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Feedback and Error Corrections
on Swedish Students' Written English Assignments

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Abstract

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Abstract: It is important to think about how to correct an essay and what the students should learn from it. My aim in this paper, is to look into what different researchers have said about feedback on written assignments and carry out a study of the kind of feedback that is actually used in secondary school today – and of what students and teachers think about it.

The results show that *underlining* is the marking technique mostly used in the secondary school where I did my investigation. This technique was also mostly preferred amongst the students. Two teachers were interviewed and both said that they used *underlining* because experience has shown that this marking technique is the most effective one. Furthermore, the results from the essays differed when analyzing errors corrected with *complete underlining*, *partial underlining*, *crossing out* and *giving the right answer*. One marking technique got good results when dealing with one kind of error, and worse in others. My conclusion is that teachers need to vary their marking technique depending on the specific kind of error.

Also, the results from a questionnaire showed that most of the students would like to get feedback on every written assignment. Not many of them said that they were already getting it, although this was what both teachers claimed. To conclude, there are many different ways to deal with marking and feedback. The key-word seems to be variation. As long as teachers vary their ways of dealing with marking and giving feedback, they will eventually find one or two that are most effective. Involving the students in this decision can also be a good idea, if they are interested.

Nyckelord: Error correction, feedback, correction techniques, marking techniques, written English, writing skills.

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1. Introduction and aims

Writing essays is one of the tasks students in Swedish secondary schools are given in their English classroom. They start with English in third or fourth grade and by the time they come to secondary school, they are expected to know how to write a short essay.

No matter how short the essay is, it is still important for teachers to give students the right kind of feedback. For example, too many corrections could have the opposite effect from what is intended. Teachers also have a choice between underlining, crossing out words and commenting, which are some of the different ways to give feedback on written assignments. Not all teachers choose the same kind of feedback. They might have different experiences with feedback and have changed their way of giving it during their years as teachers. What is common is that the teachers' main goal is to make sure that the students learn from their mistakes in order to develop their writing skills.

Teachers are known for their red pen, which can smother down a page completely with corrections. Books describing writing techniques, suggesting activities to use in class, and offering advice on how to give feedback, are some of the different aids a teacher can turn to for help. But they rarely tell a teacher what not to do. This seems to be part of the personal experience each teacher has to make. John Truscott has noted that teachers should change their marking techniques if students keep making the same mistakes over and over again (cited in Gray, 2004). So what different ways of corrections are there? In this paper, I will look into what different researchers say about feedback on written assignments and carry out a study of the kind of feedback that is actually used in secondary school today – and of what students and teachers think about it.

2. Background

2.1 Errors and mistakes

In some contexts, it can be important to distinguish between errors from mistakes (Ellis, 1998:17). Errors show what students do not know. They show that there is a gap in the students' knowledge, something that they have to learn. Mistakes are when students use an

incorrect form like *have* instead of *has*, but write *has* correctly in other places. They know the answer but had a lapse in their performance.

It is not always easy to see the difference between errors and mistakes. One way is to check how many times, for example, one particular incorrect form appears. If it occurs in all places, it is an error. If it is correct some places but not all, then it is likely to be a mistake. Another way is to ask students to correct it themselves, by just pointing out the incorrect answer. If they are able to correct it, it is a mistake. If not, it is an error (Ellis, 1998:17). In my study, I will not make a distinction between error and mistakes.

2.2 Feedback

Feedback, whether it is given through corrections or comments, has the purpose of supporting students' learning. Race (2005:95) says that feedback has four more purposes: It should help students to make sense of their work in some way. Also, it should clarify the need of learning by showing the students what they should be trying to achieve, what the outcome of their work should look like. Another purpose is to enhance students' willingness to learn, and last but not least, feedback should motivate the students to develop their skills.

2.2.1 Effective feedback

The importance of feedback lies in quality, not frequency. There are some important aspects to consider before feedback is given. Firstly, does the feedback take the students' development into account? By showing their progress, it could be an extra motivation for them. Also, a teacher should emphasize the efforts the students made, not the positive effect the outcome has on the teacher. There is a difference between "I see that you have worked very hard, good job!" and "I appreciate the hard work you have done!". The second comment suggests that the work was done for the teacher, the first focuses on the students' effort. The students should feel that they work for themselves, not for the teacher (Good and Brophy, 1994:147). There are also two other aspects to consider when it comes to feedback. Is the feedback based on a conscious strategy? And does the teacher vary it from time to time? Only writing "Wow!" does not say much about the work the students have carried out. It is better to point out the parts that are impressive and explain why. Also, variation is necessary. If a teacher constantly writes "Good job!" the students might not find it genuine and disregard it

(Good and Brophy, 1994:147). Keeping these points in mind could help to make feedback more useful for the students, and also more appreciated.

Another aspect of effective feedback is that it should concentrate on content, rather than form (Gray, 2004). Check to see if the students write fluently. Have they tried to use new words? Do they succeed? Do they have the knowledge how to go around the problems when their vocabulary is not extensive enough? There are more aspects to look at than only grammar.

A common mistake teachers make is that they focus on errors instead of excellence in the student's writing. Motivation is an important part of feedback and this is another problem that can lower students' self-esteem. Giving feedback should be about motivating students and at the same time focus on what they need to improve. This is a difficult balance to keep (Hyland and Hyland, 2001:187).

2.2.2 Sugaring the pill

Feedback is a good way of giving attention individually to each student, something that can be difficult in a classroom situation (Hyland and Hyland, 2001:185). As stated above, feedback should motivate students. It is therefore important to consider how much criticism is necessary, or possible, for each student. Too much criticism can lower students' self-esteem instead of helping them with their writing skills. A teacher's personal knowledge of each student can therefore be important (Hyland and Hyland, 2001:187). Teachers want to help their students and by knowing how much criticism the students can take, they are in a better position to give the right kind of feedback. Teachers also want to keep a good face-to-face relationship with the students. That means to consider each comment carefully before making it.

2.2.3 Draft or final product?

Teachers tend to give different kinds of feedback depending on whether the work is a draft or a final product (Hyland and Hyland, 2001:188). Corrections and feedback on drafts tend to be more extensive than that given in connection with the final product, which usually triggers a more general feedback on the whole assignment. Feedback on drafts can also be more developed. It is important to consider the two as equally important when it comes to feedback. They are both part of the writing process.

