

Does the use of coded marking improve student engagement with feedback?

Introduction

As a department, we introduced coded marking in English for the Key Stage 3 end-of-year examinations in 2018 and repeated this approach, with some improvements, in 2019. We wanted to see if giving subtle indications of where students had made errors in their work, with different symbols denoting the general nature of the error, allowed them to recognise their mistakes and start discovering how their work could have been improved. There were several stages to this process, with each stage providing more help for those students who were finding it difficult.

Context and Identifying the Need

My published research project¹ on comment-only marking with Year 7 English, Year 8 French and Year 9 Geography classes had prevented students from fixating on the marks at the foot of the page and comparing their marks with each other and, instead, forced them to engage much more with what the teacher had written. As a result, comment-only marking became school policy for Key Stage 3. The next step was to explore whether we could encourage students to recognise their own mistakes, with *minimal* comments.

Substantial evidence reveals that the best feedback encourages students' ownership of their own learning. As educationalist Professor Dylan Wiliam says, "effective feedback should be more work for the recipient than for the donor".² The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) supports this view in its summary of reviews and meta-analyses of feedback: "feedback should be about complex or challenging tasks or goals as this is likely to emphasise the importance of effort and perseverance as well as be more valued by the pupils".³

By moving more responsibility in the feedback process towards the students, it seemed there might also be the opportunity for the teachers to reduce the time spent writing comments on students' work and to help students more during the feedback lessons. The Independent Teacher Workload Review Group said recently that it was "concerned that it has become common practice for teachers to provide extensive written comments on every piece of work when there is very little evidence that this improves pupil outcomes in the long term". The group's 2016 report goes on to say that "marking has evolved into an unhelpful burden for teachers, when the time it takes is not repaid in positive impact on pupils' progress" and "if teachers are spending more time on marking than the children are on a piece of work then the proportion is wrong and should be changed".⁴

I wondered whether coded marking could be the answer. My suggestion was never that coded marking would replace all other forms of marking; it was whether it could play a valuable role among the various marking and feedback strategies that should be at every teacher's disposal.

Innovation

The new examinations

We introduced coded marking as part of an overhaul of Key Stage 3 summer examinations. Until this point, students in Years 7, 8 and 9 would sit a paper that assessed their skills in comprehending a short passage, writing an opinion piece and producing a piece of creative writing. To prepare the students more purposefully for the demands of Key Stage 4, we decided to introduce separate one-hour Language and Literature examinations for Years 8 and 9 (Year 7 examinations were no longer set from 2018).

The Language paper for each year group gave the students a choice of two questions, each requiring the students to write a descriptive or narrative composition; this reproduced the requirements of one of the current IGCSE writing papers exactly. The Literature paper for Year 8 required the students to write an essay on the prose text

¹ Barton, A (2017) Exploring the Effects of Relative Marking in Key Stage 3 (Impact, journal of the Chartered College of Teaching) <https://impact.chartered.college/article/barton-effects-relative-marking-performance-ks3>

² Wiliam, D (2011) Embedded Formative Assessment (Solution Tree Press)

³ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/feedback> (last accessed 30/07/19)

⁴ Independent Teacher Workload Review Group (2016) Eliminating Unnecessary Workload around Marking (Crown)

studied during the spring term, while the Year 9 students had the choice of writing a whole-text essay, like the Year 8 students, or analysing an extract from the novel studied. The Year 9 paper replicated the current IGCSE prose paper.

Preparation for the examinations

There was no preparation allowed for the Language paper before the examinations, but the marking criteria for both examinations were distributed to all students at least a couple of weeks before the examinations (see Appendices A and B). The criteria were copied directly from the current criteria for Cambridge International Examinations, with some of the additional information for the Language paper removed for clarity.

For the Year 8 Literature examination, the students were told the whole-text essay question at the beginning of the lesson preceding the examination. This lesson was then spent with the students working individually and in silence to complete a planning sheet, which they could take into the examination. It featured a column for a point, another for a quotation and a third for an explanation. The students were not allowed to write in sentences, nor were they allowed to write on the reverse side. These sheets were collected by the teacher at the end of the lesson and returned to the students, with a clean copy of the text, at the start of the examination.

The Year 9 students were told at the beginning of their preparatory lesson which four characters the question might be on. They had the hour to use their texts and fill in the four boxes on one side of planning paper, without writing in sentences. They would only find out which character they would be writing on at the beginning of the examination, when the planning sheets and clean copies of the text were distributed.

Marking and feedback

These papers had to receive a summative grade for reporting purposes, so we instead put an end to all teacher comments other than a brief line of genuine praise. This praise was to reassure any students looking at a sheet covered with unfamiliar symbols, each of which indicated an error of some form. During the feedback lesson (one feedback lesson for each paper in 2019), we gave each student a sheet of symbols with their returned papers (see Appendix C). The definitions alongside the symbols explained the seemingly mystical annotations that adorned the margins – symbols identifying that a line contained a structural problem, unclear expression or flawed logic, for example. The precise nature of the error, however, was something the students had to determine.

