



What happens to the quality of writing in year 5 when we use a framework to train students on delivering quality verbal peer feedback?

Clio Chartres

Key Stage 2

Project rationale

Our current year 5 cohort is striking for its polarised profile. Generally speaking, they are emotionally engaged with one another and the quality of their collaboration and exploratory talk is a great advertisement for an oracy-rich curriculum. In contrast, they have always struggled with some of the routine basics of the curriculum, often finding independent work overwhelming and, in particular, many struggle to record their imaginative ideas with any real level of accuracy. They did not – or could not – effectively edit their own work.

Recent research suggests that ‘verbal feedback, when applied well, has a positive impact on the engagement of all students and gains in progress and achievement’ (UCL, 2019). Developing effective verbal peer feedback offers the possibility of the students themselves channelling their collaborative and social strengths to support one another in tackling weaknesses in the written accuracy of their work. Indeed, successful verbal peer feedback relies heavily on pre-existing emotional and collaborative skills within the classroom (Van de Weghe, 2004) but has the potential to support students of all attainment levels. Those who struggle with the basics can be supported by more confident members of the class, while -- in engaging more fully with a piece’s success criteria and style -- higher attainers are better able to assess the quality of their own work and often more invested in doing so (Topping, 2017).

Deliberate development of the skill of providing effective feedback was new to the cohort as a whole; the six focus students of my intervention were consequently made up of three mixed-ability pairings.

Baseline data

In order to build an overall picture of peer feedback in the classroom prior to the intervention, I looked at three different areas:

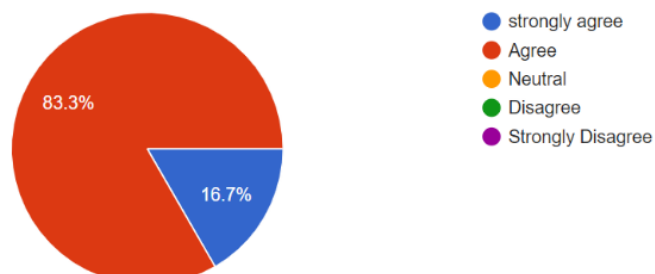
1. Students’ perceptions of peer feedback
2. The quality and type of feedback being given
3. Any impact or effect this feedback had on the writing

Pre-existing attitudes in the classroom to peer feedback

To assess their attitudes towards peer feedback, my target students filled in a questionnaire. My assumption that we had a positive classroom culture in which to develop effective peer feedback was supported by the overwhelmingly positive attitudes students expressed in the questionnaire.

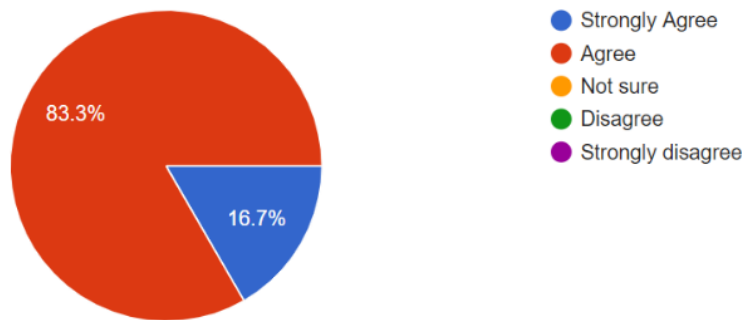
I enjoy receiving feedback from my peers on my own writing.

6 responses



I usually find feedback from my peers on how to improve my writing helpful.

