

# Chapter 5

## Learning-Oriented Assessment: More Than the Chalkface



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**Abstract** The idea of using assessment to promote learning has now gained powerful traction in education. However, a good deal of the relevant theoretical and research work tends to focus on the teaching-learning interface, paying particular attention to efficacious teacher and peer interaction that can enhance student learning. Relatively little attention has been paid to the importance of curricular provision and institutional facilities (cf. Norris 2016). In this chapter I will draw on the work of a case study exploring (a) the ways in which experienced university teachers try to develop and implement an assessment approach that they believe can promote student learning, and (b) students' perceptions of and responses to assessment in relation to their own ideas of learning. Taking an interpretive phenomenological approach, I track the experiences and expressed views of the teachers and students of a Masters programme in English Language Teaching over a 24-month period. The overall aim for this chapter is to provide an 'insider' account of the 'hinterland' of assessment within an academic context, and to call for a broadening of perspective to take account of both conceptual and curricular issues situated within institutional contexts.

### Introduction

In their introductory chapter to this volume, Poehner and Inbar-Lourie explicate the value of partnerships between researchers and practitioners as a way to develop both L2 education and the theories and conceptual models that may inform them. The focus of the present chapter is on the diverse ways in which learning and teaching are positioned conceptually in theorizing and researching learning-oriented assessment (LOA), and the possible 'after-wash' or consequences of the different positions for curriculum design and pedagogic practice. That is, in line with the

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thematic focus of this book on praxis, understood as the dynamic interrelation of theory/research and practice, the present chapter recognizes that differing conceptualizations of what occurs in classrooms must be accounted for as part of the theoretical and practical elaboration of LOA. Moreover, the arguments and ideas explored in this chapter emerged not from a study designed and conducted by researchers external to a context of practice and for whom the teachers and learners involved were simply participants. Rather, the ideas emerged from a piece of practitioner research on student responses to tutor feedback comments on their written assignments. By ‘practitioner research’ is meant the observations and interview data included in this discussion were collected during the course of teaching and programme running with a particular focus in mind (Menter et al. 2011). The emerging data are then explored collaboratively with colleagues concerned with a view to achieving a shared and, hopefully, deeper understanding of the on-going practice. No contrived data were involved. For reasons that will become clear presently, ‘feedback’ is effectively the clutch mechanism, metaphorically speaking, that links curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment in this discussion.

Perhaps a brief word on provenance and nomenclature is appropriate here. LOA, a relatively recent coinage, is used as an inclusive umbrella term in this discussion to cover a range of the research and theoretical work in classroom-based assessment that has appeared under different labels such as *assessment-for-learning*, *dynamic assessment*, *embedded assessment*, *formative assessment* and so on (for examples of this work, see Chaps. 6, 9 and 10 in this volume by Baker and Germain, Poehner and van Compernelle, and Davin and Herazo). The discursive use of LOA as a superordinate term is not intended to supplant all the different schools of thought, each with its rich conceptual and theoretical articulations and principles of practice (see Leung et al. 2018). LOA is used here totemically to foreground the ‘for learning’ dimension of assessment; indeed, at the heart of LOA is obviously learning, and by association, teaching. The main aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that LOA is context- and people-sensitive, and that this renders the concept particularly useful for orienting to situated local research involving teachers and students. Unlike certain chapters in this volume, the present discussion does not re-examine LOA in light of a particular researcher-teacher partnership but instead it emphasizes the importance of engaging with the individuals in a given educational context whose lived experiences, goals, needs, and values shape that context and influence the ways in which practices are realized and interpreted. Such engagement is an essential starting point for praxis as well as a concern that must continually be returned to throughout collaborative undertakings, a point illustrated by Harding and Brunfaut (Chap. 4, this volume).

In the first part of this chapter I will draw attention to two foci on LOA found in the research and professional literature: the teaching-learning interface and the relationship between assessment theories (often implicitly and routinely embedded in practice) and institutional and external affordances and constraints. After that I will explore the complex links between classroom level LOA practice, curricular infrastructure and teachers’ intellectual/professional dispositions. This part of the

discussion will be facilitated by some data drawn from a study of student responses to teacher feedback. In the concluding remarks I will suggest that it is not enough for LOA to be based on a set of sound concepts and theories, rather the practice of LOA requires on-going situated local practitioner-led research.

## Focus on Teaching-Learning Interface

Conceptually LOA can be said to be at the intersection between curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. A good deal of theorizing of and research in LOA is, perhaps not unreasonably, focussed on the teaching-learning interface. The following is a selection of statements on representing a range of concerns and orientations at different levels of education. Black and Wiliam (1998: 2), for instance, open their discussion in the highly influential school education focussed pamphlet 'Inside the Black Box' with this statement:

Teachers need to know about their pupils' progress and difficulties with learning so that they can adapt their work to meet their [pupils'] needs – needs which are often unpredictable and which vary from one pupil to another. Teachers can find out what they need in a variety of ways – from observation and discussion in the classroom, and from written work of pupils whether done as homework or in class.

Wiliam (2011:46) puts forward the following advice for teachers for embedded assessment, that is, classroom-based assessment of student performance by teachers carried out as part of their everyday teaching activities:

1. Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward
4. Activating learners as instructional resources for one another
5. Activating learners as the owners of their own learning.

In a discussion on the kind of assessment that would likely promote student learning in university settings, Gibbs (2006: 29–30) sets out the following 11 conditions:

- Assessed task capture sufficient study time and effort.
- These tasks distribute student effort evenly across topics and weeks.
- These tasks engage students in productive learning activity.
- Assessment communicates clear and high expectations to students
- Sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail.
- The feedback is provided quickly enough to be useful to students.
- Feedback focuses on learning rather than on marks or students themselves.
- Feedback is linked to the purpose of the assignment and to criteria.
- Feedback is understandable to students, given their sophistication.

