

## A CRITIQUE OF RESPONSE STRATEGIES: MEASURES TO INDUCE A PARADIGMATIC SHIFT IN RESPONSE TO STUDENT WRITING

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*This paper explores response to student writing in entry-level English modules in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context at the University of South Africa (UNISA). After an evaluation of the research undertaken by Spencer (1999) and Lephhalala and Pienaar (2008), both conducted in this specific teaching context, the argument is put forward that the predominantly formalist orientation of the marking can be described as an attractor (Weideman, 2009), since it seems that the system is attracted into this state and has maintained it over a number of years. There is a need to shift towards a cognitive, reader-based orientation. The author uses the categories defined in Lephhalala and Pienaar (2008) to describe feedback styles. The categories are L1 (minimal feedback), L2 (general and non-text-specific feedback) and L3 (feedback with a focus on content and organisation). Four amendments are proposed to the existing marking code which will encourage markers to operate in the desired L3 feedback category. This paper argues that these additions to the marking code will address limitations inherent in the marking code. At present, marked scripts contain a jumble of recommendations relating to content/form and global/local issues and there is little indication of the relative importance of an error. The marking code is inherently negative in orientation and promotes a formalist L1 style of response. A qualitative investigation into the reaction to the proposed changes was obtained from 33 marked samples of response to student writing provided by external markers. Compared to the data given in Lephhalala and Pienaar (2008), the changes tested in this study were unable to influence the dominant L1 response strategy, but caused a shift away from L2 formulaic responses and an increase in the desired L3 feedback. There is a need for intensive investigation into feedback in this ODL teaching context and into measures to promote L3 feedback.*

*Key words: Response, student writing, formalist approach, correction code, limitations, writing research, ODL*

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This article<sup>1</sup> focuses on response to student writing in an entry-level English for Academic Purposes module (ENN103F) offered at the University of South Africa (UNISA), a mega open and distance-learning (ODL) institution. The module under scrutiny is offered on NQF level 5 and its purpose is to develop learners' ability to read critically with comprehension and insight, improve their linguistic competence and develop their ability to write logically and effectively. The investigation relates to the writing section of the course, specifically the second learning outcome, which requires attention to writing both as process and as product,

as learners are required to write effectively for different purposes, implement planning strategies, write a draft, edit it and produce a final text.

Response to student writing in this context is problematic for a number of reasons. The enrolment figures are very high, as the 2009 UNISA College of Human Sciences statistics attest. Over the two semesters in 2009, 6541 students were registered for ENN103F, a dramatic increase from the 2779 students registered in 2008 when the course was offered as a year module rather than a semester module. The students registered for the module in 2009 represented 13.41% of the total annual registrations in the College of Human Sciences. Marking of student writing is done primarily by external markers who are carefully screened, experienced teachers whose work is quality controlled by full-time members of staff. Markers are required to attend markers' meetings designed to integrate them into the teaching team, facilitate debate and to enhance the inter-rater reliability of the marking. The student numbers would be daunting in any teaching context but the difficulty is further exacerbated by the fact that many of the students lack the linguistic competence necessary for study at tertiary level through the medium of English, a language that, for the majority, is not their mother tongue. These 'non-traditional', 'disempowered', 'at risk' students are typical of the students entering tertiary level South African institutions (Fouche, 2007; Parkinson et al., 2008; Van Dyk, 2005; & Van der Walt & Hattingh, 2007). The distance-teaching context places a further challenge into the mix, making effective instruction, in general, including feedback on writing tasks, even more critical than in a contact-teaching institution.

Research on feedback on student writing in this context has raised a number of deep concerns. In her doctoral research focused on the same module at UNISA, Spencer concluded that 'the response strategies adopted ... reveal a regression to the traditional, product-orientated approach to writing' (1999:263). After an analysis of the response to student writing involving 50 randomly-selected scripts, Spencer (1999:210-247) concluded that 80% of the response could be defined as formalist and 82% as text-centred. In this context, the fact that 74% of the response had its locus of control outside the reading process itself is not surprising. The marking was characterised by a dualistic response mode, which is to be anticipated if the focus is on grammatical correctness; 72% of the response mode fell into the category of criticism and 92% of the commentary fell into the objective/judging role. A focus on form was revealed in 84% of the marking. The formalist axiological orientation of 80% of the response contrasted strongly with the 18% whose response could be described as cognitive. Spencer concludes that there is a chasm between current writing theory, as modelled in the tuition guide, and the evaluative practices employed in the module. In the former, the focus falls on meaning making, discovery of ideas, recursive moves, multiple readership and postponed attention to surface-level correction. However, the evaluation fixates on formal correctness, restricts readership to the lecturer and suggests that writing is a product to be assessed and graded. A study by Lephala and Pienaar (2008), which examined marker feedback on 100 randomly-selected ENN103F student essays, re-enforced Spencer's (1999) findings. The case study identified three categories of response. L1 feedback, comprising 60% of the marking, could be described as providing minimal feedback, where correction codes are used and the focus is almost exclusively on formal correctness. This is 'the least helpful level of marking' (Lephala & Pienaar, 2008:73) and there is little attempt to engage in a dialogue. L2 feedback is non-text-specific. This 'rubber-stamping' of scripts consists of generalised commentary characterised by vagueness and the approach is used by 30% of the markers. Only 10% of the marking fell into the third category, in which commentary on content and organisation means that the feedback becomes the voice of the