2.3 The teacher's role

Teachers take on different roles when they give feedback on written assignments. It all depends on where the students are in their work and how extensive the project is. One of the roles teachers take on is that of an audience that responds to the students' work. Some other roles are the assistant who helps the students find information, the evaluator who follows the students to see how they are progressing in their work and the editor who helps the students arrange their work correctly. However, students often choose to see their teacher in only one of these roles, as the examiner. The teachers are the ones who give students their grades and this is what they expect. It is therefore important for the teachers to make clear the other roles they can have in writing activities as well (Harmer, 2005:109).

2.4 Students' awareness

When feedback and corrections are given, it is important that the students take time to observe the mistakes they have made and look at the feedback given. A common phenomenon is that students first notice their grade, see how many corrections they got and then put the assignment aside. If a teacher instead asks the students to correct their mistakes there and then, the feedback would be more useful (Harmer, 2005:109).

There is also a difference between intentional and incidental learning (Doughty & Long, 2005:359). Intentional learning can be compared to memorizing grammar rules and words. Incidental learning can take place while reading a book, writing an essay or doing a listening exercise. In 1991, Doughty did a study on two groups. One group was given a task and told that there was going to be a test on it later. The other group got the same task, but did not know about the test. The results showed that incidental learning had occurred, even though those who knew about the test scored higher (Doughty & Long, 2005:359). So, combining traditional tasks in class with free reading and writing might be effective when it comes to students' learning.

2.5 Correction

When students have completed a written assignment, teachers are expected to correct it. The corrections serve to help the students' language development by showing where their knowledge is lacking. Students have a mental picture of how they think a certain grammar rule works, and the corrections should help students to adjust that picture when they are mistaken (Krashen & Terrell, 1985:177).

2.5.1 Ways of correcting

Harmer (2005:110) says that even if underlining, crossing-out and question marks are used, there are more effective ways of correcting written assignments. Selective correction means not correcting every mistake the students make. The students must be told before they start writing, that selective correction is going to be used. If a teacher announces that only punctuation will be corrected, the students might concentrate harder and make fewer mistakes in that area. Another way is to use correction symbols. This reduces the amount of red ink all over the essay, which often lowers the students' motivation. Harmer (2005:111) also mentions reformulation, which means that the teacher shows how a particular sentence can be formulated in another way. That enables the student to compare a correct version with an incorrect one. Referring to a dictionary in the feedback is yet another way to make students learn. They have to look something up with a purpose in mind. This way, they learn as they correct. If a mistake is difficult to explain, teachers can write "ask me" next to it so they can explain the mistake to the student face-to-face.

2.5.2 The Robb, Ross & Shortreed study

In a study made by Robb, Ross, and Shortreed in 1986, four kinds of grammar corrections were studied: giving the correct answer, marking with a yellow pen, giving a number in the margin after every line in an essay that shows how many mistakes there are, and correction codes (Gray, 2004). The authors observed Japanese students to see if they made any progress in their grammar because of the grammar corrections. The study showed that there had been no significant development at the end of the course. The authors concluded that these kinds of corrections are "not worth the trouble for teachers to make".

2.5.3 The Chandler study

Chandler (2003), carried out a study with an ESL class in the United States, where she let students write a paper of approximately 40 pages. Each homework was to write about eight pages about themselves. The papers were handed in and after they were corrected, the students had to revise them. The teacher chose four different kinds of correction each time the homework was handed in. These were: *underlining with description of the error*, *underlining*, *correction* and *description of error type*. *Underlining* meant to only underline the error without an explanation in the margin of the text, which was given in *underlining with description*. *Correction* meant that the teacher gave the right answer and *description of error type* meant that the error type was given in the margin of the text, without pointing out where it occurred. Then Chandler compared how many errors and mistakes the students still had after each revision. She measured by calculating how many errors and mistakes were left per 100 words. Her results showed, not surprisingly, that most errors and mistakes were revised correctly when correction had been used, but still the result was 1.1 remaining errors per 100 words. Second best was underlining and description with 3.1 errors per 100 words. Underlining gave a result of 4.6 errors per 100 words, and only description of error type 4.9 (Chandler, 2003:280-290).

Chandler also gave the students a questionnaire about what they thought of these correction types. According to them, it was easier to eliminate the errors and mistakes when correction was used, but underlining and description made it easier for them to see what kind of mistake they had made. Their preference was correction, even though most of them agreed that underlining and description helped them most (Chandler, 2003:289).

2.5.4 Grammar correction

Gray says that grammar corrections in second language writing are often more harmful than helpful (Gray, 2004). He says that those who do not receive extensive grammar corrections often write more and with more complexity than those who do receive them. Gray later states that grammar feedback does not work. His explanation is that the corrections do not always follow the students' level of grammatical development. Students develop their awareness of grammar in different ways and at different speeds. If students are corrected on a level they have not reached yet, it might not be effective. Grammar feedback does not work since it is more or less impossible to know exactly where students are in their development.

Another explanation of the ineffectiveness of grammar correction, Gray says, is that students often find teachers' remarks confusing, vague or contradictory (Gray, 2004). If students do not understand their errors, then they cannot correct them either. When they go through their work in order to revise it, they only make a kind of mental note of the errors they have understood and disregard the others.

Even if grammar corrections might be a waste of time, students expect teachers to make them. Students can become resentful towards those teachers who do not give this kind of correction and find them unprofessional (Gray, 2004).

2.5.5 Students' influence

How much input should the students receive when it comes to error correction? According to Jo Budden [online], one way of deciding on how to correct a written assignment is to ask the student. Sometimes the students have a clear idea of how they would like to be corrected. If some of them do not, the majority can rule. Use the way of correction that most students are comfortable with. Budden gives a concrete example of how students can choose how much correction they want. By drawing a traffic light on the written assignment, the students can fill in red, orange or green. Red means no corrections, orange means to correct the most necessary parts and green means to correct as much as possible. This traffic light can be used on smaller assignments where the main goal is to make the students express themselves. Instead of corrections, the teacher can use feedback on how the students did, by writing a comment at the end.

2.5.6 Repetition

Budden gives other examples of how to work with error correction. She states that she often says to her students that they are allowed to make new mistakes, because that means that they are trying to use language in new ways. To prevent students from making the same mistakes over and over again, she gives them a task after they get their written assignments back. They have to write down the errors they made in a specific notebook. Before a new written assignment, the students can look through their book and note what mistakes they have made and keep that in mind as they write. The teacher can also collect those books and have a test on the most common mistakes in the class.

