

AN INNOVATIVE ALTERNATIVE TO PROVIDING WRITING FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' ESSAYS

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Abstract

Over three semesters screen casts were successfully used with Elementary English language learners for writing feedback and peer learning. As a result, accuracy improved and students were more engaged in redrafting. Amongst improvements noted were all the students started passing their final writing assessments. Screen casts have conventionally only been used for scaffolding instructions or content. As well as allowing greater autonomous learning and increasing peer learning, it is postulated this methodology actually reduces the teacher's work load and is as efficient as audio or handwritten feedback.

Introduction to screen casts

A screen cast is a video of the computer screen and on the screen there is a moving arrow or dot synchronized to personalized aural input. In 2006 Russell Stannard highlighted the use of screen casts for writing feedback <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=207117>.

However, in New Zealand they have been rarely used at all. Since 2009, I have taught teachers how to use them to scaffold a wide variety of content and skills and how to integrate these 'computer screen videos' with other e-learning tools into *Moodle* unaware that Stannard had been promoting them since 2006. His site offers a very user-friendly experience and is a generous and comprehensive resource: <http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com>. He is a strong advocate of *JING* and has created many useful support videos to help teachers.

Literature review

Screen casts have been successfully used for scaffolding instructions and for content of the Dewey System and were regarded as very effective for educational purposes by students in online courses (Peterson, 2007) and in ophthalmology (Razik *et al.*, 2010). They were used with only limited success in computing content -introductory programming in Java. However, there is no published study focussing on the use of screen casts for writing feedback. According to the National Student Survey (NSS, 2008) student feedback from

tutors and assessors impacts heavily on student satisfaction. Students have reported very positive responses to audio feedback (Ice, 2007). By utilising screen casts one takes audio one step further by adding a visual component of the student's own work.

Advantages and disadvantages of screen casts

The screen cast approach to writing feedback engages visual, aural and kinesthetic ways of learning, allows the student to learn at their own pace, share with fellow students, receive personalized feedback from the teacher, which has the ability to present tone and provides an alternative to often illegible teacher's handwriting feedback. In addition, once teachers are familiar with this new tool they will find it much quicker than writing by hand.

The above scenario is dependant on the availability and the access to computers. In the author's institution, Unitec (a large public tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand), this is not a problem as there are computer labs open after class and weekends. However, a greater number of students have computing access through iPads, laptops, netbooks and computers at home. A recent institution-wide strategy to move classes into blended learning, using *Moodle* and mobile devices, has meant wikis and forums can be used for peer correction, but these activities were often developed to reduce the personal attention from the teacher and its associated workload.

Use of screen casts: A personal experience

After 25 years of teaching using screen casts to give feedback on students' writing has clearly been the most successful and effective method. During the semester in which this feedback strategy was employed, students showed considerable autonomous development in their written language skills for example capitalization, email conventions, paragraphing, punctuation, spelling, cohesion and coherence and grammatical structure. Students found the screen casts engaging and easy to learn from; it had additional benefits in encouraging some of them to even learn to type. For example, one 60-year-old Chinese woman was motivated to type, as she perceived there was the added value of listening comprehension and increased personalized feedback with screen casts. The improvements in typing led the students to focus on their writing accuracy. In addition, all of them appreciated the listening practice. These benefits were further extended when a few started sharing them with their family and they began learning together. This feedback was gathered from in-class discussion and a Choice activity on *Moodle*.

Present practice

Current students in my class are Elementary level and each week a new writing task is introduced in class. Then they are expected to email me their first draft and redraft from corrections. Early in the course they are also taught email format: using the subject line, appropriate greeting, explanation of why they are writing and appropriate ending. They are prepared for this piece through models, joint negotiation of a text to practice, speaking activities to extend vocabulary and help them to personalize etc.

At Russell Stannard's site <http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/> there are screen casts to learn how to download and use screen casting applications. I use free downloadable software called *JING* <http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html> but I have also used other free screen cast software successfully, *Screencast-o-matic* <http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/>. The latter has easy-to-learn videos on the home page. Both of these considerably easier to use compared with *CAMTASIA* <http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html>, which is closer to a recording studio in sophistication and cost.

There are multiple applications of screen casting software and it all depends on one's specific needs. A useful set of questions at <http://dreamwebdesigns.com/screencasting-software-comparison-and-features/>, equipped with a comparison table and a set of questions for reference, is helpful to determine the best one for you.

What I like about *JING* is the library and one of these folders can be just for the students. They can view not only their own writing feedback but also everyone else's. This is useful for referring a student to a good peer model, which shows students that you are fair in your treatment and encourages peer learning. Students' permission is needed for this but can be overcome by peer editing in class in pairs or small groups. Competitively correcting sentences taken from everyone's first drafts has always been a successful activity, but the disadvantages of all of these activities are that they are time-consuming and students resist being corrected by other students due to their personality or inability to correct as well as a teacher.

Lesson plan. Using screen casts for writing feedback

Level: Elementary to advanced with experience with email and the Internet

Time: 15-20 minutes but 30-35 minutes the first few times

Aims:

- To promote autonomous learning

- To be a more effective way of giving writing feedback for the teacher and student

Resources/ materials: *JING* or *ScreenCast-o-matic* application

Possible problems: Internet Broadband connection; student lack of computer access

Procedure

1. Pre-stage (5-15 min)

- a) Read submitted document and if necessary make notes on the piece of writing.
- b) 'Mumble aloud' what you are going to say before you record as if the student were beside you and you were talking though the submitted piece of work. (You will only need to do this a few times before it becomes very natural and unnecessary.)
- c) Think about what you are going to highlight or change in the submitted text/document. If it is a WORD attachment then show the toolbox in the screen cast.

2. While-stage (5-15min)

- a) Open student's document first, then capture it, including the scroll bar, and if it is Word show the toolbox too.
- b) Greet and give your writing feedback + and -. Use the pause feature if you have a tickly throat, there is background noise etc
- c) If you changed the document in any way with the Word Toolbox then return to the submitted text (Ctrl+Z). Name the document carefully with student's name and number of draft or if it is the final draft, save, listen and check for a few seconds, upload to your library and transfer to a relevant folder.
- d) Copy the link to the feedback screen cast.

3. Post-stage (<5 min)

- a) Reply to student's email briefly with an expectation that they will redraft after listening to your comments and paste the link. Make sure the student's original draft is also attached. (The first time give instructions on how to access the link and the possibility of listening many times and accessing other student's screen casts in the same JING folder.)
- b) Show the JING folder in class and demonstrate how to use the screen cast for listening and writing.

Final thoughts

Through seven departmental workshops to ESOL teachers, at two conferences and at a

private sector professional development day, I have promulgated my ideas on screen casts. My promotion through these venues has sown the seeds of interest as more colleagues are now approaching me within the department for one-on-one tutorials. Students' expectations have also grown as they have moved up the levels. Here is a link to a workshop at our Literacy Community of Practice at Unitec earlier this year (<http://screencast-o-matic.com/watch/cXjiYurgY>). It is a screencast of a PREZI presentation and may be of help too. I strongly believe in the benefits of using screen casts for providing feedback to students on their written work and would encourage other ESOL teachers to try this approach.

References

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