Feedback is received by students and attended to.

Feedback is acted upon by students to improve their work or their learning.

In a discussion specifically focussed on science and technology in primary school education (Year 1 to Year 8) in New Zealand, Cowie, Moreland and Otrrel-Cass (2013: 9) define LOA (the authors use the term ‘assessment for learning’) as follows:

Assessment for learning encompasses those everyday classroom practices through which teachers, peers, and learners seek/notice, recognise and respond to student learning, throughout the learning, in ways that aim to enhance student learning and student learning capacity and autonomy.

In an elaboration on their approach to assessment for learning, Cowie et al. (op. cit.:11) state that their version of sociocultural orientation ‘... directs attention to the interaction between teachers, students and tasks in a particular setting as these evolve over time.’

Despite the clearly different concerns, contexts and orientations articulated in the above statements, a common perspective can be seen running through them. That is, their focus of attention is on the teaching-learning interface. The assumption is that learning is largely, if not exclusively, a consequence of teaching.

## **The Broader Context of Teaching, Learning and Assessing**

While the teaching-learning interface is undoubtedly as a key issue for any discussion on teacher-led LOA, it should not be regarded as the only concern. Teaching-learning in schools and universities does not take place in a vacuum. The assessment conduct of teachers and students is influenced contingently by a whole host of other factors such as statutory assessment requirements (e.g. type/volume of evidence/performance) and standards/criteria, phases of education, institutional assessment arrangements, teacher values (individual and/or collective), and disciplinary beliefs and practices.

Institutional ethos and disciplinary practices can be influential. In a series of three studies of teacher assessment practices in England involving over 40 primary and secondary schools, Clarke and Gipps (2000: 45) found, for instance, that teachers working in the participant primary schools and English departments in secondary schools tended to use more ‘informal, formative methods (e.g. pupil self-assessment, regular notetaking, use of pupil portfolios)’ whereas teachers in Mathematics and Science departments in secondary schools tended to adopt ‘rather formal approaches to ongoing assessment (e.g. end of module tests, regular classroom tests)’.

Crossouard and Pryor (2012) look closely at the practice of LOA (formative assessment in their terms) in a Scottish primary school context. Perhaps it should be noted that the school education system in Scotland prides itself on resisting using standardized testing for accountability purposes and favouring formative assessment to promote learning. This approach is built into the Scottish curriculum framework

(see <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/curriculum/assessment>). In this case study the two researchers examine, *inter alia*, the ways in which teachers conceptualized formative assessment within the *collaborative challenges* – these were extended collaborative problem-solving group tasks, a feature of the curriculum work in this school. The topics of these challenges were quite complex, e.g. students engaging in democratic politics (forming a political party and developing a political manifesto). They were meant to afford students with opportunities to generate their own idea and to produce work that is not necessarily right or wrong. However, as noted by Crossouard and Pryor (op.cit.: 256), there seems to be ‘a disjuncture between teachers’ declared espousal of the “freedoms” of a ‘challenge’, and the framing of these freedoms within expectations that pupils were to learn particular curricular ‘content’. This disjuncture is reflected in the following statement made by one the participant teachers:

‘... there’s a kind of freedom element which I think most children thrive upon. And when they’re in a group, the generating of ideas within the group, some of the things they can come up with – it’s quite amazing. So sometimes making it quite open ended the product, or how it’s to be presented, it’s great, because what they’ll come up with to do is maybe nothing that I’d even considered. The road I was going down was completely different, [and] as long as they’ve tackled the challenge and learned what they’re supposed to learn, that doesn’t matter’. (Loc.cit.)The phrase ‘as long as they’ve tackled the challenge and learned what they’re supposed to learn’ is telling. The ‘openness’ seemed to relate to the ways in which the students developed their challenge and presented their work. In terms of content knowledge, the students were reminded in the formative feedback that they should conform to certain expectations such as ‘Put in accurate information’ (loc.cit.). So ‘openness’ was a constrained concept; there is a curriculum structure that defines the meaning of freedom. Convergence with the school’s agenda is expected.

All of this is consistent with Sadler’s (1989:121) observations that for students to benefit from LOA, three conditions should be met:

‘the learner has to (a) possess a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for, (b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, and (c) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap.’It would seem learning, particularly learning in institutional settings with a curricular framework, involves external reference points. These external reference points can be formally stated standards and benchmarks and/or tacit expectations shared among key stakeholders, such as teachers, trainers and supervisors, who are charged with the responsibility to help others to achieve their best. Furthermore, these studies, like many others, locate assessment within an intricate web of interconnected beliefs and values, activities and regulations. Together they unambiguously suggest that LOA, much like any other organized educational activity, must be understood as part of a curricular infra-structure with inter-linking components. In the next section I will begin to explore the idea that LOA is inescapably intertwined with a curricular infra-structure and professional-cum-intellectual beliefs and values. The discussion will be contextualized by a sample of student responses to tutor feedback on written assignments. Beyond the substantive teaching-learning

issues raised in relation to the individual students concerned, the data extracts in the next section also alert us to the need for a more fundamental conceptual sensibility. LOA approaches and principles, as we have seen earlier, can be transformed into a set of recommended practices from the standpoints of the teacher and/or the curriculum requirements. However, unless we take account of the dynamics, contingencies, and demands of local contexts through the students' perspectives, we might simply be enforcing a top-down learning agenda in the guise of LOA. Seen in this light, understanding students' perceptions and orientations through dialogue is a critical point of engagement for LOA practice.

