

Giving feedback on journals.

Watson Todd, R., Mills, N., Khamcharoen, P. and Palard, C.

ELT Journal vol. 55 no. 4 pp. 354-359. (2001)

The definitive version of this article was published as Watson

Todd, R., Mills, N., Khamcharoen, P. and Palard, C. (2001)

Giving feedback on journals. ELT Journal vol. 55 no. 4 pp. 354-

359. doi: 10.1093/elt/55.4.354

It is available at

<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/55/4/354.short>

Giving Feedback on Journals

Richard Watson Todd

Nathan Mills

Preeya Khamcharoen

Chatchai Palard

While journal writing has become an increasingly important tool in both language learning and teacher training, how to most effectively use journals is still unclear. Looking at a language and study skills support course for an MA in Applied Linguistics in Thailand, this paper treats journals as a dialogue between tutors and participants, and focuses on how tutors can give useful feedback on participants' journals. Through analysing journals and tutors' comments in response to journals, and from interviewing participants about the usefulness of the tutors' comments, it was found that participants greatly preferred comments referring to specific points in their journals rather than general comments at the end of the journals. Tutor comments which give suggestions, evaluate positively, add information or support the participants were also regarded as useful, possibly because such comments can promote trust and build relationships between tutors and participants.

The use of journals has increasingly become de rigueur both in language teaching and in teacher training. Writing a journal stimulates reflection on

learning and teaching experiences, and so enhances learning. Most of the literature on journals, however, simply presents data from journals as a fait accompli (e.g. McDonough, 1994; Woodfield and Lazarus, 1998). While this is useful in showing the value and benefits of using journals, how teachers and teacher trainers can encourage reflection in journal writers is largely ignored. A number of questions concerning the use of journals need urgent attention. How should the idea and practice of journal writing be introduced? How can affective resistance to journal writing be overcome? How can teachers and trainers give useful feedback on journals? In this paper we will focus on the last of these questions.

Journals as dialogue

It is tempting to view journal writing as something learners or teacher trainees do by themselves. They have a lesson, go home and write a journal. Later, they may give it to the teacher or trainer to read, but the writing and reflection is seen as essentially a solitary pursuit. Instead of this picture of the journal writer as an isolated individual, following Porter et al. (1990) we believe that the most effective journals involve an ongoing dialogue between learners and the teacher or between trainees and the trainer. Writers write for an audience, and journals provide a chance for the teacher or trainer to be an

active audience giving feedback and comments. This feedback may become input into the next journal creating a cycle of journal writing and responses.

In research into graduate students in non-language courses, this dialogic approach of writing and feedback is preferred. Roe and Stallman (1994) compared students' reactions to dialogue journals and response journals. They defined dialogue journals as journals written for the tutor to read and comment on, and response journals as journals not directed at any audience but written as a reaction to a text. Although the content of these two formats of journals was similar, dialogue journals were preferred since the feedback "promoted collegial consultation, improved task engagement, and affirmed [students'] feelings and ideas" (ibid.: 579).

Given that learners see the value of feedback on their journals, teachers and trainers need to know what kinds of feedback to give. To provide information on this, journal writers' reactions to different kinds of feedback need to be investigated.

The study

The situation in this study is a language and study skills support course on an English-medium Master's degree at a Thai university. The participants were asked to write journals throughout the course. Nine of the participants (8 Thai and 1 American, mostly experienced teachers) agreed to allow their journals to be analysed and to be interviewed regarding the usefulness of the tutors' feedback.

There were three tutors on the course. Each of them received journals from all participants. When giving feedback on the journals, the tutors did not know that their comments would be analysed. The feedback was analysed in three areas: the format in which the comments were made, the intention underlying the response, and the functions expressed in the journal which prompted the tutor to comment.

Formats for feedback

The three formats in which the tutors gave feedback on the journals were:

1. In-text comments relating to specific points in the journal, together with a general comment at the end.

2. Superscript numbers in the text referring to footnotes relating to specific points in the journal, together with a general comment at the end.
3. A general comment at the end only.