lecturer engaged in the meaning-making process. Here the student is encouraged, by questioning, to rethink and return to the ‘chaos’; the thinking stage of composition. These comments are text-specific and represent the engagement and questioning of genuine readership. Such critical involvement with a developing text should be promoted.

If one views response to student writing in the context outlined above as a complex system (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; and Weideman, 2009) it is clear that L1 feedback employed by the majority of markers in the ENN103F course represents a ‘stable state where the system maintains the same kind of behaviour over some time. ... [It is] an “attractor”, since it seems that the system is attracted into this state’ (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007:228). It is clear, as determined by the research conducted by Spencer (1999) and Lephala and Pienaar (2008), that this stable state has endured over time. There has been continuity with the formalist paradigm strongly represented in the response mechanisms employed in L1 feedback. There needs to be an urgent transition to the cognitive, questioning approach characteristic of L3 feedback. This would represent a paradigmatic shift in orientation. In thinking about how to effect such a change, the author took solace in the claim that ‘a complex systems approach ... emphasises that even small interventions can make a big difference’ (Weideman, 2009:68) and that ‘in complex systems theory ... the effect is disproportionate to the cause’ (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007:228). The response to student writing that is employed requires a ‘big difference’ in the form of a distinct shift from the formalist L1 feedback employed by the majority to the more effective L3 feedback used by only 1 in 10 markers.

This article describes an intervention that the author devised independently after wrestling with the problem described above. It is a ‘small’ intervention in that it involves requiring markers to use four relatively minor additions to the marking code that is already in use. These changes represent characteristics of L3 markers and by requiring all markers to use the new symbols markers will be encouraged to operate in a cognitive, reader-based paradigm, which is in opposition to the formalist response style that has been employed by the majority to date. The markers and students are very familiar with the present correction code (Addendum 1). This is given to the students in their first tutorial letter and is linked to explanations in the guide notes. This has value in an ODL context where the marked script is posted back to the student and there is seldom contact between the participants. As changes proposed involve additions to the correction code, use of the method will be debated in some detail.

## **THE CORRECTION CODE**

The Correction Code uses symbols as response shorthand and is a popular response mechanism, as Leki’s (1991) research shows, where it is the marking technique of choice of 83% of the lecturers she surveyed. It is a method she describes as showing where the error is and giving a hint about how to correct it. Opinion on the value of the method is divided. It is undeniably a formalistic, mechanised response style that focuses on defects, ‘symbolically sandwiching in everything else rhetorical’ (Anson, 1989:4). The codes invite surface-level alterations and, once done, lecturers can easily overlook the fact that they have ‘forgotten, in the arduous and painful process, to listen to what they [students] have been saying’ (Anson, 1989:6). This is exactly the trap that L1 responders have fallen into and which the correction code, in its present form, invites.

The advantage of the correction code is that it serves the same function as road signs, briefly and efficiently indicating if the student is on the correct route. It is an attempt, as Wiggins explains, to provide feedback which informs students not only when they are diverting from their path, but also identifies the nature of their straying (1993:203). Ferris explains that indirect feedback encourages students to be more reflective and analytical about their errors than direct feedback which actually corrects the errors for the students (2002:63). Indirect correction allows the learner to take responsibility for the correction and its use can be posited as an argument against ‘appropriation’ of student texts. In theory, the code should provide students with adequate information to facilitate self-correction. However, the method depends on students comprehending the issue identified by means of the abbreviation and being able to apply this knowledge to their writing. The core problem, however, is that the present codes refer almost exclusively to concerns relating to linguistic competence.

