

Exploring Face-to-Face vs. Online Feedback Approaches in Academic Writing Courses

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The Asian Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

There are various ways in which teachers and students provide feedback in L2 academic writing courses. This has been especially true over the past four years during and after the pandemic. This research presents two dimensions—how the teacher has changed his approach to giving feedback during and post-COVID interruptions, and key differences noted in students' comments in online and face to face contexts. This paper first gives a description of his changing approach in giving feedback in online and face to face contexts. Secondly, the researcher will present data findings showing the differences in quantity and quality of student feedback between October 2021—March 2022 (online) and April 2023—August 2023 (face-to-face). Data from feedback collected show that students' face-to-face comments have more length and depth, especially in being critical about content and logic, as opposed to the virtual environment where students gave mostly surface comments on grammar, spelling, and writing structure. The researcher will further provide results showing a comparison of quantity related to specific grading criteria as well as linguistic tone when communicating online and face to face. Key findings highlight the important role dialogue plays in academic writing when providing feedback in either online or face-to-face settings.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Feedback, Online vs. Face-to-Face Teaching

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Introduction

Having strong written communication skills is essential in academia as well as beyond the classroom. How to write well academically at the tertiary level requires a substantial amount of reading (Linuwih, 2021), an understanding of formality and accuracy of academic vocabulary (Syarofi & Shobaha, 2023), and consistent practice of controlled writing covering a range of writing genres (Mallia, 2017). However, without receiving feedback or reflecting critically on one's writing, it is difficult for learners to identify areas to improve or gauge overall progress. Feedback approaches in academic writing courses vary depending on educational settings, cultures, institutional goals and expectations, proficiency levels, among others. Between 2020-2023 during the COVID-19 pandemic, approaches to feedback faced new challenges as many teachers and students were suddenly thrown into emergency remote learning environments. For teachers who had already been conducting academic writing in an online setting, feedback approaches may not have changed; however, for a substantial number of teachers, including those at the institution at which this research took place, new protocols had to be implemented to ensure the quality and quantity of feedback remained at a high level. During these three years, many fruitful discussions between teachers occurred which led to unplanned, but very welcome informal professional development sessions. One key realization that emerged among the teaching staff was that we all had to revisit teaching practices learned in our early teaching days and rethink best approaches for the new era. We had further acknowledged that many of us had comfortably settled into one pattern of teaching or were not fully up to date with useful technological tools and applications to assist students in becoming more critical writers.

This research presents two dimensions. First, it follows changes in feedback approach by the researcher before, during, and after COVID-19. Secondly, data findings will be presented showing the differences in the quantity and quality of student feedback comparing online and face-to-face contexts between October 2020—February 2023 (online, Semester 2) and April 2023—August 2023 (face-to-face, Semester 1). The research concludes by offering insights into benefits and drawbacks of face-to-face versus online feedback approaches in academic writing courses.

Research Context

This research took place in an academic writing course for freshman students at a national university in Japan. Research participants majored in various fields (Engineering, Letters, Agriculture, Science, and Economics) (Figure 2), but all students had to take English writing courses to gain the required number of credits for graduation.

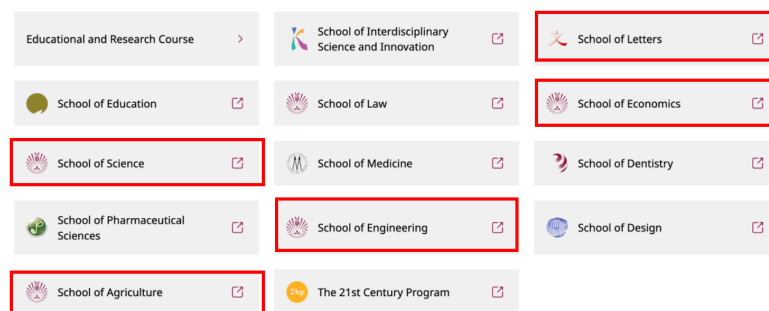


Figure 1: Student participants by faculty <https://www.kyushu-u.ac.jp/en/faculty/>