In the interviews, participants were asked which of these formats they preferred. Of the nine participants, five chose in-text comments, four chose footnotes, and none of the participants preferred a general comment only. In contrast to what many teachers practise, then, the easy route of writing a single general comment in response to a journal is not appreciated by the journal writers. Instead, the participants' preferences suggest that tutors should link their feedback to specific points in the text wherever possible.

Of the five who chose in-text comments, two mentioned that they would have preferred footnotes if they had been able to read their journals and the footnotes together. The tutor who used footnotes had written these on the back of the participants' journals making direct comparison of the footnotes and the text difficult. If footnotes are written on a separate piece of paper appended to the journal, then, this may be the preferred format of feedback.

Kinds of response

To categorise tutors' feedback based on the intention underlying the response, initially the five kinds of responses associated with active listening (Johnson, 1986) were used:

1. Supporting e.g. "Only one day to understand an article by Widdowson is not bad."
2. Probing e.g. "This is one possible rationale for using L1, but there are many others. What other reasons for using L1 can you think of?"
3. Evaluating e.g. "A thoughtful response. Well done."
4. Understanding e.g. "Yes, some people spend a lot of time worrying about things that happened in the past which cannot be changed. Although it is vital to learn from past mistakes, excessive worrying over them is pointless."
5. Analysing e.g. "Are you trying to blame outside factors rather than looking at yourself?"

In attempting to categorise responses into these categories, it was found that four further categories were needed:

6. Suggesting e.g. "As we discussed a few days ago, it is crucial for you to establish a satisfactory living situation."

7. Adding information e.g. “Although there is a belief that tutors are the main source of knowledge/information in any academic program, friends are also a vital source, especially as they probably understand your situation better than the tutors.”
8. Agreeing e.g. “Yes, thinking is a strange thing. Everyone knows what thinking means, but explaining what it means is impossible.”
9. Thanking e.g. “Thanks for such an interesting journal.”

Of these responses, probing, supporting and evaluating (overwhelmingly positive) were the most commonly used by tutors, while understanding, analysing and adding information were the least used.

In the interview, participants were asked to select tutor comments which they felt had been useful, and were asked to give reasons. Kinds of responses which were frequently felt to be useful were suggesting, evaluating, adding information and supporting. Agreeing, analysing and thanking, on the other hand, were less frequently cited as useful.

Suggesting and adding information may have been preferred for their practical value in helping the participants solve problems. In giving reasons for choosing these, participants stated for example:

“He wrote some tips on writing that I found useful when doing assignments.”

“He gave me another way to think about problem-solving.”

The need for and appreciation of tutor support were explicitly stated as reasons for choosing evaluative and supportive comments:

“He understands my feelings in these situations and gives some kind of support.”

“His comment on my future career, to become a teacher, is very supportive.”

Although looking to tutors for suggestions and support implies a certain level of tutor dependency in the participants, it should be remembered that these journals and comments are building a dialogue between the tutors and the participants. This dialogue is a relationship, and for relationships to grow and develop, trust is essential. In trust building, disclosures from one person lead to acceptance, support and cooperativeness from the other (Johnson, 1986). In other words, participants disclose their ideas and feelings in their journals to which tutors can react with support and cooperative suggestions.

The kinds of responses which the participants prefer, then, can be seen as those most likely to build a close relationship between the tutors and the participants, further promoting the dialogue of journals and comments.

What prompts tutor comments?

The third aspect of tutors' comments on journals which warrants investigation is whether there are any patterns concerning what prompted the tutors to comment. Tutors' specific comments (either in-text or as footnotes) came in response to certain sections of the participants' journals. By categorising the content of the journals in these sections, we should be able to identify what types of journal writing prompt tutors to make comments. To make the categories of content of the journals generalisable regardless of the topic being written about, four broad functions of writing in the journals were identified:

1. Exposition. This category includes descriptions, explanations and providing background information. E.g. "So this program and the curriculum are designed with Thai students in mind."
2. Questions in the journal. E.g. "Does it mean that I'm not successful in doing this?"