## **RESEARCH INTO THE VALUE OF THE CORRECTION CODE**

The question as to whether students are capable of using the correction code productively has been the subject of extensive research (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; & Sheppard, 1992). Robb, Ross and Shortreed concluded that detailed feedback on sentence-level mechanics ‘may not be worth the instructor’s time and effort even if, as Cohen suggests, students claim to need and use it’ (1986:91). Sheppard’s research indicates that use of the code might depress the students’ tendency to take risks: ‘Having become aware of its complexity, they opted for avoidance, particularly since the course stressed corrective error feedback’ (1992:107). Lalande’s meticulously-controlled research supports a policy of indicating problem areas so that students can themselves ‘invoke problem-solving/active correction strategies’ (1982:147) and be made aware of recurring errors by means such as an Error Awareness Sheet. Semke’s (1984) work suggests that the code is not as effective as written comments that force the students back to the ‘initial stages of composing, or what Sommers ... refers to as the “chaos”’ (Robb, Ross & Shortreed 1986:91), the stage at which they are wrestling with structuring meaning. Semke’s study suggests that student progress is enhanced by writing practice and that ‘corrections may have a negative effect on student attitudes’ (1984:195). These findings suggest that codes that highlight linguistic competence alone are problematic and that it is vital to keep students ‘talking on paper’ (Semke, 1984:196) and encourage them to return to ‘the chaos’. This would involve suggestions for content and structural changes, the defining characteristic of L3 feedback.

A strong argument can be made for the use of a correction code in an ODL writing context. The reasons to support this contention will be outlined below. First, it is important when weighing research into feedback on student writing to remember that research in the field remains ‘notoriously inconclusive and rife with methodological problems’ (Casanave, 2007:70). Ferris explains: ‘researchers face a “catch-22” of sorts: If they show that feedback can be tied to short-term editing success, using controlled experimental designs ..., reviewers immediately observe that such findings say nothing about long-term student progress. On the other hand, if naturalistic longitudinal designs are utilized, critics note that, rather than improvement being attributable to teacher feedback, other intervening factors ... may have led to students’ progress’ (2002:16). In addition, studies vary on ‘about every research parameter imaginable – subject characteristics, duration of treatment, types of student text and teacher feedback being considered, and analysis methods’ (Ferris, 2002:17).

Second, in a field known for its contradictory research findings, one consistency emerges. Students regard accuracy as important, view teacher feedback in this area as vital, prefer comprehensive rather than selective error feedback, favour indirect correction via a code or labelling to direct correction (Ferris, 2003:106) and go as far as claiming that teachers who do not provide this feedback are neglecting their responsibilities (Casanave, 2007:87). Ferris supports Leki's contention that to dismiss student opinion would be 'high handed and disrespectful' (Leki, 1990:210, in Ferris, 2003:107) and states that, if errors are ignored, we are in danger of alienating and frustrating students. The author's contention is that this undesirable effect would be exacerbated in an ODL context.

Third, the teaching context is vital when a response mechanism is to be selected. If one uses Celce-Merca's (1991:465) variables to determine the relative importance of grammar, then UNISA students fall into the category where focus on form is vital as they are adults, writing at an advanced level, who require skills in formal, professional writing. Regardless of the view that one adopts in the Truscott (anti) / Ferris<sup>ii</sup> (pro) grammar correction debate, one cannot dispute the fact that errors are part of learning and that mistaken hypotheses and wrong connections characterise interlanguage (Hendrickson, 1987:362) but that these require attention to reduce the risk of error fossilisation. In an ODL learning context, the correction code has decided advantages as an error treatment method. In the absence of the teacher in person, the code provides

information to the students so that they can call upon their own prior knowledge or use resources such as grammar books to understand or remember the rules and figure out how they apply. ... Error identification could be especially salient and appropriate if it refers specifically to an already defined error pattern on which the student is focussing and/or to errors that have been covered in ... instruction. Under these circumstances the teacher can label errors with firsthand confidence that students should be able to access a specific knowledge system in response to these labels (Ferris, 2002:67).

While the first section of this article has described the dominant axiological orientation of marking at present and has given a critical overview of the correction code research and a justification of its use in an ODL context, the second part recommends adaptations to the marking code designed to encourage markers to employ the strategies used in L3 feedback and encourage them to make a paradigmatic shift away from a formalistic response paradigm. The problem is not that error correction is facilitated by means of a correction code but that commentary is dominated by error correction. A means to enhance the correction code to include structural and content-related commentary needed to be sought.

## **ADAPTIONS ENVISIONED**

The researcher worked independently to identify the weaknesses in the present marking code and to formulate additions to the existing code to overcome the inherent limitations. These suggestions to address specific flaws in the code are listed below.

**Not all aspects relating to content and organisation which are part of the teaching material are represented in the correction code.**

If a paradigmatic shift is to be attempted, all aspects relating to structure and organisation that are taught in the study material should be incorporated in the correction code. For example, as cohesion and coherence are specifically taught in the course, a symbol, such as S/Ch could be added to indicate the need for a chronological signpost word. The next step would be to include instructions in the guide to assist students to self-correct if they find one of these symbols in the margin of a returned assignment.

