But Will It Improve Their Writing?
The use of Verbal, Peer and Written feedback as Formative Assessments

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Abstract
Formative assessments have been proved to be an effective tool to assist children in the learning process, especially for writing. Feedback, a type of formative assessment is the focus of this article. Written, verbal and peer are all types of feedback that teachers use in their language program. This article investigates which types of feedback are most beneficial in improving the writing skills of a class of grade 5 students. By taking information from the literature, using the opinions of teachers and hearing the voice of the students, I found that written and verbal feedback are mainly used by teachers when doing formative assessments for writing. Additionally, although some students prefer verbal feedback, written feedback seems to be most beneficial in improving written work.

Introduction
From the student’s point of view, formative assessment by way of clear and concise feedback works. “Good formative assessment gives students information they need to understand where they are in their learning (the cognitive factor) and develops students’ feelings of control over their learning (the motivational factor)” (Brookhart, 2008, p. 54). But in what form should this feedback be given when doing formative assessments for writing? Should it be communicated verbally? Perhaps it should be delivered in writing so that the students have evidence of the feedback given? Maybe feedback should be given from another student, as a peer may be able to motivate more than a teacher would? Although Brookhart’s research indicates the positive effects of feedback on student work, is it actually being practiced in the classroom? What kind of feedback, if any, do teachers give to their students?

These questions were the basis for this study. Although “students love the opportunity to practise tasks using peer and/or teacher feedback instead of doing things only once for marks” (Campbell, 2010, p. 20), the type of feedback that is best suited for the students in our changing classrooms however, is in question. This study will examine whether the use of peer, written or verbal feedback before individual revisions will improve the writing skills of a class of grade five students. As a result, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What type of feedback do teachers use when doing formative assessments for writing?
2. Are effective changes in students’ writing influenced by written feedback, peer feedback or a teacher’s verbal feedback?
3. What type of feedback (verbal, written or peer), does a class of grade five students prefer?
Literature Review

Using feedback as a formative assessment for writing is a topic that is becoming better recognized in the literature as we continue to research a variety of strategies to teach our students. However, when doing research on feedback for elementary students, the literature does not quite touch on this topic. Much of the literature has dealt with post secondary student writing and the written feedback that professors use in order to help their students. Additionally, the current literature refers to mainly written feedback instead of verbal or peer feedback. Even so, feedback as a general means of formative assessment has been proved to ameliorate student work and the literature makes that very clear. Brookhart (2008) relates feedback to self-efficacy, and the amount of effort that goes into task completion when students really understand the criteria and their ability to fulfill them. However, because feedback is closely tied to students’ feelings of self-efficacy, “even well-intentioned feedback can be very destructive if the student reads the script in an unintended way. Research on feedback shows its Jekyll-and-Hyde character. Not all studies of feedback show positive effects; the nature of the communication matters a great deal” (Brookhart, 2008, p.54).

Teachers can use different types of feedback during the assessment process; however, students may revise differently with different types of feedback. For example, if a student is able to translate instructions to another peer in a language with which the classroom teacher is unfamiliar, then there is a greater opportunity that the instructions would be understood. The literature is vague in describing the success of the revisions after peer feedback, but peer feedback can lead to positive changes in writing skills and it can lead to increased understanding in conventions and content of a piece when done correctly. This is mainly because “when peers communicate their comments, they use the same language without using professional jargon” (Cho, 2010, p. 329).