We each approached the feedback lesson in 2018 in our own way but decided on the following approach for 2019, supported by PowerPoint:

- Students were asked to familiarise themselves with the symbols by reading the explanation for each of them on the sheets distributed.
- They were then asked to remember what was expected for each of the levels in the marking criteria. Then, looking at the marking criteria, the guiding question was: “Can you remember how you might demonstrate the skills required for each of the bullet points?”
- We modelled an example of how we would apply the symbol-based marking approach to a paragraph on the board.
- We then returned the scripts and told the students to use a different colour from that which they used in the examination to complete the following two tasks: 1) correct in the text any errors that can easily be corrected (e.g. spelling errors, tense slippages); and 2) identify in the margin the nature of any errors that *can't* be easily corrected (e.g. lack of deeper textual analysis). We said that if students found it difficult to understand an error they had made, then they could ask another student to help, but they had to wait until the teacher said this was okay and they had to try their best to discover the error by themselves.
- The teacher then distributed a list of common errors from across the year group (I had collated common errors emailed to me by individual teachers to create this list – see extracts of these lists in Appendix D). The students then highlighted or underlined any errors they knew they had made and indicated any errors on their essay that they and the other student had been unable to detect.
- At this point, the students were shown a model essay or extract.

- The students then chose several sections of their work that they could immediately start to improve. The teacher would then check on students to see if anyone had overlooked any errors in their work. The examples of improvements provided in the presentation were:
 - A. Re-write your point or topic sentence focusing on the wording of the question.
 - B. Add quotations to the paragraphs that are missing a quotation to support your ideas.
 - C. Add a sentence about the writer's use of language to each paragraph.
 - D. Add a sentence to each paragraph discussing what the moment discussed or textual evidence shows about the character, relationships or situation.
 - E. Write out your analysis using words such as this suggests/highlights/indicates... etc.
 - F. Write out correct spellings x3 and try to come up with a technique to avoid such errors.
- Finally, the students began deciding on six key targets across creative writing, analytical writing and literacy from the examinations. These would be targets where they knew they would need to demonstrate a new approach a few times (or in a longer piece of writing) before they and the teacher would be convinced that the targets had been successfully met. They then entered these into a target sheet which had one column for the target and a second, crucially, for how that target might be met. For example, one 'how' might be to create a rule tool to ensure they punctuated dialogue correctly. The completed sheet would be collected by the teacher a week later and redistributed at the beginning of the following academic year.
- When the target sheets were collected in, together with the examination papers, the teacher could ensure that each student had identified key errors and created appropriate targets.

Observations in 2018

We held a departmental meeting soon after the feedback lessons in 2018, during which all five Key Stage 3 staff present (one absent) agreed that this approach had led to much better engagement with the marking criteria and individual corrections than when work was typically marked with standard teacher comments. We also agreed that it saved valuable time for the teachers when marking, with more time being afforded to the feedback lessons.

One teacher said that SEN students engaged particularly well and wrote lots of content on their sheets; this could be because learning enrichment encourages students to reflect on their work in such detail. Two other teachers added that the most-able students were those who were the most focused on the mark they received and who continued to ask the teacher how it could have been higher; it generally appeared that these students found it the most difficult to relinquish the specific, detailed feedback previously provided by the teacher.

All staff agreed that this approach had been an improvement, but some changes were suggested to make the process more effective in 2019. These included adding an additional symbol (a caret in the text to show that a point or sentence could benefit from more development), a feedback lesson for each paper and the opportunity to write a little more than a sentence in the final comment for some students.

Conclusions

In a survey of staff after the 2019 examinations, the comments revealed overall satisfaction with the approach. Staff liked the dual benefit of saving marking time for teachers and allowing students to be more active in their response to the examinations. There were positive comments for the increase in time for feedback and the ability to write a little more in the final comment for certain students. Staff still liked the symbol sheet and how it encouraged students to identify their errors, particularly in spelling, punctuation and grammar.

One teacher mentioned some frustration in being unable to indicate more subtle or complex issues in creative writing, analysis or essay structuring. This echoes the possible frustration observed with the more-able students in 2018. Such issues do, however, tend to be mentioned in the lists of common errors; the teacher could point out such shortcomings to individuals while patrolling the class, although there is no avoiding the fact that the feedback lessons are a time-intensive experience for the teacher and students alike. One teacher suggested a list of common targets to help more able students stretch and challenge themselves further or to help refine their approach.