Proficiency levels ranged from B1 to B2 (English independent user) on the CEFR (CEFR, 2001) scale. The researcher taught five writing classes with an average of 20 students in each class. At the start of the semester, there were approximately 100 students. Due to the attrition rate over the 16-week semester in both online and face-to-face contexts, the final data set collected from feedback comments on Moodle (Moodle, 2024) and Google Docs (Google Doc, 2024) consisted of 90 students (90%) in the online course (semester 1) and 85 (85%) in the face-to-face setting (semester 2) respectively. The main reason for the higher attrition rate in the physical classroom was that many students find it difficult to maintain attendance throughout the semester and fail due to the policy of no more than 30% absences. In the online context, students were typically able to work at their own pace and at the most suitable time as the teacher did not organize virtual meetings on Zoom every week. The researcher was thus able to collect a significant amount of data from both contexts. Between 2022-2023, the researcher tried various feedback approaches which provide insights into the most effective method of providing feedback that would enhance student learning.

Teaching Journey: Changing Approach to Giving Feedback

This section describes the researcher's changing approach to giving feedback in the academic writing course. Through close observation of and reflection on the various approaches, it was possible to identify benefits and drawbacks of each method and understand which method was more effective in face-to-face and online contexts.

Pre-2018 (Face-to-Face)

The university's academic writing syllabus focuses largely on a process-style approach to writing essays with intermittent feedback, rather than the teacher grading only the final product. The approach described in Figure 2 was the style all teachers had been using at the time. Typically, the researcher would ask students to print out the first draft of their essay and then the teacher would give feedback. This was repeated a few weeks later with the students highlighting the revisions they made. The teacher checked the revised, highlighted sections and then the students wrote and submitted the final draft a week later, attaching all the previous drafts.

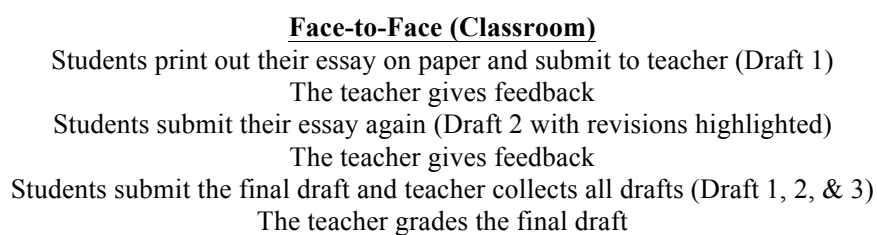


Figure 2: Feedback approach pre-2018

The benefit of this method was that the teacher could observe student progress after subsequent drafts, and help the student understand areas to improve. The drawback was that unfortunately, some students submitted the same essay three times without making or highlighting any revisions. This was demotivating for the teacher who had spent 3-4 hours grading each class. Thus, this style of feedback favored students who were intrinsically motivated and driven to improve their academic writing.

2018–2020 (Face-to-Face)

Class sizes had been increasing from 2015 and thus the previous method of giving feedback became unsustainable as it was leading to teacher burnout. Thus, an alternative approach was needed to maintain quality and quantity of feedback while lessening the workload (Figure 3). Discussions with a colleague (McCarthy & Armstrong, 2019) led to a new student-centered approach with the aim of increasing critical thinking and dialogue.