3. Problem, where the participant gives details of a problem he or she is experiencing. E.g. “I feel uncomfortable because I am afraid of wasting the reader’s time.”
4. Solution This category covers sections of journals where participants suggest solutions to their own problems. E.g. “Sometimes if I have to teach the topics or skills that I am not good at, I can ask for help from my friends who are good at those things to teach me how to teach them.”

In addition, a fifth category was needed to cover non-specific responses such as those given in general comments at the end of journals.

Comments from the tutors were most frequently given in response to exposition by the participants, followed by comments in response to problems. Questions and solutions from the participants elicited the fewest comments. This pattern may simply reflect the overall frequency of the functions in the participants’ journals.

Comparing the functions prompting comments with the kinds of responses that tutors gave yields some interesting findings. Responses to participants’ exposition were most frequently evaluative, responses to both problems and solutions were most frequently probing, responses to questions were usually

supportive, and thanking was the most frequent response used in non-specific comments. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions concerning the relationship between the functions in the participants' journals and the kinds of responses tutors gave, the high prevalence of some matches suggests that certain kinds of journal writing are more likely to elicit certain kinds of response, although this point needs further research.

In the interviews, participants were asked to choose comments which they found most useful. These were then matched against the functions of the sections of the journals prompting the comments. It was found that responses to problems, exposition, solutions and questions were almost equally preferred, while non-specific comments were rated less useful. This supports the finding concerning preferred format that text-specific comments are perceived as more useful than general comments. Regarding text-specific comments, it would appear that tutors can feel free to comment on any point in the journal that they want, since comments on all points are regarded as equally useful.

Conclusion

Although the generalisability of a study like this is unclear, as the participants were in the roles of language learners and teacher trainees simultaneously, the study may have implications for both language teachers and teacher trainers. The main guidelines concerning how to give feedback on journals emerging from this study are:

1. A general comment at the end of a journal is not sufficient. Instead, feedback should be related to specific points in the journal either through in-text comments or through footnotes on a separate piece of paper. The latter may be preferable as it does not restrict the length of comments and does not obscure the original text.
2. Comments which give suggestions, evaluate positively, add information or support the participants are perceived as the most useful types of comment, perhaps because they engender trust and build relationships between tutors and participants.
3. Tutors do not need to worry about what points in journals to give feedback on, as all comments on specific points are appreciated.

The literature focusing on the writing of journals emphasises how it can help learners and trainees reflect on their experiences, since journals provide a record which can be used for later reflection and the process of writing helps

trigger insights (Richards and Lockhart, 1994). In a dialogic approach to journals, the reflective elements are retained in the writing process, but the feedback and comments add an extra level to journal writing. This extra level allows the purpose of building relationships, not normally associated with journal writing, to be served when journals are used as a dialogue.

References

- Johnson, D. W.** 1986. *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization*, 3rd edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- McDonough, J.** 1994. 'A teacher looks at teachers' diaries'. *ELT Journal* 48/1: 57-65.
- Porter, P. A., L. M. Goldstein, J. Leatherman and S. Conrad.** 1990. 'An ongoing dialogue: learning logs for teacher preparation' in J. C. Richards and D. Nunan (eds.).
- Richards, J. C. and D. Nunan** (eds.). 1990. *Second Language Teacher Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C. and C. Lockhart.** 1994. *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roe, M. F. and A. C. Stallman.** 1994. 'A comparative study of dialogue and response journals'. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 10/6: 579-588.

Woodfield, H. and **E. Lazarus.** 1998. 'Diaries: a reflective tool on an INSET language course'. *ELT Journal* 52/4: 315-322.