Some of us chose to create our own copy of the lists of common errors for each student and to highlight them accordingly. This not only allowed us to ensure each student had identified the correct errors but also left us with something useful for writing reports. One teacher said they would like to provide a task sheet for each student

next year, with the most appropriate in-class task for the feedback lesson highlighted for each student; this teacher felt that some students found it difficult to determine what their task should be.

These are valid observations, and we will certainly discuss such suggestions in preparation for next year's examinations. They are, however, centred on the way in which we can improve the feedback lessons and help students with improvement tasks and target setting rather than concerned with the symbols themselves. The use of symbols has certainly encouraged students to focus more on their work and begin determining for themselves how it can be improved. Even seeing the paper outside the discomfort of examination conditions proves enough for many students to notice silly errors; a simple question mark in the margin might prompt a student to realise an error they made while rushing to complete their paper.

Evaluation

Our findings support the movement away from covering students' work with comments to allowing students more time to uncover their own mistakes through a scaffolded approach. Even if a student is unable to detect all their own areas for improvement, identifying errors by themselves is likely to be more beneficial than if the teacher writes at length explaining all errors in the student's work, which can sometimes be overwhelming. Indeed, the EEF recommends feedback that is "given sparingly so that it is meaningful"⁵. In the short term, the way I have seen three of my own Key Stage 3 classes engaging with the use of symbols in these examinations over the past two years is a marked improvement on previous years, when more time would be spent on the marking than the feedback. One way we may wish to develop this further is to withhold the marks until a later point in the feedback lesson, therefore giving the students a greater appreciation of the requirements of the marking criteria by asking them to predict their own mark and, at the same time, incorporating the benefits of my previous comment-only research by reducing the students' opportunity to compare each other's marks.

I have been surprised at how unusual the idea of giving students more ownership of their own learning seems to some people outside of education. Nevertheless, more people than not have recognised its value, with several teachers asking me how they could introduce something like our approach in their own schools. Indeed, our own Music department has since followed our lead and successfully trialled its own coded marking (see Appendix E). The next step is to see whether such an approach could have similar results in other subjects.

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⁵ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/feedback> (last accessed 30/07/19)

Appendix A: Marking criteria for Years 8 and 9 English Language examinations

		Content and structure
Band 1	11-13	W1: Content is complex, sophisticated and realistic. W2: Overall structure is secure and the constituent parts well balanced and carefully managed.
Band 2	9-10	W1: Content develops some interesting and realistic features in parts of the writing. W2: Writing is orderly, and beginnings and endings are satisfactorily managed.
Band 3	7-8	W1: Content is straightforward with ideas, features and images that satisfactorily address the task; some opportunities for development are taken. W2: Overall structure is competent and some sentences are well sequenced.
Band 4	5-6	W1: Content consists of relevant ideas that are briefly developed. W2: Overall structure is easily followed, though some constituent parts are too long or too short to be effective.
Band 5	3-4	W1: Content is simple, and the presentation of ideas and events may only be partially credible. W2: Overall structure is recognisable, though paragraphing is inconsistent and sequences of sentences insecure.
Band 6	1-2	W1: Content is inconsistent in relevance, interest and clarity. W2: Structure is frequently unclear, revealing a limited grasp of purpose.
Band 7	0	W1: Content is rarely relevant and there is little material. W2: The structure is disorderly.

		Style and accuracy
Band 1	11-12	<i>Writing is consistent, stylistically fluent, linguistically strong and almost always accurate; has sense of audience.</i> W3: Consistently wide range of appropriate vocabulary. W4: Subtle and effective sense of audience; appropriate use of varied sentence structures. W5: Spelling, punctuation and grammar almost always accurate.
Band 2	9-10	<i>Writing is mostly fluent, sometimes linguistically effective and generally accurate; may have some sense of audience.</i> W3: Obvious attempt to use range of vocabulary to interest the reader. W4: Partial or inferred sense of audience, with appropriate sentence structures. W5: Spelling, punctuation and grammar mainly accurate.
Band 3	7-8	<i>Writing is clear, competent, if plain in vocabulary and grammatical structures; errors minor, but frequent.</i> W3: Occasional precision and/or interest in choice of words. W4: Accurate if repetitive sentence structures W5: Minor but frequent errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar.
Band 4	5-6	<i>Writing is clear and accurate in places and uses limited vocabulary and grammatical structures; errors occasionally serious.</i> W3: Plain but mostly correct choice of words. W4: Correct use of simple sentence structures; some errors of sentence separation. W5: Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar.
Band 5	3-4	<i>Writing is simple in vocabulary and grammar; overall meaning can be followed, but errors are distracting and sometimes impair communication.</i> W3: Words may sometimes communicate meaning satisfactorily. W4: Frequent weakness in sentence structures. W5: Errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar impair communication.
Band 6	1-2	<i>Writing is weak in vocabulary and grammar; persistent errors impede communication.</i> W3: Insufficient language to carry intended meaning. W4: Faulty and/or rambling sentence structures. W5: Persistent errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar impede communication.
Band 7	0	<i>Writing is impossible to follow.</i> W3: Language proficiency is lacking. W4: Incorrect sentences. W5: Multiple errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Appendix B: Marking criteria for Years 8 and 9 English Literature examinations