**The correction code does not indicate the relative importance of errors**

There is a lack of prioritisation in the lecturers' use of the correction code and it is difficult for students to determine the relative importance of errors. As Lephala and Pienaar state, 'markers continue marking errors comprehensively instead of selectively' (2008:70). A possible aid could be for markers to place a circle around the code representing the error that they regard as the one requiring urgent remediation. If the symbols are integrated into the study material, students will then be in a position to go back to that specific section, revise it and do extension exercises.

**The correction code does not distinguish between local and global errors**

To compound the problem relating to the degree of attention that errors should receive is the fact that all errors are not equal. Hendrickson (1987:359) differentiates clearly between communicative and non-communicative errors, where the former are far more serious as they interfere with communication. This distinction can also be expressed as the difference between sentence-level or global-level flaws. Please consider the following sentence first before you continue reading:

*Their is four errors in this sentence. Can you find them?* (adapted from Hartwell (1995), in Connors & Glenn, 1995:387).

English teachers tend to struggle to find the final error long before they question the truth value of the statement and accept that there are only three errors! The sentence indicates clearly that when reading for local errors, one can easily overlook problems relating to content. This raises the issue that in the correction code there is no distinction between global errors that interfere with the message of the text and local errors that do not impact negatively on comprehension. A specific code, C, should be used to indicate instances of communication breakdown. This is particularly important as the *ESL Composition Profile*, which is used for assessment, cites communication breakdown as the criterion that distinguishes between passing and failing scripts. Phrases such as 'meaning not obscured' and 'meaning confused or obscured' are the means of distinguishing between passing and failing performance levels.

**There is a need to counter the negativity inherent in the code**

Positive marking is a response to a student's work that sets 'out primarily [to indicate] what is right, good, vivid, accurate, sincere, interesting or lively, rather than to focus attention on what is incorrect [or] slipshod' (Spingies, 1990:26-7). Van Heerden suggests that lecturers 'easily take for granted what is good, but frequently pinpoint the minutest writing errors'

(1993:294) and need to find ways to counteract these tendencies. Zak probed the effect of exclusively positive comments by highlighting effective sections of writing, commenting on content, on any sound structural patterns, but not on form, not on ‘the plethora of awful things going on – that tend to discourage, dismay, dishearten, and disappoint’ (1990:49-50). The shift from a formalist orientation is clear in Zak’s work.

In direct contrast to the research into the effect of positivity cited, is the problem that the correction code is inherently negative in its focus on grammar and fixation on the flaws in the students’ writing. Boswood and Dwyer assert that ‘multiple, complex symbol systems have to be devised for indicating errors to student writers, yet no one, to [their] knowledge, has expended comparable time and effort in devising a coding system of the identification of writing success’ (1995:79). There is no need to develop a separate system for praise. A symbol, such as a  $\surd$ , could be used in conjunction with any of the codes to indicate achievement in a particular area which could serve as a model for future writing tasks. The tick needs to be used in specific instances of effective writing. This should counter the tendency to use rubber-stamping (Summers, 1995:310) and the vague generalisations so characteristic of L2 responders.

### **The code focuses on form rather than content and there is a need to separate content and formal commentary**

Although Ferris cites studies (2003:17) that indicate that students are both willing and able to cope simultaneously with feedback on content and form, clarity is enhanced if the two types of feedback are separated. This is ideal, as form and content changes require different revision strategies. Students who are given both content- and form-related commentary tend to ignore the former and simply rewrite, incorporating minor grammatical corrections. Ferris attributes this to the fact that, because students are aware of their ‘linguistic limitations [they] are thus more likely to focus on word- or sentence-level accuracy, to the detriment of the ideas and improvement in written fluency’ (2002:62). This is a characteristic of inexperienced, novice writers (Lephalala & Pienaar, 2008:79). Students need to be given direction with respect to the most appropriate strategy for revision. In this regard, a reverse arrow  $\leftarrow$  could serve as a code to indicate to the student that a return to the thinking stage is necessary while a forward arrow  $\rightarrow$  could be used as a symbol to mark the fact that the student’s writing is at the stage that it requires only minor editorial work. A single line – could be used to indicate that there are content- and form-related issues that require attention, although, in this instance, the content problems are not so great that the student has to revise completely.