3. Material and methods

My investigation was conducted in a secondary school in Sweden. The informants were eight girls and nine boys from grade seven and twelve girls and six boys from grade eight, or 35 students in all. Some of the students in each grade were ill on the day of the study, and this lowered the number of participants. The two classes had two different teachers, who work closely together. Each class got a writing assignment, instructing them to write an essay of one to two handwritten pages.

Initially, the idea was to have two classes in eighth grade with different teachers and that both classes would have the same assignment. This was not possible since one of the classes had too much to do, so one of the teachers chose a grade seven for me instead. Since this investigation mostly focused on corrections and feedback, this did not change the planning much.

Two questionnaires were also handed out. One was given to the teachers (appendix 1) and another was given to the students (appendix 2). The teachers will be anonymous as will the students.

3.1 Essays

One part of the materials used in this investigation was the essays. The two classes got different writing assignments chosen by the teachers themselves. The seventh-graders were to write an essay with the topic “This is me”, where they were asked to describe who they are and write a little about their families and hobbies. This assignment gave the students an opportunity to write freely and use the language abilities they had. The eighth-graders got three different beginnings of a story and the students were to choose one of them, continue where it left off, and finish it. The purpose of both essays was to see the students’ ability to use English in writing and how far advanced they were in their writing skills.

The seventh-graders wrote about one handwritten page each, whereas most of the eighth-graders wrote two pages. The two teachers were asked to correct the essays as they normally did. They got no requests regarding which correction technique to use, although they knew

that the investigation was about correction and feedback. The marking techniques they used varied. One teacher mostly used underlining of whole words, without a description of the error. The same teacher also gave the right answer where the student could not be expected to know it. The other teacher mostly used underlining of parts of words where the error occurred. Neither of them corrected all the mistakes where there were many. They said that they chose the errors which they felt the students were able to understand and correct.

The students then corrected the essays to the best of their ability. Since the corrections from the teachers varied, the students were more challenged in some places with only underlining and less in others, where the teachers had given the correct answer. The correct answer was to be written above the error the students had made. This made it easy for me to see if they understood what they had done wrong. Some of the students forgot this and did erase their errors, but it was still possible to see if the new answer was correct or not. Then the essays were handed in again and copies of these were used in this investigation.

3.2 Surveys

3.2.1 Students

When the essays were corrected and revised, the students got a questionnaire on correction and feedback, with oral clarifications where necessary. The survey was anonymous, even though the results will show what grade the individual respondents belong to. The survey was of the multiple-choice type and the students had to choose one alternative in connection with each question. In some places, the students could mark *other* and write their own answer.

The purpose of this survey was to see if the students had any thoughts about correction and feedback, including the teachers' different marking techniques. The students' answers were compared to their teacher's (cf. 3.2.2).

Not all the students who wrote an essay were present when the questionnaire was handed out. Also, some of the students did not write an essay but participated in the survey. This means that the number of students who answered the questionnaire, 15 students from grade seven and 19 from grade eight, is not the same as the number of students who wrote an essay.

3.2.2 Teachers

The two teachers also got a questionnaire about correction and feedback. This survey also consisted of multiple choice questions with some “other” alternatives, but some questions demanded an explanation, for example “why not?”. Some of the questions were more complex than the ones given to the students. The purpose of this survey was to see how the teachers felt about feedback and what kinds of correction technique they used.

As stated above, the answers on these questionnaires will be compared to the those of the students. This will show the relationship between the teachers’ corrections and how the students feel about them.

4. Analysis and results

4.1 Essays from grade seven

The results of the corrections and revisions of the essays are shown in Table 1. The teacher in grade seven used four different marking techniques: *complete underlining*, *partial underlining*, *crossing out* and *giving the right answer*. The last two techniques are almost the same. *Complete underlining* underlines the whole word without specifying where the error is. *Partial underlining* underlines where the error occurs in a word. It would be fair to say that this teacher used *underlining* as a correction technique most of the time.

Most of the students wrote one handwritten page, one wrote a little more and some of them wrote less. In Table 1, I chose to show the results concerning the errors that occurred most frequently in the essays.

As can be seen in Table 1, errors concerning *is / are*, apostrophe and *I / I’m* are easily corrected when *complete underlining* is used, most likely because the choices are few between the right and the wrong answer. Preposition and word choice errors are not as easily corrected with this correction technique. The number of choices is greater and it can be difficult to identify the right one. These two groups of errors had the highest numbers of *right answer given* by the teacher, probably due to this difficulty.

Table 1. Errors and corrections in the 7th-grade essays¹

Error	Frequency	<u>Complete</u> underlining	<u>Partial</u> underlining	Crossing out	Right answer given
Spelling	77	24/27	27/42	5/5	3/3
Prepositions	37	18/30	3/3	---	4/4
Apostrophes	9	2/2	2/5	---	2/2
<i>Is / Are</i>	13	13/13	---	---	---
Plural <i>-s</i>	18	---	13/14	3/3	1/1
The progressive form	3	2/3	---	1/1	---
<i>I / I'm</i>	3	1/1	---	1/1	1/1
Word choice	22	3/16	---	---	6/6
S-v-agreement	7	3/3	2/3	---	1/1

Even though *partial underlining* is more explicit, fewer correct revisions were made where this correction technique was used in connection with spelling mistakes. This can be a result of negligence on the part of the students as the error might not have been considered carefully enough.

Errors that seemed to be blunders were often corrected with *crossing out*. These include the use of *I'm* where it should be *I* and *dogs* where the student meant *dog*.

I will now discuss the different errors and marking techniques more explicitly in sections 4.1.1-4.1.8, starting with the most frequent error.

4.1.1 Spelling

The most frequent type of error concerned spelling. Spelling errors were also most frequently marked by the teacher and most of them were revised correctly when *complete underlining* was used. The reason could be that this makes students consider the error they made more carefully. First, they have to notice that it is a spelling mistake, then they have to come up with the correct answer.

¹ Below the different marking techniques, the first number indicates how many errors were revised correctly; the other number indicates the total number of errors that were corrected with that particular technique.

Partial underlining did not lead to as many correct revisions as *complete underlining*. This might be due to negligence on the part of the students. If only a part of the word is underlined, the choices are fewer when it comes to possible correct answers. Also, *partial underlining* might make it easier for the students to understand that it is a spelling mistake and this could entail that they do not consider the error closely enough. If the error was *get* where the student meant *yet* and only the *g* was underlined, the student could choose between *j* and *y*. These two letters are often confused by Swedish learners of English and the student may choose one without further consideration. Also, many of the spelling errors were due to pronunciation. One student wrote *spartime* and the marking looked like *spartime*, and this proved difficult to correct. The student knows how the word is pronounced and the result of this student's revision was *speartime*.