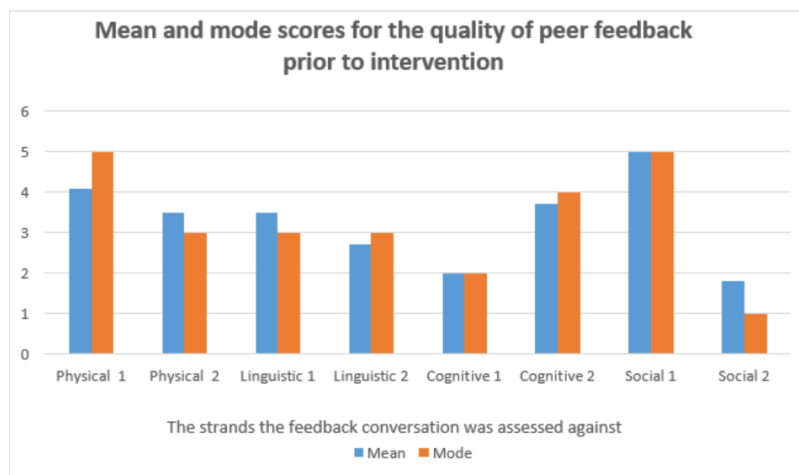
6 responses



2. The quality and type of feedback being given

I took transcripts of students giving feedback to a partner on a recent piece of work. I and two colleagues then rated these conversations on a scale of 1 – 6 in relation to eight different strands that my wider reading had suggested were integral to high-quality peer feedback (outlined in the feedback framework I created to underpin my intervention, see figure 2).

I then took a mean and mode score for each strand to identify the various strengths and weaknesses (figure 1):



There were notable strengths linked to the emotional-social target: 'we are always kind and constructive' and the physical target: 'we are clear and believe in the value of our voice'. This data strengthened my assumption that the emotional culture of the classroom and the students' oracy background would be a good foundation on which to build high-quality peer feedback.

Whereas I had assumed that students overly focused on things like capital letters and full-stops because they were easy to pick up on, only one student commented on punctuation. This lack of grammatical focus in the feedback was particularly interesting as this is the area in which students especially needed support.

With one exception, all the students commented in some way on the overall style of the piece, albeit in a non-specific manner. In fact, lack of specificity was the most striking issue: only a third of the students referred to any specific phrase or element of the piece. Otherwise, the feedback was made up of general statements which were hard to action such as 'this needs more adjectives' (in fact untrue in the context that it was a formal newspaper report!).

3. Assessing the impact of peer feedback

The ultimate purpose of teaching students to deliver good quality feedback is to improve students' own writing. After receiving feedback, students were given time to make edits. A qualitative judgement was made about whether the feedback had had any marked impact on (a) the accuracy of the piece (looking for adjustments to spelling and grammar) and (b) the overall structure, flow and content of the piece. Again, this was rated on a scale of 1-6 and triangulated with two fellow colleagues before taking the mean judgement.

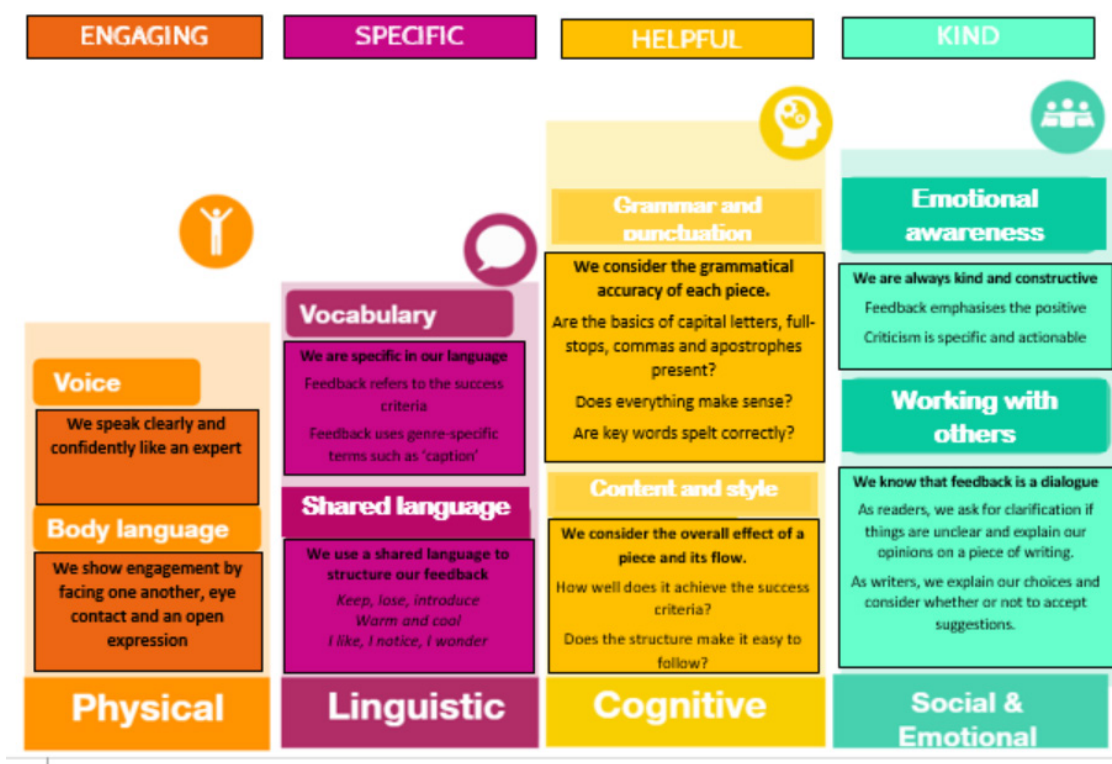
Only one student made any adjustment to the content or structure of the piece. Five out of the six students made some minor grammatical edits but only one of these actually related to feedback received.

