

Submission 082 – The Impact of Teacher’s Feedback on Primary 4 Composition Scores

Ms Ang Mei Ling – HOD/English, Yu Neng Primary School
(ang_mei_ling@moe.edu.sg)

Mrs Christina Lim – HOD/Talent Development (Aesthetics), Yu Neng Primary School
(tay_shiok_ching@moe.edu.sg)

Mrs Nancy Chong – English Teacher, Yu Neng Primary School
(ng_mei_chin_nancy@moe.edu.sg)

Abstract

It is argued that students would benefit more from the feedback on their writing rather than the test scores given by their teachers. It is also noted that a composition score may take away the constructive aspect of the teacher’s feedback on a student’s composition. Little evidence has gathered to show the impact of such written feedback on students’ composition scores on their improvement in writing in Singapore primary schools. This study involved Primary 4 students (N = 214) working on five authentic writing tasks under 3 conditions: teacher’s written feedback with a score given, teacher’s written feedback with no score given, and no teacher’s written feedback but a score given. Teacher’s written feedback with marks given to individual work was found to be strongly correlated with student improvement in composition scores. Teacher’s written feedback without a score showed improvement in composition scores although it was not as much compared to the teacher’s written feedback attached to a score. Giving only scores without teacher’s feedback did not show any significant improvement of composition scores. The findings of this study might contribute to the development of pedagogic practice in assessment for learning in the area of composition writing in primary schools.

1. Background

Continuous (Composition) Writing has been a difficult component for our students to score across all levels. Our school leaders believe that formative assessment offers a powerful means for meeting the goals for the high-performance of student outcomes, including the area of language learning, in particularly writing. In order to help teachers to improve their formative assessment practices, our school has provided our teachers with effective professional development in Assessment Literacy.

During our school’s in-house *Assessment Literacy Workshops* conducted by our Vice Principal (VP1) and School Staff Developer (SSD), examples of good feedback given on students’ composition scripts were highlighted so as to encourage teachers to write feedback for students to improve on their writing. The Primary 4 teachers were inspired by the trainers of the *Assessment Literacy Workshops* and wanted to know the impact of teachers’ written feedback on the students’ composition (Continuous Writing) scores.

2. Research Question

This study was designed to examine how teacher’s written feedback can increase students’ learning and, in turn, increase their composition scores. Specifically, the following research question was posed: How much does teacher’s written feedback affect Primary 4 students’ composition scores?

3. Literature Review

The most recent reform in education is highlighting **holistic assessment** in the *Primary Education Review and Implementation* (MOE, 2009). The PERI Committee has recommended that assessment should support the holistic development of students, and the

school-based assessment and feedback system should be adjusted to focus more on developmental objectives. Formative Assessment is necessary to provide regular feedback on students' learning to the individual students themselves and their parents.

According to Cowley (2012), formative assessment is natural "as children learn to write more fluently, you will begin to give evaluative comments on their writing to help them improve. The key to ensuring this process is confidence building, rather than soul destroying, is to strike a balance between targeted praise and constructive criticism. Clearly, this will vary according to the needs of the child" (p. 130). Zawacki (2008) pushed forward that idea that once the students better understood their expectations, they felt encouraged to move beyond their status quo.

Many established authors who wrote on Formative Assessment voiced that grading should not be used on such assessment for developmental purposes. Brookhart (2010) argued that "Students need and deserve an opportunity to learn before they are graded on how well they have learned. Formative Assessment is used before instruction, to find out where students are, and during instruction, to find out how they are progressing." She claimed that when students are not graded on a piece of written work, "they are free to pay attention to figuring out how they are doing and what they need to work on without worrying about a grade" (p. 4). Similarly, an ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) article in the November issue of *Educational Leadership* (2011) discussed how demotivating it was to have grades compared with teacher's feedback. It portrayed how devastating it was for weak students to receive a 'D' grade, how grades were a mystery as the criteria of grading was not clear and how useless a good grade with the words 'Good Job!' beside it. Basically, the main purpose of the article was to convince its readers that teacher's thoughtful written feedback is useful and grading is useless to develop students' learning. Bearne (2002) even outlined the routine of useless grading into the following five bullet points:

- teacher tells pupils what to write;
- they write it;
- the teacher marks it;
- the pupils look at the grade and ignore the marking;
- the writing is put away and not looked at again. (p. 48)

Robb (2004) also emphasized that "feedback is crucial to students' progress. First, feedback arms students with specific suggestions for improving their piece. Second, if students struggle with revising with feedback, it's time to confer with them" (p. 262). Similarly, Lattimer (2003) also described the writing process requires "lots of writing conferences, suggestions about where students might find potential points, and cheerleading them when they located the perfect quote or example" (p. 262) rather than a number of grades or indicators to show the level of achievement of the written work.