Content and structure		
Band 1	25 24 23	<i>Sustains personal engagement with task and text</i> A1 – sustains a critical understanding of the text showing individuality and insight A2 – responds sensitively and in detail to the way the writer achieves effects A3 – incorporates well-selected reference to the text skilfully and with flair
Band 2	22 21 20	<i>Sustains a perceptive, convincing and relevant personal response</i> A1 – shows a clear critical understanding of the text A2 – responds sensitively and in detail to the way the writer achieves her/his effects A3 – integrates much well-selected reference to the text
Band 3	19 18 17	<i>Makes a well-developed, detailed and relevant personal response</i> A1 – shows a clear understanding of the text and some of its deeper implications A2 – makes a developed response to the way the writer achieves her/his effects A3 – supports with careful and relevant reference to the text
Band 4	16 15 14	<i>Makes a reasonably developed relevant personal response</i> A1 – shows understanding of the text and some of its deeper implications A2 – makes some response to the way the writer uses language A3 – shows some thoroughness in the use of supporting evidence from the text
Band 5	13 12 11	<i>Begins to develop a relevant personal response</i> A1 – shows some understanding of meaning A2 – makes a little reference to the language of the text A3 – uses some supporting textual detail
Band 6	10 9 8	<i>Attempts to communicate a basic personal response to the task</i> A1 – makes some relevant comments A2 – shows a basic understanding of surface meaning of the text A3 – makes a little supporting reference to the text
Band 7	7 6 5	<i>Some evidence of a simple personal response</i> A1 – makes a few straightforward comments A2 – shows a few signs of understanding the surface meaning of the text A3 – makes a little reference to the text
Band 8	4 3 2	<i>Limited attempt to respond</i> • shows some limited understanding of simple/literal meaning
Below Band 8	0/0–1	No answer / Insufficient to meet the criteria for Band 8.

Appendix C: Definition of symbols for students

In the text:



Spelling and punctuation errors/omissions are circled.



Any errors in grammar or syntax are underlined with a squiggly line. Arrows are used to connect underlined words if there are errors such as tense slippage or subject-verb disagreement, where the offending components are sometimes far apart.



The need for a new paragraph is indicated with a double forward-stroke.



The need for more detailed development of a point is shown with a caret.

In the margin:



Generally good material receives a tick.



Anything that works particularly well receives a double-tick.



A structural problem, such as a paragraph that deviates from the point or a moment in a story that feels rushed or overlong compared with the rest of the text, is indicated by a triangle. If the problem spans more than a line, then a curly bracket ({} next to the triangle might show you how far the problem stretches.



Something in the line that is unclear is indicated by a question mark. The text might be underlined.



A point that is clearly expressed but questionable in its logic is indicated by a 'Q'. The text might be underlined.



Something that is incorrect receives a cross. The text might be underlined.

Exam Feedback and Targets

Language: Composition

Below are some common errors that came up in the composition task. Use this to help you identify the specific problems in your own writing that have been highlighted by your teacher.

Content and structure

You might find that you...

- include details that are unnecessary or improbable
- use imagery that is clichéd or inappropriate
- include elements in your story that are confusing or overcomplicated
- have a plotline that is melodramatic or implausible
- include some contradictory details (e.g. a character grins happily when disaster is unfolding all around)
- introduce plot points or characters and then drop them
- have a composition that lacks progression, shape or development

Exam Feedback and Targets

Literature: Prose


Below are typical errors for the Literature paper. Once again, use this to help you identify the specific problems in your own writing that have been highlighted by your teacher.


Look carefully to see if you...

- have an introduction that does not fully engage with the question and set out your overall argument
- do not include a conclusion that sums up your key points succinctly and leaves the examiner with one last overriding, persuasive thought
- have a topic sentence that does not directly relate to the question
- fail to maintain focus on the question throughout your response
- forget to comment on every quotation you include
- do not analyse the language in the quotation (or not to an appropriate depth)
- do not include terminology when analysing techniques (e.g. metaphors and similes)


Appendix E: Symbols subsequently used in Music marking


Composition Marking: Symbols

Check number of beats in the bar 


Add time-signature 


Add correct clef 

Add double bar line (at end) 

Notation error (i.e. quaver doesn't have a stem) 

Specific Symbols for Melody Composition

The piece doesn't start and end on C (C Major) 

The piece doesn't include a sequence 

The piece isn't at least 8 bars long 