## Individual Responses to Feedback

The data reported here are drawn from a corpus of student responses to formative feedback conducted in a London university in 2013/4 (for a fuller account see Andon et al. 2018). The context and setting of the study were as follows: The programme was a Masters in Applied Linguistics and TESOL; the teaching team involved was concerned that students should make the best use of their highly pressurised time on a one-year programme; and promoting effective learning through feedback comments on written assignments was one of the formative strategies adopted by the teaching team. As part of this pedagogic approach, the first written assignment in the first (autumn) term was designed to be an early opportunity to provide formative comments to help students understand the teaching team's expectations in terms of content selection, textual organisation and academic register. The programme leader was at pains to explain and emphasize this aim to the students in all the meetings with them throughout the academic year. Students were encouraged to see their tutors to discuss the feedback comments that they had received and to share their feedback comments with one another.

The study involved eight students on this programme: four UK-based students, four international students – two of whom were English L1 speakers. The student participants were all volunteers. All the students on this MA TESOL programme were briefed on the main purpose of the study – to explore the students' perceptions of written feedback as a form of formative support for learning. The study took place in the summer term 2015. All the students had received marks and comments on the assignments they submitted in the autumn term (the previous September to December). The participant students were invited to attend a 30-min semi-structured interview to discuss the feedback comments, and their responses to them. The students were advised that they were free to choose any marked assignment/s that they had written as a basis for discussion.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the interview data. To draw out the main themes in the data, the analysis followed inductive coding procedures to identify manifest and latent content (Berg 2009, chapter 11). Manifest content refers to explicitly expressed points of view or statements by the student participants (in response to questions in the interview); latent content refers to statements that

require some degree of interpretation. The contingent and co-constructed nature of the interview utterances was taken into consideration in the analysis (Mann 2011, 2016). The data analysis and findings were conducted and cross-scrutinized by the three members of the research team, and there was consensus on the emerging themes.

A number of themes emerged from the study. For reasons of space and scope, I will report some of these themes as they relate to feedback. It is important to make clear that the participant students expressed a large number of views and opinions on a wide range of issues in the individual interviews, but there was a tendency for one or two of predominant themes to emerge in most, if not all, the interviews. For clarity of representation and sense of immediacy the themes will be illustrated through four mini-accounts of individual student responses. The students and tutors presented here are either given pseudonyms or anonymised.

### *Sadie – Happy Let-It-Pass*

Sadie was a UK-based practising teacher. On returning to university to study, she found academic writing at university to be quite challenging. She did not do very well in her first Grammar and Phonology assignments in the autumn term, partly because she had to do them hurriedly due to time pressure.

The Grammar assignment involved evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in the sample extracts of vocabulary exercises in two textbooks, each representing a different approach. Figure 5.1 below was the opening section of her assignment:

This opening statement was commented upon by the tutor in his/her overall feedback as follows (Fig. 5.2).

The contrast between the orientation adopted by Sadie and the tutor's expectations for the work she would produce is clearly discernible in this opening section, and this in fact shaped much of the feedback Sadie received for this assignment as well as her overall marks. Figure 5.3 below shows another section from this assignment immediately after the opening. The numbers refer to the specific remarks made by the tutor:

The tutor's numbered comments were:

1. Most of this is irrelevant to the question asked ... Just stick to the question asked.
2. Cross-refer more accurately. Section C of 26, 27 or 28?
3. 27C's.

The term pedagogic grammar (PG) is used to describe the way in which the grammar of a language is used to communicate with other people and is aimed at people who specifically want to learn the target language. This is distinct from a reference grammar, for example, which teaches people about the language in question ...

**Fig. 5.1** Sadie's opening section- Grammar assignment

The beginning of this analysis suffers from a failure to stick to the question asked. You were not asked to discuss the difference between pedagogic grammar and reference grammar, or the nature of pedagogic grammar ...

Fig. 5.2 Tutor's written comment on Sadie's opening statement (on separate comment sheet)

Greenbaum (1987) cites *The Students' Grammar of English*, whose authors (Quirk et al, 1972) opted for a dual role in their attempt to combine a PG covering the GCE syllabus with a comprehensive handbook. Nevertheless, Michael Swan dismisses the idea that a reference grammar can in any way be pedagogical and insists that it:

"...is a reference book. Not a systematic course in English grammar." Swan (1980)

This is made clear in this case when the extracts are viewed in the absence of the practise exercises. Some of the points highlighted become a reference (apart from section C in extract A, which has space (albeit very little, for students to list more examples). In addition, some of the points and illustrations covered appear almost random without them. For example the language points under section C's *Some Other Useful Words*, which detract from the previous two sections' focus on pairs.

Grammarians are quite clear on what PG is not, however pinning down a definition is more difficult, as there are varying views on the subject. For example Chalker (1994) cites Corder (1975), who sees it as the tools for teaching and defines it as:

"...those statements about, and exemplifications of, the language which are for the use of teachers rather than of learners, the object of which is then to guide the teacher in the way he is to present the rules."

Chalker (1994) narrows the definition down further to one that both teachers *and* learners can relate to:

"If you ask classroom teachers to define grammar, various definition emerge. But the word 'rules' crops up frequently. Grammar is rules."

Fig. 5.3 Sadie's grammar assignment page 1

This assignment was given 52 marks, a low Pass. Sadie expressed her disappointment with the tutor's comments because she thought they were not helpful and 'punitive' (her word).