On the other hand, Anderson (2003) had outlined the importance of grading in learning with three primary reasons:

1. Grades are the primary currency of exchange for many rewards such as adult approval and recognition.
2. Students are used to receiving grades and equate grades with learning proportionally.
3. Grades can serve as incentives and sanctions. (p.148 – 149)

The basic goal of this study is to explore the three different types of feedback from teachers after composition marking, namely: teacher's written feedback and score, teacher's written

feedback only, and score without any written feedback, and the effects they each have on students' performance.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

214 participants for the study were all Primary 4 students studying in Yu Neng Primary School between 1 January and 30 May 2013. The participants ranged in age from 9 to 10 from a government neighbourhood school from six Primary 4 classes (39 pupils in 4-1, 37 pupils in 4-2, 37 pupils in 4-3, 34 pupils in 4-4, 34 pupils in 4-5, and 33 pupils in 4-6).

Six different teachers were teaching these six classes during the whole period of research. Teachers of Classes 4-1 and 4-4 returned composition scripts with teacher's written feedback and a score attached. Teachers of 4-2 and 4-5 returned composition scripts with teacher's written feedback without a score attached. Teachers of 4-3 and 4-6 returned composition scripts with a score without any teacher's written feedback. All P4 students were included as research participants to give this study a credible sample size. Nevertheless, the researchers noted that 4-1 and 4-2 consist of higher-ability students in the cohort and this point would be discussed in Section 6: Limitations.

The sample size for the experiment was 214 students, with 73 students given teacher's written feedback with a score on their returned composition scripts, 71 students given teacher's written feedback without a score, and 70 students given a score only without teacher's written feedback.

4.2 Instrument

Performance task – As a part of P4 writing task requirements, students were asked to write a composition of at least 120 words on 4 pictures or a scenario five times over a period of five months (Semester 1). The prompts for the writing tasks (Refer to Appendix A) were modified from P4 examination papers in preparation for the P4 midyear examination. The pre-test score is taken from first performance task and the post-test score is taken from the midyear examination score.

Students were graded with the writing rubric (Refer to Appendix B) in the P4 MOE assessment guidelines which teachers were very familiar with. In order to make sure that students wrote the same number of compositions for practice, all the scores of the five performance tasks were recorded. The Pupil's Feedback Form and samples of Teacher's written feedback are attached as Appendix C and Appendix D respectively.

4.3 Procedure

The study involved six teachers of the six Primary 4 classes conducting five writing lessons over one semester. The first writing task was conducted in January 2013 and the pre-test score was recorded from this task. Subsequently, two teachers returned the class compositions with teacher's feedback and a score on each script, two teachers returned the compositions with teacher's feedback only while the scores were not disclosed to the students, and two teachers returned the compositions with only a score on each script. Following this writing task, four other similar tasks were assigned to the Primary 4 students with the feedback returned accordingly. Finally, the students sat for the Semestral Assessment 1 in May 2013 and the midyear exam writing scores of the composition writing component were recorded as post-test scores.

5. Findings – Analyses of the effects of different feedback on the composition score
 The research question of the study asked how much does teacher’s written feedback affect Primary 4 students’ composition scores; whether students’ writing performance would vary depending on the type of feedback they received on their composition script.

A Paired Samples Test, with the 3 sets of pre-test and post-test scores according to the 3 different types of feedback: Type A – teacher’s written feedback with a score, Type B – teacher’s written feedback without a score, and Type C – a score without any teacher’s written feedback.

Significant main effects were found for teacher’s written feedback with a score, followed by teacher’s written feedback without a score but not a score without teacher’s written feedback. The effect of teacher’s written feedback was strong: (1) with a score – a mean increase of 2.72, and (2) without a score – a mean increase of 0.86. There was a decrease in the mean of 0.56 for giving a score only, however, this result is insignificant as indicated in the last column of Table 1.

Table 1: Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	Post_test_A - Pre_test_A	2.71918	2.48745	.29113	2.13881	3.29954	9.340	72	.000
Pair 2	Post_test_B - Pre_test_B	.86111	2.10503	.24808	.36645	1.35577	3.471	71	.001
Pair 3	Post_test_C - Pre_test_C	-.56338	3.18695	.37822	-1.31772	.19096	-1.490	70	.141

Table 1: The paired t-test indicates that there was a significant increase from the pre-test to the post-test for Type A and Type B feedback. Teacher’s written feedback has an impact on the performance of the pupils.