The *ESL Marking Profile*, used in the assessment of student writing in the course under scrutiny, requires separate evaluation of form and content. If this division were to be reflected in the marking, the left-hand side of the student script could be restricted to commentary relating to content. As this margin is small, lecturers would only be able to write a number here and should then comment on the problem at the end of the assignment. This would encourage lecturers to place greater emphasis on the larger issues relating to logic, organisation and discourse-related matters. The comments would also relate to a specific point in the text and go some way to reduce rubber stamped, generalised commentary. These comments should be formulated in complete, grammatically correct sentences. This would serve as grammatically sound, comprehensible input for the students. A balance would then be achieved with lecturers’ discussion of more complex issues counteracting the numerous, frequently minor grammatical infringements indicated by means of the codes. This should

promote formative assessment and invite a return to the creative chaos, the reworking stage that is so beneficial to student writing development.

## **RESEARCH OUTLINE**

The first phase involved the researcher independently interrogating existing marking strategies, critically examining flaws inherent in the marking code, and devising means to enhance response in order to encourage a shift from a formalistic response style to a more cognitive, reader-based approach to feedback. This process resulted in suggested additions to the marking code and these were explained to the markers by means of a comprehensive document (Addendum 2) outlining the rationale behind the additions to the marking code and containing four selected student paragraphs to be marked using the new symbols. The sample scripts given in the document were written as part of a writing assignment which required students to describe a childhood incident and reflect on its significance in their lives.

The document given to the markers was designed to determine their response to the additional codes and to evaluate whether the changes would encourage the paradigmatic shift envisioned by the researcher. The questionnaires were distributed at the 2009 markers' meeting held in April 2009 and then at a subsequent markers' meeting. In total, 32 samples of response to student writing comprised the research sample. Confidentiality was assured and markers were requested to submit their responses anonymously.

A qualitative evaluation of the returned responses was conducted and examples of use of each of the additional codes were critically examined. A quantitative analysis required responses to be coded and classified into the three feedback categories, L1, L2 or L3 feedback. These are the categories identified and described in Lephala and Pienaar (2008:72) where the percentages in the categories were 60%, 30% and 10% respectively. This made comparison possible, as the same sample group was used. The aim was to determine whether the four new correction codes had brought about any discernable shift towards L3 feedback.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Qualitative analysis of the use of the new codes**

There were specific instances where the directional arrows were used to give specific directives for revision. The use was intended to foster a view of writing as a process rather than a product to be graded. In three instances the reverse arrow ← was used, all in response to Paragraph 1, where the student had to return to the thinking phase to identify a specific incident that had impacted on his/her life. The → was extensively used—seven times for Paragraph 4, where only minor editing was required, along with compliments about the careful construction, effective conclusion and arresting opening. The – was used four times, in one instance for Paragraph 4 because, here, the marker suggested that the student should 'briefly explain why telling the truth is important to you' and thus the student had to address a content-related issue in addition to the grammatical revision. The use of these codes gives students clear instructions as to which revision strategy is suggested. However, the fact that there were only three instances out of 32 samples where the students were returned to the thinking phase in their revisions suggests that these codes are ineffectual in promoting deep,

content- and structure-related revision. The markers were unenthusiastic about the use of the directional arrows, with one marker describing them as ‘complex/confusing’ while another felt that these symbols are ‘obscure’ and that ‘the tutor’s comment should clarify this issue’. One marker adopted a narrow view of the revision arrow ← and stated that it was ‘already covered by the code irr (irrelevant), which suggests that she restricted the use to instances where the student was off topic.

The √ was used nine times to indicate specific instances of effective writing. These included complimenting the student on use of imagery and for the final explicit, thematic statement that concludes Paragraph 3. Here the identification of effective writing could assist in making the student aware of strong points to be emulated in future writing tasks. In one instance, the tick was so overused in the left hand margin on almost every line that it was rendered ineffectual. The fact that only nine instances of effective use of praise were found in a sample of 32 responses indicates that a change in the code alone is unable to promote the shift towards positive marking envisioned by Boswood and Dwyer (1995), Spingies (1990), Van Heerden (1993) and Zak (1990). The inclusion of a positive code is not enough to counter the negativity inherent in the marking code itself. Ironically, the marking itself contradicts the fact that the markers expressed approval of positive marking in theory.

The seven examples of separation into content and form resulted in specific and astute content comments. Effective directive, content-related feedback was provided for Paragraph 2 in the form of a note that stated ‘you could have included more specific detail, especially about the traumatic move, and commented in greater detail on the significance of the two related events’ and the request in Paragraph 3 to ‘describe the scene in more detail to make this a rich, vivid picture for your reader [and to] focus on the new school friend’. There were also full sentences relating to specific language problems, such as the disconcerting shifts from personal to impersonal and back again in Paragraph 1. These comments were all pleasingly specific, such as the request to re-think issues clearly in Paragraph 1 because, ‘although the “multitude of factors” is mentioned, these are not developed at all’. Such examples serve the dual purpose of suggesting improvements and serving as comprehensible input.