The few places where I could find *crossing out* was when students had confused two words. They wrote *bee* and meant *be*. Both spellings are used, but the meanings are different.

Giving the right answer occurred in long words or those that are particularly difficult to spell, like *mechanic*.

4.1.2 Prepositions

Learning prepositions is difficult for most students. There are many to choose from and sometimes it is difficult to know when to use which. *Complete underlining* makes it difficult for the students to know the correct answer. Obviously, the more prepositions there are to choose from, the more difficult it becomes to choose the correct one.

Partial underlining lowers the number of possible alternatives. This technique was used a few times in connection with the prepositions *on* and *in*, where the first letter was underlined.

On and *in* were the two prepositions that were most frequently used incorrectly (cf. example (1) and (2)).

(1) *on* the summer

(2) *in* my vacation

When it came to prepositions like *at* and *by*, *giving the right answer* was used, perhaps because the sentences were not like those the students had used when they practised prepositions or were difficult in some other way.

4.1.3 Word choice

This type of error was also frequent. *Complete underlining* with no description or explanation was used most of the time, but only three correct revisions were achieved on the basis of this technique. The students have to consider carefully which word should be used instead, and this can be difficult if they do not understand what was wrong with their choice to begin with. These kinds of errors might need a bit more explanation to be revised correctly.

When whole sentences or expressions were wrong, *giving the right answer* was used, and also when one student chose *good* instead of *well*.

4.1.4 Subject-verb-agreement

Errors like *has* instead of *have* were correctly revised with both *complete* and *partial underlining*. Only once was the *correct version given* by the teacher.

Is / are occurred 13 times and was revised correctly 13 times on the basis of *complete underlining*. This has a simple explanation: there are only two choices, namely *is* and *are*. If one of them is wrong, the other has to be right.

4.1.5 Plural -s

This was another common error in the essay, mostly when the students forgot to add a plural *-s* at the end of a word. *Complete underlining* was not used at all in connection with this kind of error.

Partial underlining occurred in 14 different places, all of them when the plural *-s* was left out.

Sometimes when *partial underlining* is used (cf. example (3)), it is easy to understand that something is missing there. This is shown in the results: 13 of 14 errors were revised correctly when this marking technique was used.

(3) I love my two dog_

Crossing out was only used when the students had used plural *-s* where there was not supposed to be one. The one time *giving the right answer* was used was in an essay with many other errors, and perhaps the plural *-s* was not the most important one. This student had, for example, many spelling errors.

4.1.6 Apostrophe

Apostrophes is another aspect of grammar and spelling that can be difficult to learn. The same phenomena as with spelling errors could be seen with respect to apostrophe errors, even though the latter were fewer. When *complete underlining* was used, the students revised correctly.

When *partial underlining* was used, only two revisions out of five were correct. I believe that the reason is the same as for spelling in general: *complete underlining* makes the students concentrate harder on what the error is. One student got a mark where he had left out an apostrophe (cf. example (4)), and he interpreted it as if the last letter *-s* should be removed.

(4) my sisters_ pet

There were two places where *giving the right answer* was used, both when there would have to be an apostrophe at the end of a word, as illustrated in example (5):

(5) the dogs_ names

The reason could be that the students have not learned the rules of how to use apostrophes yet or that most of them have problems with them.

4.1.7 Verb errors

These errors include the use of *I / I'm* and the progressive form. They were not frequent, but when they occurred, they were easily corrected with the help of *complete underlining*. *I / I'm* does not have many alternatives and the progressive form does not either. The choice is whether or not to include *-ing* as in *walk* or *walking* to create a verb that describes something ongoing.

Crossing out was used for both types where students had written too much, as in *I'm* instead of *I* and *playing* instead of *play*. The one time *giving the right answer* was used was when the student had used *I'm* correctly in all places except one.

4.1.8 Summary

Spelling and preposition errors were by far the most frequent errors in the seventh grade (cf. Figure 1). Most of the students were able to correct their mistakes and it was noticeable that even when they did not know the right answer, they had at least tried.

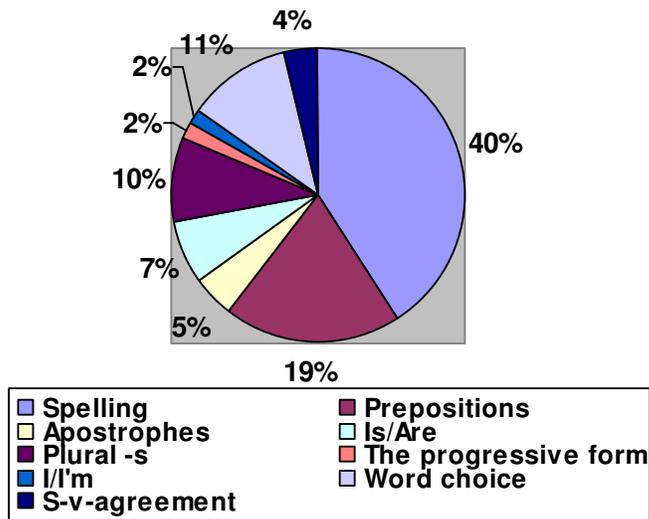


Figure 1. Survey of errors, grade seven.

The teacher's use of marking techniques are summarized in Figure 2. *Crossing out* was not used as frequently as *giving the right answer*, which are both two ways of giving the right answer. *Complete underlining* was used most frequently.

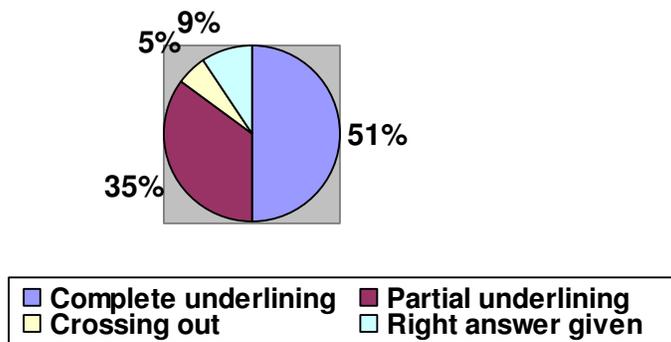


Figure 2. Survey of teacher's marking techniques in grade seven.

