classroom interaction elicited concerns over levels of engagement and motivation, as it became clear that students at our pathways college would complete their programme of study online and would not return to a physical classroom. A clear link had been established demonstrating the significant impact of attendance and engagement on meeting learning outcomes, so measures were required to ensure student success and maintain the levels of support offered in college. Additionally, the increased working demands of transitioning online meant that any measures taken would need to avoid extra tasks on top of an already heavier workload for teaching staff.

All teaching was taking place synchronously, and so it was felt that stronger connections with students should be forged asynchronously, for example, when giving feedback on written work. The aims were to increase engagement, provide support and encouragement

via verbal and non-verbal cues not present in text feedback, and to complete the feedback process in a more timely and efficient manner, in turn developing tutors' digital literacy.

The response

A small group of tutors decided to experiment with providing video feedback on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Project formative assessments. This was in the form of screencasts, both with and without a webcam window in which the tutor was visible. Tutors provided comments as they scrolled through the assessment, highlighting areas using the cursor.

Studies have reported that students respond positively to video feedback (McCarthy, 2015; Espasa et al., 2019; Bahula and Kay, 2020; Cunningham and Link, 2021). This is partly attributed to the conversational cues and paralinguistic features absent in text feedback (Ajjawi and Boud, 2017; Ryan, 2020), but which through video present a means of social interaction (Mahoney et al., 2019; Lowenthal et al., 2020; Ryan, 2020). Students also consider this mode of delivery more personalised (McCarthy, 2015; Anson et al., 2016; Bahula and Kay, 2020), and tutors concurred with this. While video feedback is, in essence monologic, learners consider it conversational (Borup et al., 2015; Anson et al., 2016), although there have been calls for more efforts to be made to produce feedback that opens up a dialogue (Mahoney et al., 2019). As students would have an opportunity for an online tutorial after video feedback was released, it was hoped that it would start an ongoing conversation as their projects developed.

There is also evidence to suggest that this mode of feedback can help to strengthen the relationship between tutor and student (Anson et al., 2016; Espasa et al., 2019; Bahula and Kay, 2020; Ryan, 2020), and form connections, especially important during the pandemic (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Cunningham and Link, 2021). This was a common aim among tutors, who wanted to mimic the one-to-one tutorials students would usually have in college and offer a similar experience to students starting their course later in the term. Video feedback was also seen as an opportunity to emphasise important aspects of the students' work and draw attention to areas for development.

Some students initially reported that they liked the video format, while others said they would prefer it together with text that they could refer back to more easily. When one tutor asked if her class would like to receive video feedback on their next assessment, they indicated a preference for feedback in an email, as they felt this was clearer. Given the effort made to foster a deeper connection and provide better one-to-one support, this surprised tutors and prompted reflection and curiosity.

Recommendations

There were several learning points from this experiment. Studies have suggested that drawbacks to video feedback include downloading large files and not having clear instructions on how to access recordings (McCarthy, 2015; Bahula and Kay, 2020; Davies et al., 2020). The linear nature of video feedback can also lead to time-consuming reviewing to locate certain comments (Bahula and Kay, 2020), although a screencast which scrolls through a written assessment could help to avoid this. A significant conclusion from this process, therefore, was the need for clear guidance on how to retrieve feedback, along with using software which facilitated ease of access (including LMS or VLE integration, where possible).

Another notable reflection is that, while one-to-one online support is invaluable in the current educational climate, there may be no realistic substitute for face-to-face delivery and tutorial support in person. It was felt that video feedback was the closest tutors could get to face-to-face interaction, but the amount of time students spend in online lessons can lead to over-exposure and fatigue (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Although video recordings are asynchronous and accessed when convenient, they essentially contribute to more screen time, which may be undesirable.

While teaching staff have taken the pivot to online learning as an opportunity to develop their skills involving learning technology, levels of digital literacy varied at the start of the pandemic (Liu et al., 2020), and this continues to be the case. It is essential that if video feedback is adopted, all staff are given the appropriate support and training to develop competence and confidence in this area. One goal of our experiment was to save time

compared with writing comments (Cunningham and Link, 2021), but evidence suggests creating videos can be more time-consuming (McCarthy, 2015; Davies et al., 2020), and it is likely that digital literacy plays a role in this.

Research specifically concerning video feedback is less common than that on text feedback, but rarer still are feedback studies involving learners who are not studying in their first language (McCarthy, 2015; Bakla, 2020). Bakla (2020) notes that international students are reluctant to engage with video feedback because it is unfamiliar to them, which suggests a need to coach students on how to access, interpret and engage with their feedback to help them adjust to receiving it in a different format. Students' listening skills in the target language should also be considered, as lower level learners may struggle with listening and watching simultaneously. Consequently, more substantive research is called for, in which international student feedback is gathered to understand perceptions of video feedback and the reasons behind them. Using different feedback modalities is feasible across the higher education sector, but care must be taken to support educators in developing competencies, providing clear instructions for access, listening to recipients' feedback and making adaptations so that feedback is meaningful and encouraging, and motivates learners to improve their work.

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