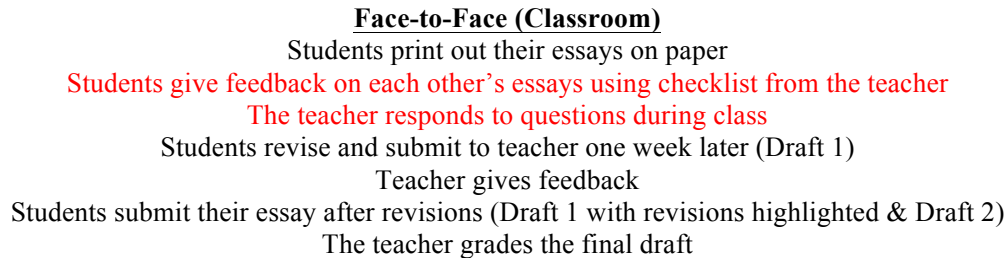


Figure 3: Feedback approach 2018-2020

In this approach, the researcher continued to provide feedback, but decided to give more responsibility to the students. The aim was to help students critically self-evaluate their own writing, thereby increasing self-awareness of their writing ability, as well as specific academic writing components. A checklist was given to students covering the four grading criteria: format, language, structure, and content. The researcher added more time for discussion among students and group questions with the teacher for any areas that were unclear. The benefit of this method was that students became more active in the learning process. Instead of seeing the teacher as “expert,” students were now encouraged to think more deeply and critically of the writing process themselves. The disadvantage was that many students felt anxious about sharing and discussing their essay with others, especially those who had a lower proficiency of English. The researcher allowed students the option to have discussions in their L1 to reduce any concerns.

2020–2022 (Online/Hybrid)

At the start of the pandemic all classes in 2020 moved online for a year. The feedback style which the researcher had been using successfully had to be changed immediately as group discussions were more difficult to incorporate into online and hybrid classes (Figure 4). Again, through discussions with colleagues, a new feedback approach was developed to meet the expected standards at the university. Classes in 2020 were held as mostly on-demand lessons meaning that the researcher prepared videos and students had the freedom to learn at their own pace. Feedback was given only once by the teacher on paragraphs uploaded step-by-step as students wrote their essay. Zoom (Zoom, 2024) was used periodically to meet with students and explain points that students needed to improve generally as a class. By 2021, the researcher became aware that the most successful component of the feedback classes was student discussions and question time with the teacher. As such, more Zoom classes were added and Moodle was used to encourage written feedback. By this time, students were more familiar with how to use online tools such as Zoom and were able to share screens to discuss essays. The most significant changes made during this time was that students used the checklist before feedback classes to check their own essays and the researcher also asked students to pre-label the structural parts of their essay. In this way, the students were able to prepare in advance.

Online (On-demand and Zoom)	Hybrid (Classroom/Moodle)
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Self-check of essay structure, content, language, and format using the teacher's self-directed checklist</i></p> <p>Students prepare to share their essay</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Students label the parts of their essay by themselves</i></p> <p>Students organized into breakout rooms (in pairs)</p> <p>Students read and discuss each other's essay</p> <p>Student asks teacher for advice if they have questions</p> <p>Student submits final essay after revisions</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Students label the parts of their essay by themselves</i></p> <p>Students upload essay to Moodle</p> <p>Students organized in groups in Moodle and in the classroom</p> <p>Students read and discuss each other's essay</p> <p>Student asks teacher for advice if they have questions</p>

Figure 4: Feedback approach 2020-2022

The benefit of the online approach was that students could learn at their own pace and at a time that was suitable to them. By adding specific self-checks, students could feel more prepared to give feedback as well as understand which areas were lacking in their essay writing. The disadvantage was that many students were unfamiliar with the various platforms and felt it was too much work to upload essays, share screens, meet in breakout rooms, and write comments on Moodle. Each platform required a different password, and the university had also begun to put restrictions on certain settings to protect student identities.

2023–2024 (Face-to-Face)

When classes resumed face-to-face after the pandemic, the researcher reflected on the successes and drawbacks of previous methods. Once again, through dialogue with a colleague at another national university, the current feedback approach (Figure 5) was developed and implemented.

Face-to-Face (Classroom/Google Doc.)
<i>Weeks 1-7: Teacher modeling of feedback</i>
<i>Weeks 8-16: Critical analysis of paragraphs and practice feedback sessions every 2-3 weeks</i>
Self-check of essay structure, content, language, and format using the teacher's self-directed checklist
Students arranged in Google Doc groups and upload their essays (Draft 1)
Students individually label the parts of their own essay
Students write comments on Google Doc in English/bilingual as practiced in previous classes
The teacher checks the comments and provides feedback on comments (meta-feedback)
Students revise their essay
<i>Teacher offers in-office consultation for students who have questions OR invites students to ask specific questions on their writing via the Google doc</i>
Students submit final essay after discussions and revisions