The communication breakdown symbol was accurately used to identify communication breakdown in three cases, but it was given without any guiding commentary, posing an additional challenge for students to identify the nature of the communication breakdown themselves. In total, the symbol was used in only seven instances, but each of these was effective in pointing out the specific place where the reader encountered ambiguity in the text. In Paragraph 1, the sentence ‘The memory fits into my story because my parents never lived a decent life and that influenced my development in life’ was given two communication breakdown symbols above the words ‘decent’ and ‘influenced’ and the comment was: ‘Detail – why – describe how this experience affected your life’. In Paragraph 2, for example, it was used together with the instruction to ‘make sure to indicate who the farmer is and who your father is’. In Paragraph 3 the opening sentence ‘it happened many years ago, but still fresh in my mind as it was yesterday’ was marked with the symbol and given the comment ‘what was it?’ The symbol was also used in Paragraph 3 with a statement to the effect that there is confusion when ‘vital words’ are left out. Here the marker was alluding to the ambiguity in sentences, such as ‘my mother helped me wearing my new uniform’ and ‘the teacher wrote our names on the paper and hung over our neck[s]’. Another marker wrote ‘unclear – it does not make sense’ at this point in the text. In these instances the marker takes the role of an

authentic reader and shows clearly the confusion that can result from ambiguity and that a paradigmatic shift to a reader-based response is possible.

## **IMPACT IN TERMS OF LEPHALALA AND PIENAAR'S (2008) CATEGORIES**

### **L1 feedback: minimal feedback**

The marking could be described as providing L1 feedback in eight instances, in that minimal marking was given together with conscientious use of the dominant language-focus inherent in codes. However, even more disconcerting were the 11 instances of minimal marking without use of the prescribed marking codes. One marker even ignored all instructions and simply indicated language errors and allocated marks to the paragraphs, representing a total regression to a formalist approach. The fact that a total of 19 of the 33 scripts (57%) still fell into the category of L1 feedback suggests that the attractor state described at the start of this article has remained strongly in place, despite the intervention described in this article. This is virtually identical to the 60% of the response recorded in Lephala and Pienaar (2008), which fell into this L1 category of minimal marking with a formalist or language orientation.

### **L2 feedback: general and non-text-specific feedback**

Three instances of L2 feedback were evident in the markers' continued use of generalised rather than specific phrases ('meaning not entirely clear' and 'well structured and well written') that were not text specific. The tone in one of the scripts was evaluative with a tendency towards rubber stamping ('your content is satisfactory') and harsh ('you misunderstood what you were required to do so your paragraph is irrelevant'). At the other end of the scale, one marker overused the  $\surd$  so excessively that it degenerated into a form of rubber stamping. The 9% of marking that fell into the L2 feedback category represented a reduction from the 30% L2 feedback reported in Lephala and Pienaar (2008). The new codes thus caused a reduction in the use of generalized, non-specific feedback.

### **L3 Feedback: feedback that focuses on content and organisation**

The notes made by one marker in the marking meeting were included in the response to the research. His/her instructions included directives to 'provide relevant, effective feedback ... [use] explicit guidelines ... use sentences – not one word ... question logic and thinking ... point out patterns ... [give] clear and specific suggestions for improving the text ... [foster] writing as a process ... help student to revise'. These notes attest to the fact that markers are instructed and trained in markers' meetings to use L3 feedback. Despite the training, there were 11 instances from the 33 samples (33%) in the present study of the desired L3 feedback. This represents an improvement from the 10% L3 feedback reported in the Lephala and Pienaar (2008) study. The marking given in the example printed below shows that the new codes can be used effectively to promote L3 feedback:

**Paragraph 1**

As no singular or particular incident has had an adverse effect on what I am, by analysing myself, I came to the conclusion that multitude of factors makes up 'me'. Yearning for the impossible: raising one's stress levels by trying to do much more than possible; reaching for the stars, only to find oneself timeously on ground level .... Oh! Why me? The endless question. As if nobody else experiences the same dilemma. Ultimately, one has to accept the human factor of frailty. Learn to love oneself, despite the shortcomings, by loving oneself, love can easily be given to others. It is important to be honest in one's relationships with people, but also subtle, so as not to hurt feelings unnecessarily. Without friends I cannot survive and although my family sometimes drives me insane, yet I will not exchange them for the world. Life in general can be experienced as the four seasons of nature. Thank God I am living in a summer place! And the cold should stay where it belongs - far, far away. ✓ Good use of vocabulary!

\*1 = general comment.