The literature provides suggestions for providing feedback to students on their writing. For example, “student writers can benefit from receiving rich comments from multiple peers. Multiple peers could improve writers’ audience awareness because they simulate a community of readers with diverse, rich response” (Cho, 2010, p.330). Macallister (2006) believes that when responding to student writing, teachers should comment on structure and content. They should also provide a set of criteria and elicit other readers to also respond. It is important that the focus be based on the curriculum expectations. The written feedback should be concise and focused on specific aspects of the piece of writing. The feedback should not fill the page with red ink, but instead, focus should be given to the aspects of writing that is most important. In most cases, this is the content, as the grammar or spelling could be corrected in a much more uncomplicated manner. Written feedback, even in its simplest form could be beneficial to all students, including the English Language Learners in the classroom. In fact, during a two-month study conducted by Bitchener (2008) with 75 low intermediate international ESL students in Auckland, New Zealand, written corrective feedback encouraged the students to achieve a high level of performance in their work. This level of performance was also retained after a two-month period. Responding to student writing definitely involves effort on the part of the teacher. Unfortunately, sometimes taking shortcuts to feedback actually ends up hindering the child instead of improving their writing skills. When done appropriately, feedback can act as both an assessment for learning as well as an assessment of learning (Lee, 2007). The students are able to demonstrate what they have learned from the feedback by being given opportunities to revise
their work, and respond to the feedback that was given.

Verbal feedback can also be beneficial and it could be one of the quickest and easiest forms of feedback as it “may be given as teachers circulate around the room while students are writing...Verbal feedback may also be given in student-teacher conferences. Students may sign up to meet with their teacher when they feel ready for feedback, or they may meet with teachers on a regular basis. Effective as both teaching and assessment tools, student-teacher conferences provide individualized instruction for students and opportunities to gather information about students’ thinking and writing processes” (Stagg Peterson, 2010, p.2).

There is scarce information on teacher verbal feedback in primary school. This study has examined this new teaching approach in comparison with other types of feedback to see which method was most beneficial in a primary classroom.

New Teaching Approach

As a teacher, I believe that formative assessments in writing are important in guiding students to do their best work. I also believe that formative assessments help me to better understand what writing concepts the children comprehend as well as directing the next step of instruction for students to be successful. Formative assessments guide my language lessons and giving feedback as a means of assessment assists the children in becoming better writers. However, over the years, I have found myself giving feedback mainly in the written form. When teaching the primary grades, I used written feedback to guide my students’ writing but I would limit the feedback to one comment that the children could use to revise their work. Now, teaching a junior grade, written feedback is the main type of feedback that I use to guide their writing skills, along with rubrics or checklists so that the students can also guide themselves according to the expectations of the task.

At times, peer feedback is used to demonstrate that we all can learn from each other. I believe that peer feedback builds a sense of community within the classroom and it puts all of the students in a teacher role, proving that assistance can be obtained not only from the teacher, but also by students as well. Students take responsibility for their own work as well as their classmates. Unfortunately, verbal feedback is not a strategy that I often use when formatively assessing due to the time it takes. For English Language Learners and those students that may struggle with reading, verbal feedback may be useful, but it requires an abundance of time of which many teachers have very little. With a packed curriculum, extra teaching subjects such as French, and with the students having more leadership opportunities within the school, there is less time to teach the core subjects. A teacher’s verbal feedback not only requires one-on-one time with each child but also requires that the students be allotted immediate time to revise written work after verbal feedback is given. Nevertheless, because of its importance, and because it caters to the different ways that children learn, teacher verbal feedback was tested against written feedback and peer feedback to see which type was most useful for the students.

The students were familiar with a teaching style that encouraged their multiple intelligences and a sense of community. In an attempt to receive well informed opinions of different types of feedback, the students were taught about what feedback actually was, and the different types of feedback that are used in order to help them improve their writing. The focus of these lessons was limited to written feedback, teacher verbal feedback and peer/student feedback. Additionally, the use of rubrics and/or checklists was also discussed to guide the
writing process.

Data Collection

The school is located in a newly developed suburban community with a population of approximately 840 students from kindergarten to grade five. There are 10 portable classrooms outside of the main building and this is where most of the grades 4-6 classes are held. Many of the students come from multi-family or extended family households that have great respect for teachers. A large percentage of the student body speaks a different language (Punjabi or Guajarati) at home, therefore they are considered to speak English as a Second Language. Because of the community, and the ESL factor, there is a strong emphasis on reading and writing, and inclusiveness is of a high importance. Inappropriate behaviours are minimal amongst the students and the junior students are given an abundance of leadership opportunities throughout the school environment. There are approximately 60 full time staff members, which include teachers and teaching assistants. The staff represents a variety of different cultures with a wealth of skills.