Another analysis was run to further investigate the results. A 3 x 2 analysis of covariance (ANOVA), with the source of feedback (x 3) and post-test score (x 2) as factors and the pre-test score as a covariate, examined differences in the post-test scores. The Tamhane adjustment was employed as the participants across the 6 classes were non homogenous. (See Table 2 for the ANOVA analysis.)

Table 2: ANOVA (Multiple Comparisons)

Dependent Variable: Post-test Scores

Tamhane

(I) Class	(J) Class	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	1.48345*	.52717	.017	.2094	2.7575
	3	2.88896*	.50536	.000	1.6669	4.1111
2	1	-1.48345*	.52717	.017	-2.7575	-.2094
	3	1.40552*	.45422	.007	.3078	2.5032
3	1	-2.88896*	.50536	.000	-4.1111	-1.6669
	2	-1.40552*	.45422	.007	-2.5032	-.3078

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Class 1 with Type A feedback – teacher’s written feedback with a score

Class 2 with Type B feedback – teacher’s written feedback without a score

Class 3 with Type C feedback – a score without teacher’s written feedback

Similarly, significant main effects were found for teacher’s written feedback with a score followed, by teacher’s written feedback without a score but not a score without teacher’s written feedback. Class 1 with Type A feedback did better than Class 2 with Type B feedback and Class 3 with Type C feedback, by a mean difference of 1.48 and 2.89 with significant results. Class 2 did better than Class 3 by a mean difference of 1.41 with significant results. All other results were insignificant.

The analyses show that students who did not receive teacher’s written feedback obtained substantially lower post-test scores than those who received teacher’s feedback and that the improvement was greater with a score attached to the teacher’s written feedback.

6. Limitations

The findings indicate that P4 students have benefitted from receiving teachers’ feedback and this pedagogic practice directly impacted post-test scores positively. However, similar-ability students were not selected for the treatment in this study. All Primary 4 pupils participated in this study to enable a credible sample size. Hence, further studies can be conducted to examine how different feedback can affect a homogenous group specially selected for the sample of the experiment. In this way, the basis of comparison might be more credible with the data analysis.

Additionally, criticisms on using midyear examination scores as post-test results were credible as this affected the motivation of learning. Higher-ability students and more affluent students might do better during examinations due to greater extrinsic incentives provided beyond the school. Future similar research should avoid using examination results as study results.

Lastly, it is imperative to note that six different English teachers carried out the five practices, and also the pre-test and post-test, in the six Primary 4 classes. Although the standardisation process was in place and the rubric used for this study was familiar to all P4 teachers and had been used for the past years, it was inevitable that six different teachers might have six different teaching and speaking styles that could have affected the neutrality of the data collected in association with teacher’s written feedback. Further investigations that might develop from this study could consider the possibility of keeping to one teacher’s instruction to strengthen the validity of data collection.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The research on *teacher’s written feedback and scores reflected on composition scripts* gives Singapore teachers a direction in the marking options for composition writing in primary schools. Teacher’s written feedback can help students improve on their writing, i.e. become self-regulated learners after reading the written feedback from their teachers. One of the principles of good feedback practice is to support self-regulation. A key argument is that students are motivated to write according to the teacher’s written feedback, especially when a score is reflected beside it to support the teacher’s evaluation. This research underpins the assessment for learning principle, and suggests the easy-to-implement Pupil’s Feedback Form (Appendix B) for classroom use. This shift in focus, whereby teachers are seen as not just a score generator but also an evaluator using feedback appropriately, has profound implications for the way in which teachers assess writing and support learning.

8. References

Anderson, W. L. (2003). *Classroom Assessment: Enhancing the Quality of Teacher Decision Making*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2011, November). Tell Me About... A Time When Grades Were Motivating – Or Not. In *Education Leadership* (p. 90 – 93)

Bearne, E. (2002). *Making Progress in Writing*. Britain: TJ International Ltd

Brookhart, S. (2010). *Formative Assessment Strategies for every classroom* (2nd Ed.). Virginia USA: ASCD

Cowley, S. (2012). *The Road to Writing – A Step-by-Step Guide to Mark Making*. India: Continuum International Publishing Group

Lattimer, H. (2003). *Thinking through genre: units of study in reading and writing workshops 4 – 12*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers

Ministry of Education. (2009). *Report of the Primary Education Review and Implementation Committee*. Singapore.