Figure 5: Feedback approach 2023-2024

The most notable change in this feedback approach was the addition of the critical analysis of body paragraphs which was done three times in the latter half of the 16-week semester. The researcher found that through critical analysis of writing, the students could better understand the grading process and give more effective feedback, whether in online or face-to-face contexts. The critical analysis was less effective in the first part of the semester as students did not yet have a complete understanding of essay components and grading criteria. As such, the teacher focused on modeling feedback in the first part of the semester and then followed up with paragraph analysis. In addition, along with talking with students in groups, the teacher offered consultation hours for students who needed more assistance. Google Docs became the platform to give written feedback as most students had a gmail account and could access and use it easily. This approach has been the most effective since returning to the classroom after the pandemic and has resulted in improved feedback comments and a higher standard of essay writing.

The next section of this paper presents data findings which illustrate differences in quantity and quality of student feedback between October 2021—March 2022 (online) and April 2023—August 2023 (face-to-face).

Learning Journey: Students’ Ability to Give Critical Feedback

Data was collected from approximately 90 students in the online setting and 85 students in the face-to-face classroom. The data examines firstly the quantity of comments and then the quality.

Quantity

Feedback data collected from written comments on Moodle during online learning numbered 128 and comments after the pandemic when face-to-face classes resumed numbered 176. Even though there were more comments in the face-to-face setting by fewer students, the quantity of comments was satisfactory for both contexts. Data showed that sufficient comments were written across all faculties. Where they differed was mostly in length of comments as the more proficient students wrote in more detail. One point to note here is that instead of writing several small, specific comments throughout the reading of the essay, students were encouraged to write one or two longer, more general comments about areas they felt were strengths and areas in which they felt the essay could be improved. If they wanted to, they could then pinpoint specific examples from the essay. This ensured that the slower-proficiency students did not feel overwhelmed with the task and more advanced students could have more freedom in the way they approached the task.

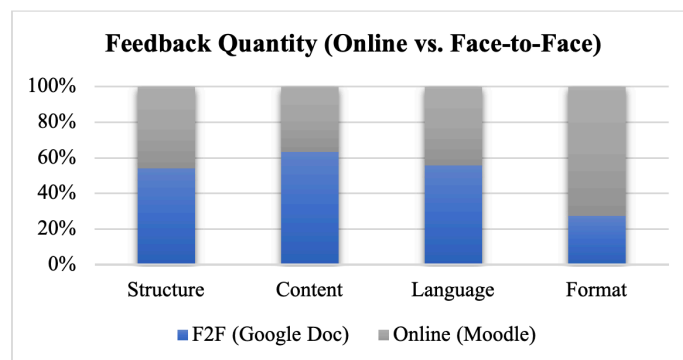


Figure 6: Comparison of feedback quantity (online and face-to-face contexts)

The key findings illustrated in Figure 6 are in the percentage of comments observed when comparing online and face-to-face comments in the four grading categories. In the online setting, most of the comments written were about formatting (74%). Comments about language accuracy (42%), content (39%), and structure (43%) were somewhat similar in number. The researcher noted that students typically found it easier to provide feedback on format and structure since these areas are more objective and straightforward to check. Regarding accuracy in language, most of the comments were on spelling and grammar as students picked up many of the suggestions by the software editing checks. There were fewer comments on academic word choice as this was the most difficult part of language checks. In comparison, during face-to-face feedback, students rarely focused on formatting, but instead discussed the content of the essay. This shows that dialogue during feedback lessons enhances the writing process as students speak more deeply about the content as opposed to just reading and writing comments. In particular, students talked about reasoning and logic in

writing. Helping students to understand how to write strong content in an academic essay is an area that is difficult to teach to an entire class as each topic is decided by the students themselves. That is, students must research and decide which information they will include in the essay themselves and consider if the selected information has unity and coherence, as well as a logical flow.