Overall, it seemed that students were good delivering feedback, but it was not taking place as a dialogue and the lack of specific references to the work and its genre meant the feedback was having little – if any – impact on the students' work.

Intervention & impact

From my reading, I distilled what best practice looks like when giving verbal feedback into creating a framework for the skills associated with delivering effective peer feedback. The framework was based on the four strands that students are already familiar with when reflecting on talk in the classroom, and uses student-friendly success statements such as 'We use a shared language to structure our feedback'.

Figure 2: Peer-feedback framework based on the four strands.



Every fortnight for eight weeks, students engaged in a 'writer's workshop' – each session focusing on the explicit modelling and practice of a different strand.

The key stages for each writer's workshop were as follows:

Stage 1: Our class discussion guidelines and school values were emphasised at the start of each workshop to ensure that we continued to build on the interpersonal and talk skills required to successfully deliver feedback. The positive potential of feedback conversations is regularly undermined by potentially damaging 'disputational talk' or the unproductive 'cumulative talk' (Boon, 2014) (Mercer and Hodgkinson, 2013).

Stage 2: Checklists and guiding questions were used to scaffold students' analysis of the work. These checklists mimicked those identified in action research as enabling students to give more specific, formative comments (Gielen et al, 2010). (As I would with any new skill, I modelled the use of these checklists to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of a piece.)

Stage 3: Students planned what they were going to say using a shared language protocol. Research suggests that a 'common vocabulary' with which to structure feedback makes it both easier to deliver and receive (Hill, 2015).

Stage 4: Students were given the opportunity to reflect on, and apply, the feedback they had been given (Boon, 2014).

Stage 5: Students received feedback on their feedback, so that they could assess how much progress they were making on the skill itself (ibid).

These skills were then applied and embedded into regular classroom practice during writing lessons, with students using an independent toolkit to provide quick-fire feedback.

Research ethics

Students were reminded that they could opt out at any time throughout the process. As a mixed ability group of both genders, it seemed unlikely that students would feel singled out for a particular reason but I nonetheless selected students who I thought would be excited to be part of something rather than feeling singled out by it.

Evaluation

Simply distilling the essential elements of successful peer feedback to create the framework -- and then having this tool to track students' progress -- has raised the importance of teaching good quality peer feedback in my own mind, and in my classroom.

Though the workshops were time-consuming, they seemed to encourage an increased awareness of the skills needed for quality feedback; it became commonplace for students to reference the framework when reflecting on feedback. Anecdotally, there does seem to have been a shift in writing lessons: there are fewer students desperately waiting for my support to help them edit the basics, and many students appear more motivated – and able – to edit work independently or with a partner with the support of the toolkit.