Robb, L. (2004). *Nonfiction Writing: From the Inside Out*. USA: Scholastic Inc

Zawacki, T. M. (2008, March 29). Writing fellows as WAC change agents: Changing what? Changing whom? Changing how? [Special issue on Writing Fellows]. *Across the Disciplines*, 5. Retrieved September 5, 2013, from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/fellows/zawacki.cfm>

9. Appendixes

The prompts for the writing tasks (Appendix A)

**Yu Neng Primary School
Primary 4 English
Composition Worksheet 1**

Name: _____ ()

Date: _____

Class: P4 ____

One afternoon, your parents had to go out. You were told to take care of your brother while they were not home. Your brother started misbehaving and did not listen to you. When you went to the kitchen to get a drink, you suddenly heard a scream.

Write a story of at least 180 words based on the above situation. In your story, make use of the following points to help you:

- What happened to your younger brother?
- What did you do?
- What happened finally?

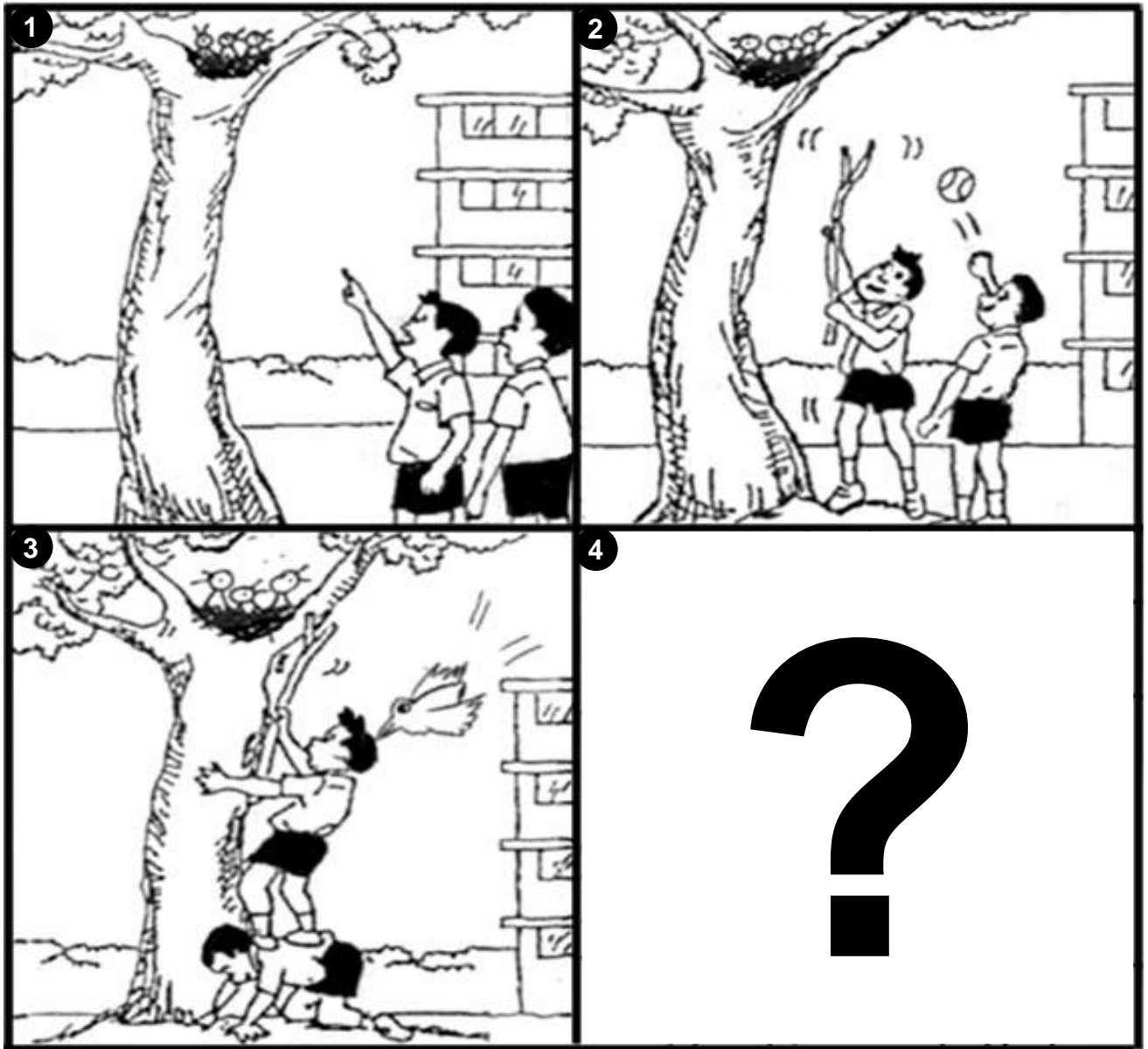
Yu Neng Primary School
Primary 4 English
Composition Worksheet 2