Quality

Regarding quality of feedback, the research sought empirical evidence showing differences in online and face-to-face environments. However, interestingly, the quality in both learning environments, for the most part, was similar. The major difference observed was that lower proficiency learners wrote more surface comments (e.g., on format and grammar) as well as shorter sentences in a somewhat monologic style. However, they seemed to benefit more from the feedback received as they were able to revise their essay to a higher standard from the original. Higher proficiency learners wrote more critical comments on key structural errors and weaknesses in content in a dialogic style and with a higher level of linguistic complexity. This finding is in line with Gao et al. (2023). What the researcher noted most significantly when analyzing the data is that the quality of feedback increased when meaningful dialogue during paragraph analysis were incorporated into feedback classes (see Schillings et al., 2018 for similar findings). Figure 7 shows the quality of feedback written when students were asked to quietly read their partner's essay and write comments (left side) and feedback written by students after paragraph analysis tasks and discussion were introduced into feedback classes (right side).

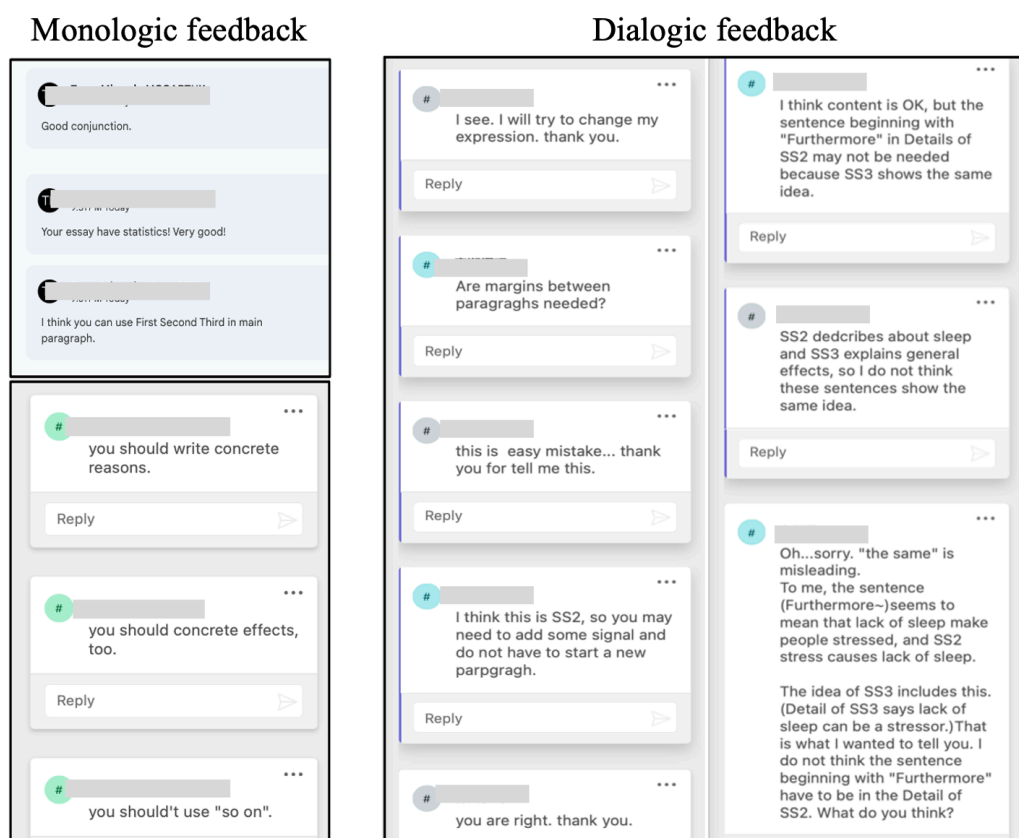


Figure 7: Quality of feedback

As can be seen in the figure, in the monologic style, the student reviewer wrote shorter comments that although insightful to the writer, did not provide much detail. There was no acknowledgment to the reviewer to show that the writer had read the comments. This was an issue to some students who felt like they had taken on the role of “teacher,” and they did not feel that this was their responsibility. Linguistically, the tone is somewhat harsh with the expression “you should” appearing frequently in the comments.

you should write concrete reasons
you should concrete effects
you shouldn't use “so on”

This style of feedback was observed in both online and face-to-face settings. On the right side, the feedback is more conversational as it includes words of thanks from the writer.

this is easy mistake...thank you for tell me this
you are right. thank you.