However, while I am confident that the students are more aware of what makes good feedback -- and better equipped to provide it -- the data is inconclusive as to whether this has had a significant impact on the quality of writing. A comparison of moderated teacher judgements on writing levels from before and after the intervention does suggest that nearly all students have made significant progress in their writing this term; however, this is attributable to a number of factors and the precise role of quality peer feedback is difficult to quantify.

In addition, I was aware throughout that effective peer feedback presupposes students already having a firm understanding of basic grammatical rules as well as of to the genre-specific toolkit of the piece in question. Quality feedback must be paired with quality writing instruction, and teacher feedback – supported by a teacher's in-depth knowledge of genre-specific rules and style etc – is still invaluable.

References





- Boon, S.I. (2014). Increasing the uptake of peer feedback in primary school writing: findings from an action research enquiry. *Education 3-13*, 44(2), pp.212–225.
- Gielen, S., Peeters, E., Dochy, F., Onghena, P. and Struyven, K. (2010). Improving the effectiveness of peer feedback for learning. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), pp.304–315.

- Hill, L. (2015). Running head: PEER EDITING AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT WRITING Incorporating a Consistent Peer Editing Model across the Curriculum. [online] Available at: <https://viurrspace.ca/bitstream/handle/10613/2566/LisaHill-thesisfinal%282%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [Accessed 24 Apr. 2020].
- J. Topping, K. (2017). Peer Assessment : Learning by Judging and Discussing the Work of Other Learners. Interdisciplinary Education and Psychology, 1(1).
- Mercer, N. and Hodgkinson, S. (2013). Exploring talk in schools : inspired by the work of Douglas Barnes. Los Angeles Etc: Sage.
- UCL (2019). UCL Verbal Feedback Project Report. [online] Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/widening-participation/sites/widening-participation/files/2019_verbal_feedback_project_final_4_print.pdf [Accessed 24 Apr. 2020]. for Speech, Language and Communication [online]. London: Communication Trust. [Viewed: 20 April 2020]. Available from: https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/12285/let_s_talk_about_it_-_final.pdf

Appendix

Stage 1: Initial positive response

Gut reaction to the key area for improvement. Pick one.

<p>LINGUISTIC</p>  <p>This doesn't make sense.</p>	<p>COGNITIVE</p>  <p>This doesn't flow clearly.</p>	<p>COGNITIVE</p>  <p>This doesn't feel like the right genre.</p>	<p>SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL</p>  <p>This is boring/I didn't enjoy reading it.</p>
---	--	---	--


Stage 3: Structuring the criticality

How well did your partner deliver the feedback?

★ 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 ★

It hasn't really helped at all because...	It's helped with the language	It's made me feel more confident about..
It's given me a better sense of the overall piece	It has helped me improve how accurate my writing is	Now I understand how to...
		I don't understand how to respond to it

Stage 2: Guiding criticality

<p>LINGUISTIC</p>  <p>This doesn't make sense.</p>	<p><i>I noticed that...</i></p> <p>The basic punctuation isn't correct. You've missed a capital letter, full-stop, question mark.</p> <p>The verbs aren't in the same tense.</p> <p>There's a word missing here.</p> <p>This word is repeated when it doesn't need to be.</p> <p>There should be a comma to show when to pause.</p> <p>This is a separate idea that should be in a new paragraph.</p> <p>This word doesn't make sense in the context.</p>
<p>I spotted.....</p> <p>I think you missed....</p> <p>Do you think you need...here.</p> <p>Have you considered.....</p>	
<p>Eye contact</p> <p>Positive tone of voice</p> <p>More praise than criticism</p> <p>Be specific</p>	

Stage 4: Reflection on impact and quality of feedback

What is good about your partner's writing?
Read, think, share.

<p>I really like the way you...</p> <p>My favourite part is... because...</p> <p>I feel that your writing is...</p>	<p>It's accurate (spelling and punctuation).</p>
<p>The content is relevant.</p>	<p>It's interesting.</p>
<p>It feels original.</p>	<p>It flows well.</p>
<p>I like the vocabulary.</p>	