Figure 5.4 below shows a segment of Sadie's Phonology assignment with (hand-written) feedback remarks from the tutor:

The tutor's feedback corrections and comments, as shown above, suggested that her assignment did not pay attention to the expected issues, and that she should have focussed on Received Pronunciation (RP in the hand-written comment 1). Comments 3 and 4 advised Sadie as follows (on a separate feedback sheet) (Fig. 5.5).

This assignment was given a Fail (below 50). However, Sadie did not seem to be unhappy with the Fail mark at all. In fact, in her interview she made the following remarks in relation to the tutor's comments ('she' in lines 1 and 5 refers the tutor)<sup>1</sup>.\*

<sup>1</sup>Transcription key:

RE – researcher

= – latching



**Transcript**  
*"Well, they had great trouble deciding what to call me in the first place, I mean they went through all sorts of various things like Verbena and Nigella, and then they blindfolded my mother and turned her loose in the library. Thank God she pulled out Richardson's Clarissa..."*

3 wel, ðe hæd gret trəbəl dəsajdɪŋ wət tu kəl mi ɪn ðə fɛɪst ples, əj mɪn ðe went θru ðl sɔrts əv vɛrɪəs θɪŋz lɑjk vɜːbɪnə ænd nɪgɛlə, ænd ðen ðe blɑɪndfɔldəd məj məðər ænd tərnd hər lus ɪn ðə laɪbrəri. θæŋk ɡad ʃi puld əwt rɪtʃərdzənz klərɪsə..

**Analysis**  
 The (l) sound is 'light' when followed by a vowel, but 'dark' when followed by a consonant or a pause. So the (l) sounds after:  
 1. (e) in well  
 2. (a) in all  
 3. (a) in call  
 4. (o) blindfolded  
 ...are heavy/emphatic as opposed to the (l) sounds in lu:s, 'laɪk, <nigella>, pleɪs and laɪbrəri.

*RP is a bit more...*  
*OK but ... I would expect your analysis to focus on the features that are typical of RP.*

4

Fig. 5.4 Extract from Sadie’s phonology assignment

3. You have made a commendable attempt to do a very thorough transcription of the RP accent but there are several mistakes in your choice of symbols (see pencil notes).  
 4. For the purposes of this assignment, I would have expected your analysis to focus on the features that are typical of RP – maybe using as a check list descriptions of RP that can be found in Collins and Mees 2008 or the article on Accent Variation in your Reading Pack).

Fig. 5.5 Tutor’s specific comments

- 1 Sadie so she’s saying you’ve done XYZ but maybe you should have done this (.) and I
- 2 don’t take that too negatively (.) I take that as a suggestion (.) for me to do
- 3 something=
- 4 Re =would you be able to make that amendment or addition
- 5 Sadie yes if I had gone back to the IPA (.) if I had gone back to that where she says
- 6 features that are of typical RP then I’d go back to the text and say OK I do know
- 7 what the features are but I omitted that because I thought this is probably would
- 8 have been probably be better now that I know I can go back to that pick that and

(.) – brief pause  
 ... – text reduction  
 ( ) – contextual information

- 9 add that to it ...
- 10 (a few moments later)
- 11 Re I think you said at one point a couple of minute ago that you should have gone
- 12 back to see [the teacher] ... (.) so why didn't you
- 13 Sadie I didn't because (.) uh I really enjoyed her lesson I thought she was one of the you
- 14 know uh she was a really good teacher (.) I thought I'd let her down somehow ...

It seems quite clear that Sadie understood that her assignments did not orient the content in the ways that the tutors expected and she did not challenge their judgements. However, her responses to the two sets of comments were quite different. With the Grammar assignment she found the comments unhelpful and 'punitive'; with the Phonology assignment she appreciated the comments and the mark (a failure). She seemed to have responded to the tutors' comments in accordance with her appraisal of the quality of their teaching. While this was the disposition of one individual, it points to the need to understand the basis of students' responses to comments intended for formative purposes. In addition, the issue of affect was also involved.

### Amy – Rejectionist

The topic of the assignment that Amy brought along to the interview for discussion was on Linguistic Analysis. Amy was from North America, and like the other students in the programme was a teacher. She was given 58 marks (a Pass mark). An extract of the assignment is shown in Fig. 5.6:

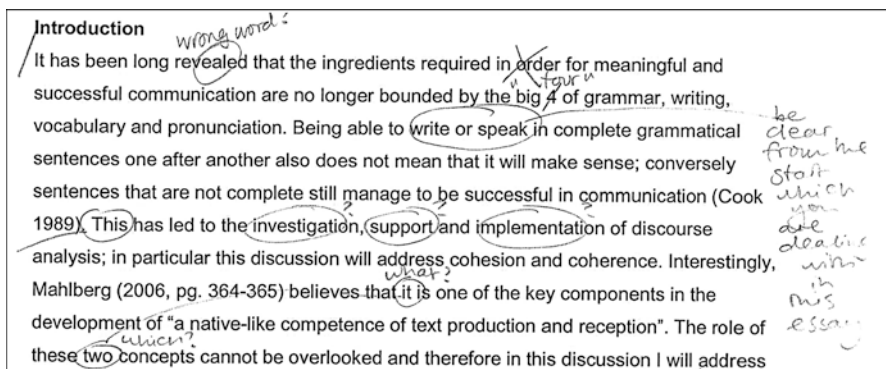


Fig. 5.6 Extract from Amy's linguistic analysis essay

In the interview, Amy stressed the fact that she went to school and university in North America where the range of assessment marks awarded to discursive assignments is generally higher than that in the UK. From my own professional experience, I know that, for instance, in the fields of Applied Linguistics and TESOL a mark of 85 (out of 100) would be regarded as exceptionally high in the UK, whereas in North America this would not be regarded so. Throughout the interview Amy expressed her general disenchantment with her assignment grades. The Linguistic Analysis assignment under discussion was given 58 (out of 100) – a middle-of-the range Pass mark in UK terms; Amy's response to this mark was 'I have never been given a mark in the 50s before'. She thought the feedback comments were 'pretty harsh'. Furthermore, she did not see the relevance of the feedback for her next assignments; in fact she seemed to regard the tutor's comments as 'corrections'. The interview extract below captures Amy's view on the value and usefulness of the written comments on her assignment:

- 1 Amy no I didn't actually really pay attention to it (.) to a lot of the  
feedback (.) I just read
- 2 the (.) I just saw the grade (.) and I saw the first page of the feedback  
comment=
- 3 RE =right
- 4 Amy I was not happy with it I didn't need to read the rest of it
- 5 RE aha (.) right (.) so hmm (.) that's interesting (.) because the idea of (.)  
of the you know
- 6 feedback comment
- 7 Amy I did look through it (.) but I didn't (.) study each and everything  
uh that was written
- 8 In the paper
- 9 Re right (.) in fact (.) you had relatively (.) little idea of what they were  
saying to you
- 10 Amy Yeah
- 11 (a few moments later)
- 12 RE why do you think then that that (.) you know the tutors bothered  
to write all these
- 13 comments from your point of view (.) was it because they were  
trying to [show
- 14 Amy [they were
- 15 trying to correct my work
- 16 RE right (.) and (.) and you didn't get a sense that you could sort of pick  
up on some of
- 17 the comments and maybe (.) use them to develop your ideas (.)  
no you didn't
- 18 Amy because this this linguistic analysis uh it wasn't a paper (.)  
it was eh (.) they told us
- 19 that it wasn't in a uh essay format (.) it was a different kind  
of assignment (.) it was

- 20 just an assignment (.) so it had nothing to do (.) with the  
 following assignment (.) they  
 21 were in different styles (.) two different formats (.) so

At the time of the interview, 5 months or so after the assignments were marked and returned, Amy was still expressing her unhappiness and dissatisfaction with both the tutor support for assignment writing and the marks that she received. She expressed the opinion that the tutors did not explicitly and adequately tell her what to do. While she was aware that there was a difference in the mark ranges typically used by North American and British university teachers, she was nevertheless unwilling to accept the marks that she was awarded. Furthermore, Amy did not seem to appreciate the intended formative purpose of the tutor comments, some of which could be helpful in the writing of other assignments. She seemed to regard each assignment as a stand-alone task for which a (numerical) higher mark should be awarded. This is an issue of both affect and intellectual orientation.

### *Miguel – Selective and Critical Acceptance*

Miguel, an experienced teacher from South America, was highly motivated and doing well generally. He had expressly signalled a strong desire to improve his work and was keen to receive advice to do this. He was given 60 (at the low end of the good Pass range) for the assignment on Pedagogic Principles (see the two extracts in Fig. 5.7).

Miguel seemed to value positive comments and advice on subject content (extract 2), but not language and writing style issues. However, in the interview extract below Miguel expressed his critical response to his tutor's suggestion for an alternative phrasing (see extract 1 above: 'Better: The result of this was generations ...').

- 1 Miguel (reading out teacher's comment) maybe it's just a linguistic  
 thing but I thought  
 2 that was the way to emphasize my idea and  
 3 RE ah right so (.) this point was (.) not so much about (.) the content  
 meaning as (.)  
 4 about the [style of  
 5 Miguel [yeah yeah  
 6 RE saying something  
 7 Miguel yes yes  
 8 RE ok [so  
 9 Miguel [that is very personal you [see  
 10 RE [aah

**Extract 1**

For a long time the teaching of foreign languages did not suffer any change; languages were usually taught in an extremely form-focused manner, usually derived from the teaching of ancient languages as Latin and Greek in a method called the grammar-translation approach. Generations of students knowing a lot about grammar but incapable of engaging in actual communication was the result of this long-term way of teaching. It was not until the first half of the last century that focus on more effective methods of teaching was drawn from the results of research in both linguistics and psychology

Source?  
Better:  
The result of this was generative.

**Extract 2**

Willis (1996, p.38) calls them: *Pre-task*, *Task cycle* and *Language focus*. For Willis (1996) the *Pre-task* phase is a stage where the topic of the lesson is examined, some key language is highlighted, and students are faced with an exemplary task. For Prabhu (1987), the pre-task stage will also serve as a tool for measuring the difficulty of the task, which will eventually feed back information for grading it in case it is needed. Secondly, for Willis (1996), the *Task cycle* will include carrying out the communicative task, planning how to report the way they developed the task, and finally, reporting how they carried out the task to the rest of the learners. All of these procedures are performed either in pairs or in groups. Finally, the *Language focus* phase is divided into two. The first one of them being 'analysis', which states that 'students examine and discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording' used to do the task. And the second part called 'practice' is where the teacher 'conducts practice of new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after analysis' (Willis, 1996, p.38).

It would have been worth examining alternatives to Willis (1996) framework.