There are even moments of disagreement where students defend their writing positions which shows that through dialogic feedback, students are able to understand and explain writing conventions more deeply.

A: I think content is OK, but the sentence beginning with “Furthermore” in Details of SS2 may not be needed because SS3 shows the same idea.
B: SS2 describes about sleep and SS3 explains general effects, so I do not think these sentences show the same idea.

Because students were asked to label their essays in advance using coding symbols (SS2: Supporting sentence 2), they were able to easily incorporate this academic writing terminology into their feedback. A second observation was students adding “What do you think?” to the end of the comments. This is a technique the researcher often used when modeling feedback in the first part of the semester to help students develop a more critical mind when self-evaluating their writing. It was interesting to observe students using the modeling style in their own feedback. Based on the data findings, it can be concluded that modeling is a useful technique for teachers who are trying to incorporate more peer feedback into academic writing classes.

For students who need more detailed feedback, a second useful suggestion would be to ask students what kind of feedback they prefer and offer consultation hours to address specific concerns. In a previous study conducted by the researcher (Armstrong, 2023), students were asked about their preferences for receiving feedback. Figure 8 shows the results.

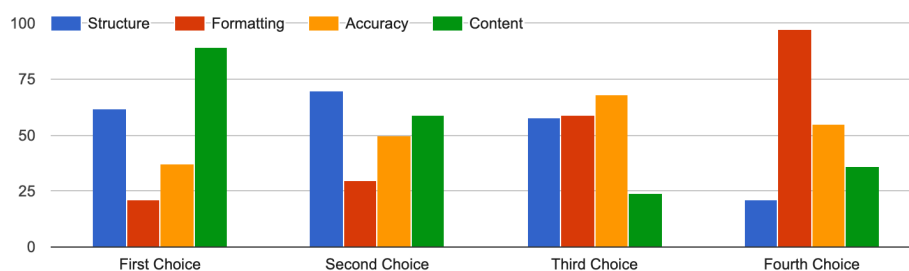


Figure 8: In order of importance, how would you prefer to receive feedback?

From the researcher's experience, only students who are either highly motivated or failing the course ask for extra assistance, thus this does not add to the teacher's workload. However, having students reflect on aspects of their writing they need specific help with before consultation helps to speed up the process and improve the quality of feedback.

Conclusions

This study first provided a description of the researcher's journey over a decade of giving feedback in an academic writing course culminating in his current dialogic approach. It then compared the quantity and quality of feedback in online and face-to-face learning contexts. The most significant findings observed from the collected data were that incorporating analytical tasks, feedback modeling, and discussion were the most beneficial in improving both the quantity and quality of peer feedback. Regarding quantity, the number of comments in classroom settings were slightly higher than in online settings mainly because students were able to discuss the essay while writing comments. The researcher found that the quality of feedback was similar regardless of learning environment. However, what was most interesting was that after doing several paragraph analysis discussion tasks before the main feedback class, students became more dialogic in their peer feedback style. They acknowledged each other's comments, used more linguistically complex sentences, and their language became more formal in tone. What the researcher gained mostly from this study which other teachers could benefit from is that successful peer feedback in academic writing courses requires three main elements: meaningful dialogue (critical discussion about academic writing components), self-directedness (a willingness to take more responsibility for the quality of one's own writing), and inquiry (reflecting on strengths and areas to improve and asking the necessary questions to improve one's writing). However, it is also important to be mindful not to fall into formulaic teaching, but rather be aware that each writing course, each group of students, and each teaching context often requires a tailored approach.

Acknowledgments

This paper was supported by JSPS kakenhi grant number 22K00737.
<https://kaken.nii.ac.jp/en/grant/KAKENHI-PROJECT-22K00737/>

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