4.2 Essays from grade eight

The results concerning the markings and revisions of the essays written in grade eight are shown in Table 2. She also used *complete underlining*, *partial underlining*, *crossing out* and *giving the right answer* as a marking technique. Like the teacher in grade seven, the marking technique mostly used was *underlining*. Some of the students wrote the beginning of the story in their essays, but this part is not considered in the results. They all wrote two handwritten pages, but since some of them included the beginning, some wrote more than others. The structure of Table 2 is exactly like that of Table 1. In the table, I once again chose to focus on the most frequent errors, and these differed from those in grade seven.

Table 2. Survey of results of essays (For explanations, cf. Table 1.)

Error	Frequency	<u>Complete</u> underlining	<u>Partial</u> underlining	Crossing out	Right answer given
Spelling	115	10/16	43/82	10/10	7/7
S-v-agreement	17	7/11	1/6	---	---
Word choice	23	5/9	1/4	---	10/10
Tense	60	4/7	21/48	---	4/4
Prepositions	11	3/6	0/1	1/1	3/3
<i>There / It</i>	5	2/5	---	---	---
Apostrophes	18	1/2	6/13	---	3/3
The progressive form	7	0/4	1/2	1/1	---
<i>A / An</i>	6	0/1	5/5	---	---

I will now discuss the different errors and marking techniques more explicitly in sections 4.2.1 – 4.2.10, starting with the most frequent error.

4.2.1 Spelling

Spelling errors were the most frequent type in the eighth-graders' essays. They were mostly corrected with *partial underlining*. The results show that even though this technique narrows down the error to the core, only about half of the errors were revised correctly. Some of the students tried to revise according to how the word sounds, which was a sign that they did not know the correct spelling. Others understood what was wrong and succeeded in correcting.

Crossing out could be seen when one letter too many occurred in a word (cf. example (6)).

(6) I have *allready* been there

Here, *giving the right answer* was used when the misspellings looked like mistakes, the essays were otherwise well written and the spelling mistakes did not seem so important.

4.2.2 Tense

Tense errors were also frequent, and most of them were indicated by *partial underlining*. *Complete underlining* was only used seven times, but the results still show that only about half of the errors were successfully corrected with either technique. The students had problems understanding what their mistakes were, and most of those who tried to correct them ended up altering the spelling. Again, *giving the right answer* was used when the students had many other errors to correct.

4.2.3 Word choice

This area involved a high number of *giving the right answer*. As in the seventh graders' essays, word choice can be difficult and sometimes it might be a better idea for the teacher to explain why another word is more appropriate.

When students had mistaken one word for another one that is very much alike the one that should have been written, *partial underlining* was used. These were words that had similar spellings but different meanings. Only one student understood that a mistake had been made and was able to correct it. *Complete underlining* was used nine times, and five successful revisions were produced.

4.2.4 Apostrophes

Most of these errors were corrected with *partial underlining*, indicating where the apostrophe should be. Not all students understood that an apostrophe was missing, and some of them thought that another word that represented ownership should be used. For example, one

student wrote *Peter car* and the marking looked like this: *Petercar*. The revision became *His car*, even though *partial underlining* was used.

The reason might be that the student did not know how to use apostrophes and chose another way out, or that *his* actually fit better. *Complete underlining* was used on short words like *it's*.

4.2.5 Subject-verb-agreement

These errors were revised most successfully when *complete underlining* was used (cf. example (7)). One reason could be that this method makes it easier for the students to comprehend the error as a subject-verb-agreement error. Most students noticed their mistake and revised it correctly.

Partial underlining (cf. example (8)) yielded worse results. Only one out of six errors was understood and corrected. As I have stated above, this might be due to the students being negligent and interpreting agreement errors as, for example, spelling errors.

(7) they has a boat

(8) he have a leguana

4.2.6 Preposition

Some preposition errors occurred, and most of them were marked with *complete underlining*. The results were the same as for the seventh-graders' revisions: only some of the errors were successfully revised and sometimes the teacher chose *giving the right answer* instead.

4.2.7 The progressive form

When *complete underlining* was used in connection with errors concerning the progressive form (cf. example (9)), not one student was able to correct the mistake. All in all, the eighth-graders did not use the progressive form much in the essays, and that might be a reason for why so few of them were able to detect and revise the errors correctly.

(9) I like to running after school

4.2.8 A/An

Errors where *a* was used instead of *an* and vice versa, also occurred in the essays. *Partial underlining* made it very easy to correct it since there is only one alternative. The one student who was faced with a *complete underlining* did not seem to understand the error at all, or simply missed to correct it.

4.2.9 There/It

I included this area, since there were some students that had problems with how and when to use *there* and *it* (cf. example (10) and (11)). All these errors were corrected with *complete underlining* but only two students understood the connection between *it* and *there*.

(10) it were many animals

(11) there was raining

4.2.10 Summary

Spelling errors were the most frequent type of error in the eighth grade also, and the second most frequent was tense errors (cf. Figure 3). The eighth-graders had a larger number of uncorrected errors, which might have affected the outcome.

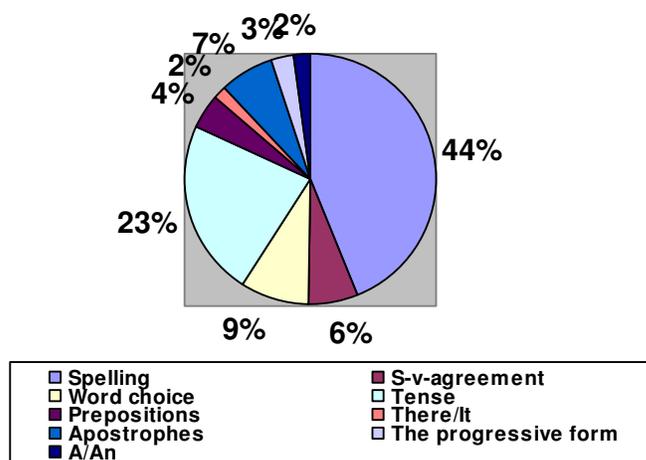


Figure 3. Survey of errors, grade eight

Figure 4 shows what marking technique the teacher used. *Partial underlining* was the most frequent marking technique. This teacher used *crossing out* and *giving the right answer* almost as much as the other teacher.