**C) Task-Based Language Teaching Rationale**

Fig. 5.7 Extracts from Miguel's corrected assignment

- 11 Miguel that's the way I expressed I would like to keep that (.) not to be not to be given
- 12 feedback on my English because I think that's not grammatically incorrect (.) but it's
- 13 my style and that (.) might be a bit face-threatening if (.) if they say say it this way it's
- 14 correcting someone's pronunciation ... (talking about his English language learning
- 15 experience) I came here to do the masters (.) not to learn English ...
- 16 (a few moments later)
- 17 Miguel uh (.) what I'm a bit uh (.) not worried but uh I don't see anything positive here

- 18 other than the checks (pointing to the ticks written by the marker)  
 19 RE Uh  
 20 Miguel it's just like when there are comments it's alright that that  
 they comment on my  
 21 weaknesses (.) I appreciate that yeah but I cannot work only on my  
 22 weaknesses I would like to maybe give more strength to my  
 strong (.) uh points  
 23 uh that I may use in my future work ...

As an experienced teacher, Miguel seemed to have a well-defined sense of what kind of advice and guidance he expected from the tutors. While he welcomed feedback on content matters, he was not so keen on comments on his writing style. The eliding of grammatical correctness and writing style seems to suggest an underlying issue of his status or identity as a professional user of English. This is quite a complex question as the claim to professional legitimacy of being an English Language teacher is often linked to the individual teacher's own English proficiency. This particular instance of response to tutor feedback signals that formative feedback is not just about what is to be learned, it is also about what students would like to learn.

### *Louisa – Secretive Marks*

Louisa was a UK-based teacher. She was an energetic and highly motivated member of the MA class. She produced very good quality assignments; her Linguistic analysis assignment, which she brought along to the interview for discussion, was given 72 marks (in the Distinction range). In the interview Louisa provided an account of the ways in which she made use of the published marking criteria in her assignment preparations. She took tutors' feedback comments in her work seriously and understood the need to pay further attention to her use of language to enhance the clarity and overall quality of her writing. She was generally pleased with the efforts made by the teaching team to publish marking criteria at the beginning of the course and to provide formative feedback. When asked if the students actually shared and discussed with one another the feedback comments and marks, she gave the following response:

- 1 Louisa ... when we got our assignment back (.) there was  
 no discussion at all we  
 2 were sort of quite (.) eh (.) we were sort of a bit cagey  
 we didn't want to  
 3 talk about our marks and things like that (.) so it was very (.)  
 you know  
 4 it was quite (.) a private secretive sort of thing when we got our first  
 5 assignments back.

Louisa's comments suggest that, at least amongst her peers in the MA programme, students saw their academic efforts and achievement as a highly individualized matter. While individual students are clearly entitled to choose what and how much information they would be prepared to share with others, the sentiments underlying the 'private and secretive sort of thing' can militate against the fostering of a community of mutually supporting learners. Furthermore, it raises the issue of whether LOA can be optimally developed where learning is construed by students as a private matter between themselves and the teacher or the curriculum content, or whether LOA requires a more open dialogic environment.

## **Connecting Post-Feedback Reactions to Programme Infrastructure**

The sample of student responses to tutor feedback we have just seen are clearly highly idiosyncratic, reflecting a multitude of factors such as individual students' background experiences in education and in general; their current capacity for and disposition on the learning at hand; and their medium-to-long term investment in success. Therefore, any follow-up action by teachers and tutors aimed at providing further formative guidance for individual students has to be bespoke, tailored to their specific needs. However, for teachers to be able to provide such individually oriented follow-up support there has to be a proactive capacity and policy to deal with post-feedback student responses at the programme/course level. It would be fair to say that at the present time teaching programmes and courses, at all levels of education, tend not to have any provision for post-feedback follow-up by teachers. The additional costs may be an issue, but, I would argue, it is also a fundamental matter of a limited pedagogic vision of LOA hitherto. A good deal of the discussions on LOA, as seen in the opening section, tend to frame LOA in terms of a one-way and one-stage process of teacher offering formative guidance to students. However, for the pedagogic value of LOA to be more fully realized, it would be necessary to develop a open-ended iterative process that takes account of student post-feedback responses that, in turn, provides the basis for further teacher follow-up. And student responses to teacher comments are a point of connection to the infrastructure of a programme. The infrastructure of any teaching programme is a complex web of cultural, intellectual, financial, organisational, policy, physical (e.g. access to teaching rooms and materials) and social affordances and constraints. For the purpose of this discussion I will focus on two aspects of the MA programme infrastructure: teaching staff ethos and curricular provision. Teaching staff ethos refers to commitment to pedagogic innovation, curiosity as to students' ways and levels of learning, and willingness to collaborate with students in teaching-learning matters. Curricular provision includes syllabus specifications for different subjects and time-tabled allocations for different teaching and learning activities.

The responses from Sadie, Amy, Miguel and Louisa can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The focus of attention here is on their possible connections with the infrastructure of the MA programme involved. Sadie was unhappy with the feedback comments on her Grammar assignment. She was aware that she was under time pressure and did not spend sufficient time on the assignment. Nevertheless, she thought that the comments were 'harsh' and 'punitive'. This raises the issue of how far the tutor's sharp formative focus on the content of the assignment as expressed through the comments (Figs. 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3) was appreciated by the student. It seems clear that Sadie responded more favourably to personally tuned feedback comments (Fig. 5.5) on her Phonology assignment. The issue of managing student affect is potentially an important consideration in LOA. To be able to deal with student affect, it would require the teaching team to be interested in student reactions to feedback comments and find ways to collaborate with students to gather this information. This is connected to teaching staff ethos. Furthermore, there is a potential implication for time-tabling as talking with students in 'town hall' meetings and individual tutorials requires time provision.