\*2

←

\*1 you've described your yearnings or aspirations rather than an event or a series of events, which may have impacted on you. It is important to address the topic, and not deviate from it. This forms part of your academic development.

\*2 Rather make this a personal description - use personal pronouns in relation to yourself. You're not describing a general human condition.

Here the comments are specific, tailored for this script, touching clearly on the two problem areas. The comments themselves serve as comprehensible input and are in the form of full sentences which can be modelled. There is an increased emphasis on content. In this instance, the ← was used to return the student to the thinking phase, to the creative chaos phase of writing that keeps writers talking to their papers.

### Markers' attitude to the new codes

The responses to the question indicating the value of the additional codes showed support for the communication breakdown symbol and the tick. One of the markers indicated that she believed that 'keeping the language and content remarks separate is useful and [agrees] with content advice being in full sentences. We tend to focus on language and neglect content - but academic writing is always both'.

Only one marker felt that all four suggestions were 'very useful [and] are essential' and another stated that the 'symbols are useful as a shorthand to many content/ thinking / planning aspects of essay writing'. Another marker commented that the additions 'could be useful but I am a bit cynical about codes in general... symbols only confuse them [students] even more - a good, general comment about their writing is more effective in my view'. This response suggests that the proposed additions might be better received if they were not linked to the correction code but presented as suggestions to enhance the efficacy of response to student writing.

One marker's comment is particularly revealing. It states that the additional codes provide 'extra work'. Given the volume of marking handled by these markers, this is an objection to be taken seriously and it could represent the reason why L1 feedback has been the dominant mode, the attractor state to which the system automatically defaults. The same marker also indicates that one 'needs to internalize the codes. It is hard to replace old habits'. The codes would become internalised with training and use would increase familiarity and ease of implementation. The comment that it is hard to change old habits suggests the challenge in effecting far-reaching change in the form of a paradigmatic shift in approach. The need for a

paradigmatic shift in the marking remains a constant concern. However, while the changes envisioned in this article have, in comparison with the research done by Lephalala and Pienaar (2008), not produced a reduction in the dominant L1 feedback category, they have elicited a reduction in the L2 rubber stamping and an increase in the desired L3 feedback. However, the marking that resulted from this study revealed that, despite all efforts, the attractor state with respect to L1 feedback has gone unchallenged. Strong evidence of L1 and L2 feedback remains. However, there is an indication that the suggested changes can be used to promote L3 feedback. The study revealed the need for intensive training as there was a marked discrepancy between the markers whose approach was summative and those who used the codes in the spirit in which they had been developed – to promote formative assessment.

In conclusion, in the hope that even relatively small changes can have a dramatic impact in a complex system (Weideman, 2009:68), the researcher introduced four additions to a marking code in the hope that this would counteract the negativity inherent in the code; encourage markers to address content and structural issues rather than focus almost exclusively on formal correctness; give students guidance for revision; and indicate specific instances of communication breakdown. In this way, it was hoped that the marking would move away from the correctness fixation characteristic in L1 feedback and the rubberstamping, generalised and interchangeable commentary evident in L2 feedback. As has been demonstrated in Spencer (1999) and Pienaar and Lephalala (2008), a stasis has resulted and marking has become fixed in an outdated formalistic paradigm. There needs to be a ‘shift to a new gait’ (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007:229). While the codes introduced were not adequate to deliver the paradigmatic shift envisioned away from L1 feedback, they are a step in the right direction and, with refinement and intensive training, could have an even greater impact that was evidenced in this case study.

**Addendum 1: Extract from the Correction Code**

SYMBOL	ERROR	EXPLANATION
Abb	Abbreviation	Do not use abbreviations, or contractions (such as ‘can’t’, ‘don’t’, ‘etc.’) in <u>formal</u> writing (e.g. a written assignment).
agr (s/v)	Agreement error	Your verb does not agree with your subject in number. Check whether your subject is singular or plural. A plural subject takes a plural verb. The students <u>s</u> read the book. <i>See: The New Word Power, pp 22-25.</i>
Amb	Ambiguity	Your statement could have two meanings. Rephrase. (See: <i>The New Word Power, p 30.</i> )
Ap	Apostrophe error	An apostrophe is a comma that hangs above the line. The boy’s hands are dirty. <u>An apostrophe is used to indicate possession.</u> Mandela’s leadership (the leadership of Mandela). The boys’ privileges (the privileges of the boys). <u>An apostrophe is used to indicate when letters are left out.</u> We’ll (we will) Can’t (can not) I’ve (I have) It’s (it is) Contractions such as these are unacceptable in formal writing. NB: ‘its’ (without an apostrophe) is the possessive form. The dog chewed <u>its</u> bone. <i>See: The New Word Power, pp 40-41.</i>
Arg	Argument	Your argument/explanation is not methodical/coherent/relevant. A clear and logical line of thought needs to emerge – consult <i>The New Word Power, pp 171-172.</i>
Art	Article error	You have used ‘a’ instead of ‘the’, or ‘the’ instead of ‘a’, or you have omitted to use ‘a’ or ‘the’ where you should have. Alternatively, you have used ‘a’ or ‘the’ with a word that should not have an article. <i>See: The New Word Power, pp 41-43. ...</i>