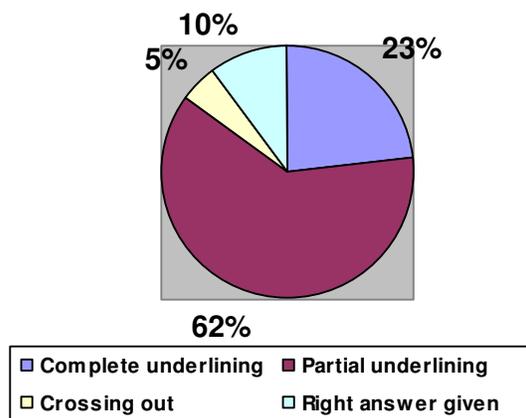


Figure 4. Survey of teacher's marking techniques.

4.3 Comparison of the two classes

To begin with, there were more errors left unrevised in the eighth-graders' essays than in the seventh-graders' and this might affect the results in places. It is difficult to know if the errors were left unrevised intentionally or if the students tried to correct them. The eighth graders had more spelling errors, but they wrote more. Other than that, the results concerning spelling errors look similar.

The seventh-graders had more preposition errors and errors with regard to the progressive form. This is probably due to their development in grammar, since they have not had as much practice in these areas as the eighth-graders.

Word choice errors were as common in grade eight as they were in grade seven. The difference was that the eighth-graders were more successful in coming up with suitable alternatives.

The eighth graders had many tense errors, mainly because their essay was more of a story, which required both past and present tense forms.

4.4 Teacher comments

The comments that the teacher in grade seven gave on this assignment came in three different shapes. One of them was a comment on how the student had done, for example “Good that you’ve written so much, (name)”. Another was a comment on the errors, for example “Try to correct your mistakes”. The last was a comment on particular errors the student made, for example “Don’t write ‘wanna’”. These three types of comments were occasionally combined with each other, like “Good that you’ve written so much! Try to correct your mistakes”, but most of them looked like the first three mentioned. The statistics are shown in Figure 5. The teacher in grade eight did not give feedback on this written assignment.

A total number of 16 essays were corrected in grade seven. 13% of the students received a comment on the essay, like “Good!” and “It’s a bit short, (name)”. 24% received a comment and were asked to correct their mistakes, for example “Good (name), but check the mistakes you’ve made”. 19% of the students got comments like “Good (name), but don’t write ‘wanna’” and another 19% received different variations of “Check your mistakes”. 25% did not get any comments at all.

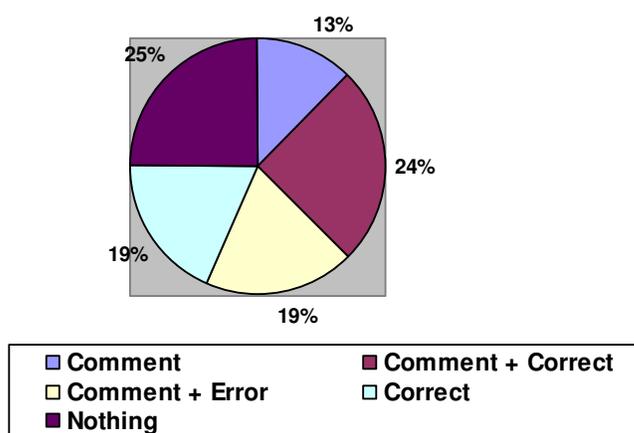


Figure 5. Comments from teacher grade 7.

4.5 Questionnaire, grade seven

15 students from grade seven participated in this survey (appendix 2). I did not divide them into subgroups.

The results showed that most students preferred *underlining* as a marking technique for their essays and written assignments. Even though the teacher did not use all the marking techniques I gave in question one, some students still chose them. Same goes for grade eight. Perhaps they have come across it with other teachers. Six preferred that the teacher write the type of error they had committed, seven preferred underlining only. Three of the latter gave the comments “so I can correct them myself”, “let me find out what the error is” and “then I have to think about what the right answer is”. One student who preferred *underlining with description of error type* gave the comment “I don’t know” as to why he preferred it. It seems like most students wanted to come up with the right answer themselves. Only two of them answered that they preferred *crossing out with correction*.

Three students who had answered *underlining* on question 1a, stated in 1b that it made it easier for them to understand what they had done wrong. This alternative was also chosen by four students who answered *underlining with description of error type*. The two students who had chosen *crossing out with correction* had also chosen this alternative in connection with question 1b.

The alternatives *easy for me to correct* and *both* were both chosen by students who had marked *underlining with description of error type* in question 1a.

Question number 2, *Do you feel that you have any power over which correction type your teacher uses?*, was interesting and the reason will become apparent in the discussion of the interview with the teacher (cf. 4.7). A total of ten students thought that they at least had some influence when it came to the way their written work are corrected. Most of them, six students, answered *yes, somewhat*. Five students had chosen *no* and one of them added the comment “and I don’t care either”.

The results for question 3 were conclusive. All 15 students wanted to get feedback on every essay or assignment. Six of them answered that they are already getting it and nine said that

they wanted to. Two students answered “on every mistake” on question 3b. This and the results from question 3a show that the students had different definitions of what feedback is or should be. Not a single student answered *no* on this question.

Unfortunately, I forgot to modify question 4 before the survey was done. *Why?* should have been added after the alternatives to elicit explanations from the students. Nine students answered “no” on this question, i.e. they did not think that the “traffic light” method sounded like a good idea. Six answered that it did.

Grammar was discussed in question 5. One student asked me what grammar is, which came as a surprise. The majority, twelve students, answered that they thought the teacher mostly corrected grammar. Two answered “no” and one added the alternative *don't know*. Most of them also thought that grammar corrections did help them in their grammar development. One answered “no” and one stated “both yes and no”.

The last question was about feedback with positive and negative response and a development report from the teacher. Here, the results were a bit different from those of question 3. Four students stated that they already got this kind of feedback. Nine said that they would like to get it and two answered “no”.

4.6 Questionnaire, grade eight

19 students from grade eight participated in this survey. I did not divide them into subgroups and all answers are anonymous.

The answers to question 1a, *Which correction type do you prefer?*, were more spread than the ones in grade seven. *Underlining* and *underlining with description* were chosen by five students each. Two students preferred *crossing out* and seven preferred *crossing out with correction*. Eight students who had chosen one kind of *underlining* in question 1a stated that it made it easier for them to understand what they had done wrong in question 1b. The rest, two students, chose *both*. One of the students who had chosen *crossing out* chose *easy for me to understand what I did wrong* on question 1b, the other answered *both* on question 1b. Of the seven students who had chosen *crossing out with description*, three marked *easy for me to*

understand what I did wrong, one marked *easy for me to correct* and the last three marked *both*. None gave any comments.