Amy seemed to be upset by the mark she received and did not think the comments were helpful for her future assignments. In fact, she thought the comments were 'pretty harsh' and that they were 'corrections'. It was quite clear that Amy interpreted the meaning of her mark with reference to her North American experience. It might not have been so upsetting if she had transposed the mark to the corresponding North American range. That said, this particular student response points to at least two other issues. Firstly there are problems with giving marks and formative comments at the same time. Most teachers know that if a mark is awarded to an assignment, students' interest is drawn to the mark and they tend to pay little attention to discursive comments (Black et al. 2003). Secondly, in an increasingly internationalized higher education environment, students tend to come from a variety of backgrounds. In all likelihood there were other international students in the programme whose interpretations of the meaning of their marks reflected their background experiences and did not necessarily match the meaning intended by the tutor. All in all, to address the issues raised by Amy's experience, it would be necessary for the teaching team to gather the necessary information on student responses and to find ways of working with students, both individually and collectively, to share the formative purpose of feedback comments and the meaning of the marks that they have received.

Miguel was not pleased with the feedback suggestions for alternative formulations and expressions of his ideas. This signals that students, particularly experienced teachers returning to university to do an advanced degree, often have a strong sense of what they would like to learn and achieve. Some formative comments, however, well-intentioned, may seem insulting and offensive to the student concerned. The issue is not that the teaching team should only focus on what the students are interested in, as that would defeat the purpose of studying at masters level. It is more a case of finding out students' own learning agenda and creating a dialogue with students both collectively and individually to share the content and academic literacy objectives of the programme. All of this is connected to a more



general need for the teaching team to ascertain students' learning goals and priorities, and to develop a shared agenda for teaching and learning.

Louisa, as a committed teaching professional and a high-achieving student, seemed to have been able to use well the formative support already in place. However, her observation that the students on the programme regarded the marks awarded to their assignments as some sort of 'personal secret'. A possible explanation is that the students understood that their marks could be seen as an index of their personal achievement and ability in a competitive education system (likely to be informed by their previous educational experiences), therefore they were keen to guard their marks, lest they were judged inappropriately by others. This understanding of the meaning of marks reflects the still dominant influence of classical test theory that is concerned with differentiating and discriminating. From the point of view of this discussion though, the post-feedback 'non-disclosure' raises at least two related pedagogic issues. Firstly, the guarding of one's own mark, and by extension the feedback comments, precludes any peer discussions that can lead to productive understanding of the feedback comments; a potential for collective learning is negated. Secondly, the view that assignment marks are 'non-shareable' suggests that the LOA approach adopted by the teaching team was still seen by students in terms of summative evaluation. All of this raises a number of question such as: Should the teaching team actively seek to find out how students use the feedback comments? Should there be further time-tabled post-feedback provision to promote active discussions on feedback comments and use them to feed forward to inform future work?

## **Intellectual and Pedagogic Dispositions in Teacher Feedback**

Teachers working in formal educational settings such as schools and universities tend to have little say in set-piece system-wide summative assessments, e.g. national school leaving examinations. The design, administration, rating and reporting of student performances tend to be externally organized. In contrast, in classroom-based LOA the teacher has a good deal more autonomy within the structural constraints of the curriculum framework. Whether it is conducted as part of an 'ordinary' teaching-learning activity (sometimes referred to as 'on the run teacher assessment') or as part of a stand-alone curricular event (e.g. an end-of-module assignment or test that can serve both summative and formative purposes), the teacher can have more say in the assessment focus in terms of disciplinary knowledge, criteria of judgement and the kind/s of feedback they provide.

Feedback in LOA is meant to be helpful in promoting student learning. It follows that teachers have in mind both the what (content) and the how (way/s of understanding and representing content) when they provide feedback comments. The 'what' and the 'how' are in turn influenced by teachers' own conceptualization of how students learn. Learning is a complex phenomenon that can be understood from a variety of perspectives. For the purpose of this discussion, I will draw on the

work of James (2006, 2008; Pritchard 2008) and characterize learning from three conceptual perspectives through the lens of assessment. These are briefly described as follows:

### ***Assessing Learning as Receiving and Retaining Information by Individual Students***

This perspective construes learning as:

- individualistic (focussing on an individual's ability, intellect, mind and so on)
- transmissionist (teachers transmitting knowledge and skills to students, some would liken this process as 'filling an empty vessel')
- passive (students receiving knowledge and skills from others, they do not act agentively to determine what to learn and how to learn)
- piecemeal (complex knowledge and skills can be learned on a decomposed basis)
- a consequence of responding to external stimulus
- repetition (repeating stimulus can lead to habitual response)

Many of these features are associated with behaviourist views of learning. This perspective will be referred to as Individual-Transmission.

### ***Assessing Learning as Individual Sense-Making***

This perspective construes learning as:

- an active cognitive process (involving thinking by the student)
- highly individualised (no two students are the same)
- building concepts/schemata (being able to link different pieces of information and understanding in a narrative)
- deploying known concepts & ideas to make sense of new information

Many of these features are consistent with constructivist views of learning. This perspective will be referred to as Individual-Construction.

### ***Assessing Learning as Joint Activity with Others***

This perspective construes learning as:

- a socio-cultural process (learning takes place through interactions with others)
- situated (context and contingent conditions can affect learning)
- involving thought and action (cognition is embodied)

- a shared activity (learning can be achieved through social participation – ‘thinking’ can be achieved collectively).

Many of these features broadly resonate with social interactionist and socio-cultural theory views of learning. This position will be referred to as Joint-Construction.