## Addendum 2: Markers' Questionnaire

### Questionnaire: Possible Additional Symbols to the Marking Code

*Please note that completion of the questionnaire is part of the process of revision of our marking code. We would appreciate your assistance. Please hand the completed form to Thuli when you return scripts.* I would like to make a special appeal to you as expert markers to assist us. Could you please mark the four short passages using the new marking symbols?

The following symbols are recommended as additions to the marking code:

1. C – This symbol is necessary to indicate the gravity of communication breakdown. The marking grid clearly indicates this as the factor that distinguishes between passing and failing scripts in terms of grammatical performance. This symbol is designed to indicate to the student the specific point at which communication has broken down and is designed to introduce a symbol which indicates the seriousness of breakdown in communication.
2. √ – There is a great deal of research which indicates the value of positive reinforcement and praise. For this reason a tick should be included in the marking code to specifically identify any positive aspect in the essay.
3. Our marking of student scripts contains recommendations relating to content and form as well as global and local issues. This can be confusing for the student. In order to separate the two aspects and to encourage more detailed content-related commentary, please give all marking codes relating to grammar/form/local issues in the margin as you usually do. However, all detail relating to content is to be given at the end of the script. Put an \* next to the aspect needing comment on structure/ content/ development in the student text and then write the comment at the end of the script. Use \*1, \*2, \*3 etc. to distinguish between different content-related comments. Use full sentences so that your writing can serve as comprehensible input for the students.
4. Commentary on content and structure requires students to return to the thinking phase while commentary on form suggests that there is only surface editing required in order to perfect the text. Please use the following symbols at the end of the script to indicate to students the direction which you feel their revision should take.
  - ← To indicate that the student must go back to the thinking phase.
  - To indicate that only surface language editing is needed
  - To indicate that a bit of both editing and content revision needs to be done

Please mark the following four paragraphs as you usually would but also use the four additional codes recommended above. The paragraphs were written in response to a question asking students to describe a childhood event and relate its significance to their lives.

#### **Paragraph 1 (not repeated as it is used in the marked example on page 27)**

#### **Paragraph 2**

I was still a toddler and I lived on the farms with my family. I remember one day my father telling my family that we were to move to another farm that was two hundred kilometres

away. The reason was that the owner of the farm wanted all his labourers to sell their cattle and my father wanted to keep them. They had to sell their cattle to him at a very low price. We moved to another farm and the farmer allowed him to keep his cattle. He used the oxen to plough the fields. Later on the farmer forced him to sell his livestock because blacks were not allowed to keep livestock. The memory fits into my life story because my parents never lived a decent life and that influenced my development in life.

### **Paragraph 3**

It happened many years ago, but still fresh in my mind as it was yesterday. My mother helped me wearing my new uniform. She took me to school which was not from where we lived. There were so many children outside making a lot of noise. My mother handed me over to my class teacher who led me to my desk. I sat next to another girl about my age. She was so friendly, from that she became my friend until today. The teacher wrote our names on the papers and hung over our neck. That day was very much important in my life because is where my schooldays started. I would never forget it in my life.

### **Paragraph 4**

I still remember what happened to me when I was 10 years old. I told my friends to accompany me to the bush. We came across a deep hole, then we started jumping over the hole one by one. While we were jumping, one of my friends who was younger than all of us fell into the hole, because we were still young we all run away instead of helping her. Fortunately there was a woman who was picking up woods, she saw me running like a madman. She tried to stop me and ask what was happening, but I did not even want to look at her. She heard the voice crying deep inside the hole and quickly helped the child to get outside. After that she rushed at me. Because I was very much afraid I fell down and the woman caught me. I tried to tell a lie but it was too late. She beaten me until I told her the truth and then she leaved me. Is that time I realised the wound on my leg. I was taken by my mother to the clinic for my wound to be cured. My wound really was cured but what was left in my mind is that, always when I see that scar on my leg, I think of telling the truth.

Please indicate your opinion of the value of the four additional codes in the space below:

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> For detail of the Ferris/Truscott controversy, please see Casanave (2007:88). The key arguments are listed here and the original articles by the authors are cited on pages 102 and 109.

***BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE***

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