Name: _____ ()

Date: _____

Class: P4 ____

Look carefully at the pictures below. Write a story of at least 180 words based on the pictures. You may use the words or phrases in the box.



chirping

explore

mischievous

shot at

twig

sprawl

pecked

painful

lost balance

regret

P4 Writing Rubric (Appendix B)

MARK SCHEME FOR P4 COMPOSITION (20 MARKS)

CONTENT (12 MARKS)*	LANGUAGE (8 MARKS)*
<p>10 – 12 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good to very good arrangement of ideas and facts • Effective paragraphing • Ideas are well-linked • Details, if included, are relevant and well-integrated with given facts 	<p>7 – 8 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contains no more than one or two mistakes in spelling, punctuation and grammar • Shows varied and very good use of vocabulary • Shows appropriate use of language according to the purpose, audience and context
<p>7 – 9 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairly good arrangement of ideas and facts • Generally good use of paragraphing • Ideas are well-linked • Details, if included, are relevant but not well-integrated with given facts 	<p>5 – 6 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contains a few errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar • Shows generally appropriate use of vocabulary • Shows generally appropriate use of language according to the purpose, audience and context
<p>4 – 6 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensible arrangement of ideas and facts in some places • Some attempts at paragraphing and linking of ideas, though not always successful 	<p>3 – 4 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contains several errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar • Shows limited use of appropriate vocabulary • Shows some attempts to use language appropriate to the purpose, audience and context
<p>1 – 3 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor or very poor arrangement of ideas and facts • Paragraphing is haphazard or absent • Ideas are poorly linked, resulting in vagueness and confusion 	<p>0 – 2 marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contains extensive errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar • Shows extensive use of inappropriate words • Shows no attempt to use language appropriate to the purpose, audience and context

* Do not award ½ marks

Pupil's Feedback Form (Appendix C)

Feedback on Composition

Name: _____

Class: _____

Content	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Ideas in the Story	Ideas are ample and fully relevant Ideas developed thoroughly.	Ideas are adequate and relevant. Ideas developed slightly.	Ideas are few and fairly adequate. Ideas developed minimally.	Ideas are inadequate. Ideas undeveloped.
Organisation of Story	Very good sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas.	Fairly good sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas.	Satisfactory sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas.	Poor sequencing, paragraphing and linking of ideas.
Language	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Choice of Vocabulary	Wide and appropriate use of vocabulary	Fairly adequate use of Vocabulary. Some words may not be used appropriately	Vocabulary used tends to be common words	Very limited Vocabulary
Sentence Structure	Very good sentence structure	Good sentence structure	Adequate sentence structure	Poor sentence structure
General Language Accuracy	Almost no errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. Grammar errors tend to be minor errors.	Some errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. As many major as minor errors.	Numerous errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. Both major and minor.	Full of errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. Errors may lead to confusion.

Things to look out for in future compositions:

Paragraphing **Spelling** **Tenses** **Punctuation**

Vocabulary

Additional Comments:

Samples of Teacher's written feedback (Appendix D)

- A few relevant ideas were not fully developed (Take note of my comments on the script.) Do pay attention to the mistakes in Grammar and Spelling. If you are not sure, write your story in the past tense so as not to mix up your tenses. By now, you must know the spelling of these words: immediately, unconscious, relieved.
A fair attempt.
 - I can see that you have put in a lot of effort to write this composition. Keep it up! The selected phrases and idioms do seem to be chosen with some care. However, you must try to use the correct tenses and punctuation, especially when they are related to direct speech.
 - Some errors were made in grammar and expression (Take note of my comments on the script). However, your facts and ideas were suitably linked. Good attempt!
 - A fairly good attempt! However, try to give more information in your next composition. You are expected to describe the main character's expressions and actions in detail. Try harder.
 - The composition is full of errors especially in grammar, expression and spelling (Please correct them in green). Most of the ideas and facts were not sequenced well (Refer to my suggestions on the script). Try your best to show some improvement the next time.
 - You were able to get the reader's attention with your opening sentence. Well done! You were able to use appropriate use of adjectives and verbs to capture the reader's attention. Do carry on with your interesting style.
-