In an attempt to answer my research questions, I gathered data that would help me to know the type of feedback that other teachers were using in order to assist with students’ writing. To find this out, a quick interview was administered to 15 primary (grades 1-3) and 10 junior (grades 4-5) teachers.

It was equally important to investigate the feelings that my 26 grade 5 students had in regards to the feedback that was given to them. Mini lessons explaining these types of feedback were necessary so that the children were able to give an informed opinion about what type of feedback benefits them the most by the end of experiment.

Receiving Peer Feedback

The children were required to write a reflection in their reflection journals explaining the difference between two types of narratives. The class had recently completed writing a myth and was getting ready to write a mystery story. Students wrote 1-2 paragraphs comparing and contrasting the two types of narratives. After writing the paragraphs, students had the opportunity to get verbal feedback from peers before time was given to revise and make any corrections suggested by the peer. A peer, in this case, is defined as one other randomly chosen individual selected by the student. The two students were required to read over each other’s piece of writing and give verbal feedback on what could be done to improve the piece. Pre and post samples of the paragraphs were collected as data sources.

Receiving Written Feedback by the Teacher

This activity was one of a set of rotating language centers. The children had recently written a myth to integrate the information learned about Ancient Greece. I gave students written feedback and handed papers back to the students so that the revision could be done while at this particular center. They were given written feedback focusing on spelling, grammar, structure and content of their myths. The feedback was written on sticky notes so that the students could easily remove the notes and make the necessary corrections. The language used in the written feedback catered to the level of the individual child. Therefore, students that struggled with reading received fewer words and simpler language but still received feedback to improve their
work. The children were expected to revise their myths based on the written feedback that was given. Pre and post samples were collected as data sources.

**Receiving Verbal Feedback from the Teacher**

This activity took up two of a set of rotating language centers. One center involved the writing, while the other center involved the feedback. The children had learned about writing a summary of the stories that were read. This activity involved the students reading a short mystery story at their own individual reading levels, and then writing a short summary of that story. The summary writing rubric was provided for this task to remind the children of the main aspects of this short piece of writing. The students were then given verbal feedback focusing mainly on spelling, grammar, structure and content of the writing piece before being given the opportunity to revise their summary using the verbal feedback that was given. Pre and post samples were collected.

In addition to the above activities, the children also had a chance to practice giving feedback. Coinciding with the story of the week, one third of the children used drama to give verbal feedback to the main character in the story. They used their knowledge of feedback and give constructive feedback to the character regarding his detective skills. Another third of the students gave written feedback to the character and the final set of students created a rubric or a checklist in order to guide the main character in this area.

At the conclusion of the lessons and activities, the students were asked to identify the type of feedback that they found most beneficial when revising their written work. One type of feedback was written on a piece of paper and posted at each corner of the room (peer, verbal, written, rubric/checklist). The children were encouraged to think of their own feelings and were allowed to go to the corner of the room that indicated the type of feedback that they found most useful. They were asked to discuss the reasons for their choice.

**Data Analysis**

In interviews, I asked the 15 teachers about their feedback methods. I tallied their responses on a chart indicating the type of feedback that they use to improve the writing of their students. Their responses to the question regarding if the feedback works, were also noted and recorded. Common patterns amongst the teachers’ responses were observed.

In order to test the type of feedback that leads to the greatest improvement in student writing, pre and post samples of student work were collected and reviewed. The pre-feedback pieces of writing for each of activities were compared to the post-feedback pieces of writing to see if the suggestions were adhered to and if the suggestions led to a better piece of writing. Any changes between the first and second draft in regards to structure, content, grammar and spelling were noted and recorded.