Nine students thought that they at least had some influence on the correction of their written work. Most of the students answered “no” to question two. One chose *yes*, five chose *yes, but rather little* and three chose *yes, somewhat*.

The opinions concerning question 3, *Would you like to get feedback on every written assignment?*, were almost unanimous. 14 students answered that they wanted feedback on every written assignment. Three did not and two said that they already got it. Four students added comments on this question, which were “sometimes”, “don’t know”, “whenever” and “never”.

The “traffic light” method sounded like a good idea to 13 students. Six of them did not agree. Again, I forgot to ask them “why?” in connection with this question.

14 students thought that most corrections made in their written work were on grammar. One commented “both yes and no, on spelling too”. Five thought that grammar was not the major area of corrections. All 19 students thought that they learned something from grammar corrections.

Only one student answered that s/he already received the kind of feedback described in question 6. 15 said that they would like this kind of feedback and three said “no”.

4.7 The views of the teacher in grade seven

The teacher in grade seven claimed that students were expected to write essays or given other comprehensive writing tasks two to five times per term. In an oral comment, he added that more such assignments would be desirable, but that it was not possible.

Underlining was the technique most often used and this was because experience had shown it to be the most effective. The techniques used by this teacher had changed many times over

the years. The comment given was: “it has been shown that *underlining* works better than other techniques”.

On average, the teacher spends 11-20 minutes on correcting an essay and feels that this time is mostly enough. 41-80% of the corrections are usually on grammar. The teacher did not agree with the statement that grammar corrections are not necessary and said that the students were not consulted about what marking technique to use.

Feedback is given on almost every written assignment. The size of the assignment or essay decides if feedback is used or not. The comment on how much is written was: “It varies of course, but I try to write at least one sentence!” The teacher also said that the feedback usually looks like the one described in question 6d.

The “Traffic light” method did not sound like a good idea to this teacher, who commented that it is the teacher who must know best what kind of feedback is best suited for a student.

4.8 Comparison between the seventh-grade students’ and the teacher’s views

Underlining was preferred by the students and this is also the technique that the teacher is using. It is interesting to note that although most students in this class thought that they had some influence on the marking techniques used by the teacher, this teacher said that they were not included in the decision-making process. Maybe the students misinterpreted the question as referring to the revisions, i.e. when the teacher’s corrections are already made.

Six students answered that they were already getting feedback on every assignment and this seemed to be correct since the teacher stated that feedback was given on almost every assignment. Still, nine students answered that they would like it. Maybe they focused on those few times when feedback was not given, or they feel that feedback should consist of more than a sentence. Another explanation could be that the teacher provided less feedback than he claimed. Also, this teacher did not think that the “traffic light” method was a good idea and most students agreed.

41-80% of the corrections were on grammar, according to the teacher, and this corresponds to what the students answered.

Nine students said that the feedback described in question 6 of their questionnaire was something they would like to get, namely positive and negative response and a comment on the progress in their writing skills. The teacher answered that the feedback sometimes looks like this, but only four students said that they were already getting it. Maybe the first nine students meant that they would like to get it more often than they are now.

4.9 The views of the teacher in grade eight

This teacher also answered that essays are written two to five times per term. The technique most often used was *underlining* because experience has shown it to be the most effective one. The teacher did not mention *crossing out with correction*, which was the technique mostly used on spelling errors. The teacher had never changed his/her marking technique.

On average, the teacher spends 21-30 minutes on correcting an essay of one to two handwritten pages and usually considers this enough. 41-80 percent of the corrections are usually on grammar. This teacher agreed to some extent with the statement that grammar corrections are unnecessary. The students have never been involved in deciding what marking technique to use, according to this teacher.

Feedback is given on almost every written assignment though sometimes time decides if feedback is going to be given or not. The comment on question 6c, about how much the teacher writes when giving feedback, was: “a few lines, positive and negative response”. The teacher answered “yes, my feedback is similar to this” on the following question.

This teacher did not like the “traffic light” method either, and commented that all students need to have their essays corrected, but not in the same manner. Weak students need to have their basic errors corrected before the more difficult ones are given attention.

4.10 Comparison between the eighth-grade students' and the teacher's views

Ten students preferred *underlining* and *underlining with description* and the latter is actually not used by the teacher. Seven students preferred *crossing out with correction*. This technique was mostly used on spelling and the students might have considered the advantages this marking technique has on spelling errors when they gave the answer.

Nine students felt that they had some influence on the kinds of corrections the teacher makes. The teacher answered that the students were never involved in that decision, so again, the students could have misinterpreted the question.

Even though the teacher answered that feedback was given on almost every written assignment, only two students answered that they were already getting it. 14 said that they would like to get it on every assignment, while three students did not. Again, the students might have recalled the times when they had not got feedback but wanted it. When it came to the “traffic light” method, 13 of 19 students considered the method to be a good idea. The teacher did not agree and perhaps this would be something to discuss with the students later on.

41-80 percent of the corrections were on grammar, according to the teacher. 14 students felt that most of the corrections were on grammar, so this seems to be accurate.

15 of the students said that they would like to get the kind of feedback described in question 6, even though the teacher had answered that the feedback given is similar to this. This could be a matter of definition. The students might have a different picture of the feedback than the teacher.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to look into what different researchers say about feedback on written assignments and to carry out a study of what kind of feedback is actually used in secondary school today – and of what students and teachers think about it. The latter was done with two questionnaires, one given to the two teachers and another given to their students. My aim was to see why some techniques are chosen and what the students think of

them. Also, how well can the students correct their mistakes on the basis of the corrections they get?

If all kinds of *underlining* are taken together, 70 percent of the errors made by students in grade seven were successfully revised with this technique. The same technique was used in grade eight, but there only 50 percent of the errors marked like this were successfully revised. However, these two classes did not make the same kinds of mistakes and the eighth-graders also had a higher number of errors all in all, and this affects the results, as does the fact that some students did not correct all their mistakes. It remains unclear whether or not they were able to correct them. *Underlining* works well in these two classes, even though the eighth-graders had a lower percentage of correct revisions. The students in this class who did correct all their mistakes did it well, so maybe the results would have been better if all students had at least tried.

