## Reflective case narrative two

### Integrating formative assessment in Business writing module

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<th>Reflective case narrative</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>The Business writing module is taken by about 100 Year 1 students from a wide diversity of disciplines, such as Engineering, Science, Arts &amp; Social Science and Design &amp; Environment. I am the course co-ordinator with 2 tutors (graduate teaching assistants) and 1 instructor (colleague from the English Language Enhancement Centre, ELEC) working with me on this module. There are no lectures in this module and all classes are based on sectional teaching, with a class size of about 25 students. My colleague and I each teach two classes, with the help of two tutors. The students who took this module come with a mix of abilities, and with different levels of motivation – from highly enthusiastic to those who signed up because they ‘have no choice’ and to satisfy cross-faculty elective requirements.</td>
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<td>Over the last two semesters since this module was introduced, I noticed that students often come to my class with their own preconceived notions of what business writing is all about. Many assume that the lessons would focus mainly on the proper use of English grammar, punctuation and sentence structures. While these elements are important, the course is designed with more fundamental intended learning outcomes in mind, namely to enable students to identify and analyse the audience, and develop an understanding of the context of communication with an emphasis on the genre, tone and style of a written text. Because so many students seemed surprised that the course was not, as they had expected, primarily about grammar and the like, I inferred that students need to have a clear understanding of what the intended learning outcomes for the course are, and that these are higher-order learning outcomes. I also realised that they should know the criteria for success in writing a business document, otherwise it would not make sense to them that the intended learning outcomes are not focused so much on grammar, but on identifying and analysing the audience and context as well as genre. This articulation of learning goals and success criteria should take place at the start of the module and be re-visited throughout the module.</td>
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<td>Given a heterogeneous class of students, the other concern is how to cater to the needs of every individual student? With the different motivational background of the students and their varied levels of English proficiency, I sought</td>
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to elicit feedback from my students during the lesson to help me adjust my instruction and to capitalise on teachable moments, wherein I provide immediate, on-the-fly feedback to address common writing errors or to introduce relevant strategies that expand the student’s current level of writing techniques and skills.

As described in my teaching philosophy statement, I learnt about formative assessment through a conference presentation by Professor Margaret Price. The ideas on formative assessment were not completely new to me, as I had tried various ways of using evidence of students’ learning to better inform my practice during the middle part of a module as well as at the end of the whole module. What actually changed my perspective is the notion of creating a continuous feedback loop whereby learning goals, success criteria and evoking evidence of student learning are aligned and used during the lesson to close the instructional feedback loop. The approaches are gleaned from a book that I read from the reference list provided by Professor Price, called ‘Visible learning for teachers’ by John Hattie (2012, Chapter 7). Educational researchers such as Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (2004) have also highlighted the importance and effectiveness of formative assessment in supporting teaching and learning. I elaborate on the approaches in the next paragraph, supported by reasons of what works in the literature based on my readings.

In view of my students’ learning issues, and the lack of clarity in the intended learning outcomes that observed, I implemented three changes to this module, with agreement from my co-teacher. Firstly, I worked with my colleague from ELEC to revamp this module by re-writing the learning outcomes in a way that was clear, concise and meaningful to students. Besides having clear module outcomes that focused on higher-order reflection and analysis, we wrote specific learning outcomes for each lesson, and explicitly highlighted these outcomes in our learning tasks and assignments. At the start of each lesson, we made it a point to get students to articulate these outcomes and insisted that students start each writing assignment by stating their learning goals in relation to these outcomes. The idea for engaging students with learning outcomes is derived from my reading of Hattie (2012), in which, he urged teachers to influence surface, deep and conceptual student outcomes (p. 27).
Secondly, I decided to incorporate the use of exemplars to scaffold students’ understanding of success criteria based on characteristics, tone and style of business writing. We examined past students written reports and documents to identify three levels of students’ writing – exemplary, proficient and needs improvement. These samples were used in learning activities to help students identify the key criteria needed for a successful piece of business writing. As argued by Royce Sadler (1989), if students are to make sense of feedback and put it to good use, they must develop a firm grasp of what counts as quality in a subject at a given level. My readings of the books on formative assessment repeatedly alluded to this important point of developing students’ capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during the learning process, so they can become ‘connoisseurs’ (Carless, 2015, p. 137) who are able to judge their own work, thereby knowing when and how to revise and improve.

Thirdly, I observed, questioned and monitored students’ in-class writing with short tasks (usually about 200 – 300 words; see example in appendix B) and a set of question prompts to help them to think more deeply about structure, audience and use of business language. This formal ongoing assessment and feedback conducted during an instructional cycle has been shown to have a positive impact on student achievement (Black & Wiliam, 2004). In our sectional teaching sessions, we decided to implement co-teaching, allowing both of us to observe students and provide immediate and timely feedback.

The impact of my intervention can be evaluated in terms of pre-post student survey, students written assignments over time (both in-class and homework), and peer lesson observations/review (with the help of my ELEC colleague). The pre-post survey consists of 12 items (using a five-point scale with 1 for strong disagree and 5 for strongly agree; see appendix C for the full survey items) which measured students’ perception of the importance of learning outcomes, writing learning goals and understanding of success criteria. The difference between pre- and post-survey average student responses was positive for students’ view on learning outcomes and success criteria, suggesting that they found the approaches relevant and important for their learning. However, the response for learning goals showed a negative difference, and one reason for this negative view may be due to students' dislike of writing learning goals for every piece of
assignment and writing task. A crucial finding revealed that students found the success criteria useful for helping them to identify the key aspects required to achieve excellent work. This is in line with the research on use of success criteria (e.g. Sadler, 1989).

Looking at the students’ written drafts over time, I found that they were able to incorporate the strategies and form of writing, advocated throughout the lessons, in their subsequent report drafts. The in-class feedback sessions also helped to correct specific language errors, and these errors were absent in the final draft of their reports (see appendix D on selected students’ written work with teacher feedback).

Qualitative evaluation by my colleague was carried out during one of the lessons (see appendix E for peer review report). As highlighted in the report, besides the use of just-in-time feedback, there was significantly more opportunity for students to ask questions and to respond to the comments provided. My colleague noticed that students were able to use the terms that were articulated in the success criteria in their discussions. In addition, students’ discussions were more focused on ways of achieving the exemplary and proficiency criteria rather than on trying to complete the writing task. My colleague suggested that a time could be set aside for the four teachers in this module to meet and exchange notes. I adopted this suggestion and started bi-monthly sharing sessions that led to a collaborative inquiry project (to study the impact of formative assessment in this module) funded by a faculty teaching grant (see appendix F for grant approval letter).

References