In order to see if the children had a preference of a type of feedback, they were asked to show through a Four Corners activity, what that preference was. At each of the Four Corners of the portable classroom, the different types of feedback were displayed: peer, verbal, written, other (rubric/checklist). The children were required to stand at the corner of the room that showed their preference for feedback. A discussion was initiated amongst the others that had the same preference and then as a large group. The discussion involved reasoning for their choices. The results were tallied on a chart and the reasons for their preferences were noted and recorded.
Findings
What type of feedback do teachers use when doing formative assessments for writing?

When asked to describe the type of feedback used for formative assessments of writing, the teachers were apprehensive in answering; concerned about giving ‘the wrong answer’. Nevertheless, all of the primary teachers (grades 1-3) agreed that verbal feedback is most beneficial with this age group. However, the grade 2 and 3 teachers believe that verbal feedback in combination with written feedback gives the best results because the children do not forget the feedback when it is written down. Seeing as grade 1 students are still learning to perfect the concept of reading, the grade 1 teachers believe that verbal feedback is most beneficial as they may not be able to read the written feedback. Only eight of 15 teachers felt that their feedback improves student writing. The remaining 7 teachers felt that it helps eventually but it takes a while to actually see the results.

Alternatively, the junior teachers (grades 4-5) indicated using mainly written feedback when doing formative assessments for writing. During the discussions, verbal feedback might be used in combination with the written feedback but time constraints only allow for these teachers to write comments on pieces of writing as opposed to having a discussion with each student. It was expressed that verbal feedback often gets forgotten and written feedback allows the students to remember what feedback will allow them to improve their writing. Teachers do not see the results of their feedback until the end of the school year.

Are effective changes in students’ writing influenced by written feedback, peer feedback or a teacher’s verbal feedback?

Student Revisions - Verbal Feedback

After reviewing the activity, it is possible that the writing piece that the students were asked to produce focused on reading comprehension rather than on the writing aspect. This could have affected the outcome of the writing piece if the students struggled to understand the reading. Unfortunately, after reviewing the student samples, the majority of the students failed to make the necessary changes mentioned in the teacher’s verbal feedback discussion. There was little to no difference between the pre and post-feedback pieces of writing. During the discussion, the children seemed to understand the changes that needed to occur in order to improve the piece of writing, but even after being given time to revise immediately after the conversation, the post pieces of writing demonstrated minimal improvement. A combination between misunderstanding the reading and forgetting the feedback that was given could have resulted in this outcome.

Student Revisions - Peer Feedback

After reviewing the student samples, it was observed that the post-feedback writing had very minimal improvement from the pre-feedback writing piece. The students gave suggestions such as creating a graphic organizer to compare and contrast the information, they attempted to correct grammar and spelling mistakes and they tried to point out whether or not the piece made sense. However, the quality of the revisions depended on two very important factors. Firstly, it depended on who was giving the feedback. The high achieving children gave feedback that was most accurate seeing as they had more knowledge of what the writing piece should consist of.
Secondly, it depended on who was receiving the feedback. Some of the students had a tendency to forget what corrections should be made or they lacked focus during the time that revisions needed to be made. Perhaps having a reference chart that the students could refer to would help the students to be more focused. Alternatively, having multiple peers reviewing the work, as Cho (2010) discusses in his article, could have given the students a better understanding from differing points of view of how to improve their work.

**Student Revisions – Written Feedback**

The post-written feedback writing showed the most improvement in comparison to the other revised pieces of writing. Even those children who struggle academically used the feedback that was given for spelling and grammar. Although the content and structure of the writing piece was not perfect after the revisions, most of the students showed evidence of an attempt. While the students were doing the revisions of the writing piece, it was noted that they were on task for a longer period of time as they read the written feedback and attempted to make the revisions. The majority of the students seemed to understand the feedback and had some success on the post-writing piece. Having such a high ESL population in the classroom, it is somewhat shocking that there was not more success with the verbal feedback. However, when Ferris (1997) wrote about a study on written feedback that was given to a class of ESL adults, there was substantial improvement on the revised piece of writing. Bitchener (2010) experienced these results as well with written corrective feedback with ESL students.