Underlining was also the technique preferred by the students in both classes. One teacher stated that he had used several techniques during his years as a teacher, but that this is the most effective one. According to my results, that might well be true for the two classes studied by me as well.

The two other techniques *crossing out* and *giving the right answer*, were only used in three different situations: firstly, when the students had made several other mistakes and the one in question was not what they needed to focus on most; secondly, when the students had committed a blunder, i.e. they had proven to know e.g. a certain grammar rule in other places; and finally, when the error was too difficult for them to correct themselves.

After handing out the questionnaire to the students, I noticed that most of them actually went through the questions carefully. Some even wrote an individual comment where I had not really provided space for one. This shows that even though they are not often involved in choosing marking and feedback techniques, they do have opinions about it.

There are some things I would have done differently in retrospect. First, I would have tried to be present when the students revised their essays. That way I would know what kind of help they got from the teachers. Also, I would have been able to make sure that all students were at least trying to correct their errors. Another thing I would have changed is some of the

questions in the questionnaires given to the students. I noticed when I went through them that I had forgotten to ask the students why they answered like they did in different places.

An idea for future investigations in this area is to inform a number of teachers about different marking techniques, e.g. those I have discussed in the background section, and then to ask them to use some of these techniques when correcting the essays. This way, more techniques could be compared and it would be easier to notice differences. Of course, the techniques would also need to be discussed with the students if they are not used to them.

Some students want to try new things. For teachers, it might be a good idea to ask the students what they think about different ways of giving feedback and correcting errors. Perhaps they surprise you with their opinions and it would also make them feel more involved. Of course, some students do not have a strong opinion and feel satisfied with what they are already getting, like the student who stated that s/he did not feel s/he had an influence on what marking technique the teacher should use, adding “and I don’t care either”. The answers can be positive and negative, but the students at least deserve a chance to be more involved.

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Appendix 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. How many times per term (20 weeks) do you have essays / written assignments?

- Once
- 2-5 times
- 6-9 times
- Every other week
- Once per week if possible

2 a) What kind of correction technique do you mostly use when commenting on student's written production? (one answer)

- Underlining
 - Underlining with description of error
 - Crossing out
 - Crossing out with correction
 - Description of error type in the margin
 - Other: _____
-
-

b) Why is that your preference?

- Experience has shown me that this works best
 - Has become a habit
 - It is the least time-consuming technique
 - Other: _____
-
-

c) Have you changed your correction technique during your years as a teacher?

- Yes, several times
- Yes, once
- No (→ go to question 3 a)

d) Why did you change your correction technique?

3 a) On average, how much time do you spend on the correction an essay of 1-2 handwritten pages?

- 0-10 min
- 10-20 min
- 20-30 min
- more than 30 min

b) Do you feel that the time you spend is enough?

- Yes
- Yes, usually
- No, usually not
- No

4 a) If you do a rough calculation, how great a part of your corrections/feedback concerns grammar?

- 0-40 %
- 40-80 %
- more than 80 %

b) Some researchers say that grammar corrections aren't necessary. Students learn grammar with different speeds and they reach certain grammar levels at different times. Some researchers claim that in order to be able to successfully correct students' grammar mistakes, you need to know what level they have reached. This is nearly impossible according to them. Do you agree that grammar corrections are unnecessary?

- Yes
- Yes, but only to some extent
- No

5 a) Have your students been involved in deciding how to correct an essay?

- Yes
- No (→ go to question 6)

b) Do you feel that involving the students in this issue is a good idea??

- Yes
- No

6 a) How often do you give feedback on an essay?

- Never (→ go to question 6 c)
- Once every term
- On every other essay
- Most of the times
- Always

b) What decides if you're giving feedback or not?

- The size of the essay / written assignment
- Time
- Other: _____

c) How much do you write when you give feedback?

d) Some researchers say that preferably feedback should consist of positive response, negative response and a comment on how the students are progressing in their writing skills. Do you feel that this is possible to adapt?

- Yes, my feedback is similar to this
- Yes
- No

If no, why?

7) The "Traffic light" method implies that there would be a traffic light on some written assignments. The pupils would choose red, orange and green. Red means no corrections, orange means to correct the most important parts and green means to correct as much as possible. Does this sound like a good idea to you?

- Yes
- No

If no, why?

Thank you for participating!

/Maria Eriksson

Appendix 2

Please answer the following questions:

1.a) Which correction type do you prefer?

- Underlining
 - Underlining with description of error
 - Crossing out
 - Crossing out with correction
 - Description of error type in the margin
 - Other: _____
-
-

b) Why?

- Easy to me understand what I did wrong
 - Easy for me to correct
 - Both
 - Other: _____
-
-

2) Do you feel that you have any power over which correction type your teacher uses?

- Yes
- Yes, some
- Yes, but rather little
- No

3 a) Would you like to get feedback on every written assignment?

- Yes, I'm already getting it (→ go to question 4)
- Yes (→ go to question 4)
- No

b) When would you like to get feedback?

4) The “Traffic light” method implies that there would be a traffic light on some written assignments. The pupils would choose red, orange and green. Red means no corrections, orange means to correct the most important parts and green means to correct as much as possible. Does this sound like a good idea to you?

- Yes
- No

5 a) Do you feel that most corrections your teacher makes in connection with written assignments concerns grammar?

- Yes
- No

b) Do you feel that you learn from grammar corrections?

- Yes
- No

6. One way of giving feedback is to write a comment at the end of a paper. Usually, this comment consists of things you did well and things you need to improve at and possible a comment on how you are doing when it comes to your writing skills. Is this something you would like on your essays?

- Yes, I’m already getting it
- Yes
- No

Thank you!

/Maria Eriksson

Appendix 3

Hej!

Jag heter Maria Eriksson och läser till språklärare på Karlstads Universitet. Just nu läser jag Engelska C och ska skriva min C-uppsats. Jag ska skriva om hur två lärare på Dejeskolan rättar uppsatser och sen ska jag jämföra dem med varandra. Jag ska också undersöka hur mycket eleverna kan justera de fel de gjorde efter de rättningarna.

För att få använda elevernas uppsatser, måste jag ha föräldrarnas tillstånd. Det är inte vad de skrivit som är i fokus, utan lärarnas rättning. Jag kommer inte nämna elevernas namn eller skola, inte heller lärarnas namn.

Med vänlig hälsning,

Maria Eriksson.

Uppge om ni tillåter att jag använder ert barns uppsats:

JA

NEJ

ELEVENS NAMN

MÅLSMANS NAMN