Given that students can and do respond to different kinds of pedagogic guidance in diverse ways, it is not the purpose of this discussion to endorse any particular perspective on learning. It is also important to acknowledge that teachers do not necessarily adopt any one of the perspectives discussed above exclusively in all aspects of their assessment work; indeed they may take an eclectic and hybridized approach because it reflects their pedagogic beliefs and/or it is judged to be strategically necessary. Feedback comments and guidance can be seen as a window into the teacher’s intellectual and pedagogic disposition. By looking at feedback comments as a heuristic and student responses to them, we may begin to see the options for post-feedback follow-up. The benefits of examining one’s own feedback with this in mind can facilitate teacher reflexivity (the capacity to think about one’s own teaching from different points of views) and a sense of professional independence (the willingness to question established values and practices) (Leung 2009, 2013). Some examples from the feedback comments we have seen earlier will now be used to illustrate this point.

The opening section in Sadie’s Grammar assignment attracted the following comment: ‘The beginning of this analysis suffers from a failure to stick to the question asked. You were not asked to discuss the difference between pedagogic grammar and reference grammar, or the nature of pedagogic grammar ...’. The deictic reference is clearly directed at Sadie as an individual. The phrase ‘... a failure to stick to the question asked’ suggests that Sadie should have paid more attention to the task set (responding to external stimulus) and should not have taken upon herself to interpret it (i.e. acting agentively). This comment can be characterised as related to *Individual-Transmission*. Sadie did not seem to appreciate this kind of comment.

Sadie also seemed to have misunderstood or misinterpreted the main task in her Phonology assignment (Figs. 5.4 and 5.5). The feedback comment ‘For the purposes of this assignment, I would have expected your analysis to focus on ... RP – maybe using as a check list descriptions of RP that can be found in Collins and Mees ...’ is clearly directed at Sadie as an individual. The mention of reference materials though suggests that the response to the task set should be understood in terms of the course content and deploying known concepts and ideas to tackle the set task (i.e. building on schemata already in place). This comment can be characterised as *Individual-Construction*. Sadie seemed to appreciate this comment, saying ‘... I don’t take that too negatively, I take that as a suggestion for me to do something’.

Amy was disappointed with her mark for the Linguistic Analysis assignment and did not paid careful attention to the feedback comments (Fig. 5.6). Had she taken the trouble to read and reflect on the comments, she would have found that some of them were concerned with her not articulating her ideas in the appropriate academic language that she was expected to have, e.g. the question marks over the words

'investigation, support and implementation' (i.e. making use of knowledge already in place). The comment 'be clear from the start which you are dealing with in this essay' on Amy's indeterminate choice of 'to write or speak' (line 3, Fig. 5.6) suggests that, in the tutor's view, Amy did not respond to the set task (i.e. not responding to external stimulus as expected). These comments can be characterised as related to *Individual-Transmission*.

Miguel did not welcome the feedback on his writing style: 'Better: the result of this ... was generations' (Extract 1, Fig. 5.7), but appreciated the comment on a content matter: 'It would have been worth examining alternatives to Willis (1996) framework' (Extract 2). Miguel clearly felt that his writing style was a matter of individual preference; at the same time the tutor's comment also reflected the tutor's own preference. From Miguel's point of view the tutor's comment seemed arbitrary and unwarranted. It may well be that this impasse was due to the tutor and Miguel having different background experiences and these experiences were not shared. In so far as this tutor comment seemed to be premised on the idea that there are preferred ways of expressing meaning and these should be used as models, it is aligned with the assumptions underlying *Individual-Transmission*. The content-related comment signalled that there was a body of established work to consult and Miguel should actively engage with it; this comment can be characterized as related to *Individual-Construction*.

Louisa was clearly able to make use of all the feedback comments in productive way to improve her work. Her remarks on the 'cagey' way in which students received their marked assignments, and the assignment mark being 'a private secretive thing' represent an interesting observation. The students perceived the marking (of their assignments) was a part of a competitive system, and they did not have a sense that feedback comments could be shared and used for collaborative learning. In other words, there was little awareness of use of assessment for *Joint-Construction*. One possible reason is that the teaching team did not provide, or did not succeed to make explicit, guidance on the value and usefulness of sharing feedback comments.

The examples above show that by examining feedback comments can reveal the intellectual and pedagogic stances embedded within them.

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I suggest that the teaching-learning interface is only but one of the constituent components of LOA. LOA is intimately connected to elements of the curriculum infrastructure. By focussing on feedback comments and students' responses to them, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of how students react and respond to feedback comments, what kind/s of intellectual and pedagogic positions are embedded in the formative support, and how the efforts made by teachers to provide feedback are or are not having the intended impact. In the process we have seen that LOA needs to be more than a one-stage and one-direction

process; a post-feedback follow-up by teachers should be considered. The iterative process of teacher feedback-student response-teacher follow-up can take the form of individual student consultation and/or teachers reviewing the processes, and the intellectual and pedagogic nature of the feedback they provide. Crucially though, for any of this discussion to happen at all, it is necessary to carry out situated local research that take account of the students' responses and the curricular provision in particular contexts. While it is certainly the case that situated research of this kind can be greatly enriched when undertaken collaboratively (see Chaps. 6 and 8 in this volume by Baker and Germain and Hill and Ducasse), it may also be realized through investigations, as reported here, in which an individual assumes the dual role of teacher and researcher. In this form of practitioner research, the teacher role is critically involved in sensing and articulating an issue or a question to be addressed; the researcher role provides (indeed demands) the intellectual space and capacity to put some distance between one's investment in one's own practice and how others perceive it. Examining multiple perspectives and exploring empirical data through different analytic and conceptual lenses are likely to be productive. To achieve this collaboration with teaching colleagues and students is indispensable.

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