*What type of feedback (written, verbal, or peer), do a class of grade five students prefer?*

**Student Preferences**

After the children were educated on the differences between the types of feedback, all of the students, according to the tally, believed that peer feedback led to poor results when it comes to improving writing skills. They felt as if there were too many factors that would cause the feedback to be inaccurate. During the discussion, the students felt that sometimes other students may not know what to say in order to help others improve their writing. They also felt that sometimes a friend might not know what to say or be completely honest so as to not hurt the feelings of the other person. Lastly, at times, the students believe that their friends could be wrong, as they are all still learning.

Of the types of feedback remaining, 13 of the 26 students had a preference for written feedback. After the discussions the children believed that written feedback allowed them to remember the items that needed to be improved. It was clearly stated what needed to be fixed and the reminder was used as a reference. Five out of the 26 students preferred rubrics and checklists to guide their writing. Using this type of feedback as a formative assessment helped to guide them along the way, as was mentioned in the discussion. They also allow the student to know exactly what the teacher expects along with how to obtain a level 3 (at grade level) 4 (above grade level) on writing tasks. For these students, the rubric helps them to improve their writing more than any other type of feedback. The final eight students preferred verbal feedback as a means of formative assessment. It was apparent through the discussion that at times, my teacher feedback is not always understood, causing them not to understand what feedback was actually given. These students find it much more helpful when I speak with them about their writing because it is easier for them to understand and be clear what they have to do in order to
improve their writing.

Conclusions/Implications

Formative assessment, in any form is beneficial to all students. When teachers know how students are progressing and where they are having challenges, they can use this information to make necessary instructional adjustments, such as re-teaching, trying alternative instructional approaches, or offering more opportunities for practice. These activities can lead to improved student success (Boston, 2002). Teachers understand the importance of this and make an attempt to give feedback as a form of formative assessment in order for the children to succeed in writing. The types of feedback that teachers use depend on the age of the students, but much of the time, teachers use a variety of feedback techniques. Verbal feedback is common in the early primary grades, but as children grow, teachers expose them to written feedback or peer feedback in order to cater to the different ways that they learn and take in information.

By educating students on what feedback is and how it can help their writing, they are able to pinpoint preferences. Sometimes their preferences do not align with the feedback that actually works for them. They may have a preference for verbal feedback, but when asked to revise using this strategy, their post feedback piece of writing shows minimal improvement. However, the process allows them to think critically about what strategies help their learning; something that they can take with them as they enter higher academic levels.

Perhaps this study can be extended further to see if a combination of feedback techniques will lead to success in student writing. Seeing as the children may forget the verbal suggestions at times, perhaps having them write down the verbal feedback on their own may lead to greater success on the revisions. This would then be a combination of verbal and written feedback that would actually create an effective feedback give by the teacher to the student. Another option could be being conscious when giving feedback and include the three aspects of feedback, praise, criticism and advice just as Rita Silver (2007) mentions in her study of compositions written by students in the junior grades. Possibly using praise, criticism or advice on feedback that is verbal, may lead to interesting results. Will it take a long time to give feedback in this way? Of course, and as teachers, time is often against us causing us to have the urge to make feedback as quick and as easy as possible. As Haswell (2006) mentions, the more complex the tasks, the greater the temptation is to simplify them. But sometimes, the shortcuts do not actually help the students succeed; and ultimately our job as teachers is to guide students to be successful in their learning.

References

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**Author Biography**
Melissa Francis has devoted much of her life to working with children. Being a certified educator for 9 years, she still considers herself young in the field. Even after 20 years within this challenging and rewarding arena, she will still be eager to consider herself a student as she continues her journey on how to best teach literacy to children. The first 3 years of her career were spent teaching in London, England, and the years that followed included teaching grades 1 to 5 in Ontario. Her passion is literacy instruction and demonstrating to children that reading, writing and speaking can be enjoyable and are a necessity in all areas of life. Melissa currently resides in Ontario with her husband and son.