From ungrading to unlearning poor habits: local strategies to recentre student learning around dialogic feedback

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Abstract:

Research dating as far back as the 1930s (Crooks, 1933) has shown that the focus on marks often happens at the expense of meaningful engagement with learning. This paper builds on this premise and newer research that demonstrates that marks epitomise assessment *of* learning rather than *for* learning and get in the way of learner-oriented learning (Kohn, 1999, 2013; Stommel 2023). I explore how recentring student learning around dialogic feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2019) can play an instrumental role in moving away from too mark-centric an approach while adhering to institutional requirements which may not grant as much leeway as a full renouncement of marks.

This paper describes how such a strategy was implemented within a beginner language module at the Centre for Foreign Language Study at Durham University. The cohort in question is one of non-specialist language learners who thus particularly benefit from robust scaffolding to support acquisition of language-specific learning mechanisms.

More specifically, this paper examines how a focus on dialogic feedback enables learners to meaningfully engage with the content of the course as reflexive learners; to focus on process rather than end product; to encourage ownership and agency within one's learning experience; to increase engagement with challenge and higher thinking skills; and to foster dialogue between learner and teacher.

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Keywords

Modern foreign languages, language assessment, assessment for learning, dialogic feedback

Introduction

In a learning environment dominated by marks, this paper explores local strategies whose aims were to recentre student focus on the learning process in the form of engagement with feedback and alignment with learning outcomes. More specifically, this paper describes the addition of a dialogic element between educator and learner to facilitate the latter within a beginner language module at the Centre for Foreign Language Study (CFLS) at Durham University. CFLS modules are aimed at non-specialist learners, i.e. students who do not have language as a degree specialism, and who in some instances have little experience of learning a language. Within this context, engagement with the principles underpinning language learning and metacognition becomes essential in supporting learners.

Theoretical framework

Continuous assessment and engagement with learning and feedback: assessment for learning

A key principle underpinning assessment is that the latter – be it formative or summative – should be *for* learning (Black et al., 1998), that is that it should support student acquisition of knowledge and skills and turn students into effective and reflective learners. To this effect, Carless (2015) established six principles of task design and implementation tied to learning oriented assessment:

(1) Promoting deep learning and supporting targeted learning outcomes

(2) Balancing formative and summative assessment so that all assessment supports learning

(3) Spreading student effort and engagement evenly through a module

(4) Supporting understanding of what constitutes quality in the discipline or sub-discipline

(5) Involving some student investment or choice

(6) Facilitating engagement with/dialogic engagement with feedback

In line with the above, CFLS adopted continuous assessment in 2019. In the case of the French provision, it involved moving away from end-of-year exams to a model of three summative tasks in the year interspersed with formative assessment, creating a scaffolding in the Vygostkian sense and ensuring a constant back-and-forth between teacher and learner to facilitate the latter's learning. The amount of summative assessment – three pieces of assessment in total – was intentionally trimmed down based on the findings that quantity in assessments did not as a direct consequence equate to better performance (Harland et al. 2015.) Focus was thus placed on quality over quantity.

Continuous assessment and engagement with learning and feedback: limitations

While continuous assessment undeniably aligns with the above principles, the fact remains that students stay focused on a set of summative assessment tasks. Since students have been proven to concentrate their effort on summative assessment (Gibbs, 2005), this means that they will disproportionately focus their time on one set of tasks, at the detriment of other learning activities that should be equally conducive to learning. This perception translates into a gradation in effort and engagement amongst students depending on the perceived value of the task in question.

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Formatives are consequently often delegated from being an essential part of the learning process to a secondary one. It follows from this that meaningfully developing skills and competencies and assessing learning outcomes have been met is then condensed to a few key points in the year, dismissing all the learning that takes place throughout the module, in class and beyond.

Continuous assessment, the incorporation of a reflective element to tasks alongside thorough feedback for formative assessment do work towards resolving the issue. However, the picture would need refining.

The two screenshots below were taken from one Turnitin submission in early Term 1, and one in late Term 2. The latter was the last submission for the module. The eye icon indicates whether students accessed the feedback for their work or not. The picture is stark: at the very first submission point of the year, virtually all students engage with their feedback. In contrast only 24% engage with their feedback at the last submission point of the year.

Figure 1: Student access to feedback in Turnitin submission at entry and exit points of the course, without use of dialogic feedback.

It is quite evident that in term 1 students understand how necessary for them it is to engage with the feedback to ensure they obtain good marks in the next round of assessment. The final assessment however indicates that, from their perspective, there is little point to engaging with feedback since they have secured their mark. Regardless of the various strategies used in the course to facilitate learning such as resubmissions or the use of reflection tasks, the focus invariably remains the mark rather than the process. As a result, learning becomes superficial.

Stommel (2023) argues that marks have become an easy, tangible and reductive shortcut for universities, students, and employers and have in the process become a synonym for learning. To remedy this, Stommel has been a vocal advocate for *ungrading* which stems from the observation that many choices made in teaching and learning from module design to assessment, are designed with marks in mind, and more specifically, around the assumption that marks and assessment are the same thing. In the eyes of proponents of *ungrading,* marks:

- by focusing on end-product rather than process, do not indicate what or how learning has taken place (Stommel, 2023);
- are too reductive and rigid a system to encompass the complexity and unicity of learning trajectories (Stommel, 2023);
- are unfair (Stommel, 2023) in the sense that they discriminate against neurodiverse students, students from first generation minorities, marginalised and international students (Kohn, 2013);
- do not instil a passion for learning (Kohn, 2013). Instead, they encourage students to aim for the easiest task (Kohn, 2013) and thus encourage extrinsic over intrinsic motivation. In short, marks format students, and thus undermine the quality of the learning process.

Practically speaking *ungrading* involves, as its name suggests, doing away with marks so emphasis is placed on the learning experience of the students. To still cater for institutional expectations but to align with the principles underpinning the approach, students leave the module with one mark which they will have awarded themselves as part of self-assessment of how they engaged with the learning of the course. To ensure

the process is rigorous, the mark is reviewed by the module convenor who reserves the right to amend it – by either increasing or decreasing it – if judged to be an inaccurate representation.

Application through local strategies

The complex processes in place for changing assessment alongside the need for homogeneity of practice at departmental level have meant that introducing *ungrading* to my courses has not been feasible.

The purpose of this paper, rather than to proselytise or denounce, is to reflect on local strategies which align in spirit with the principles underpinning *ungrading* and which can be implemented at modular level while operating in an environment that does not facilitate a full renouncement of marks and while circumventing bureaucracy-heavy procedural steps.

Dialogic engagement with feedback

The wider team had previously explored various avenues for enhancing engagement with feedback such as self-assessment (De Grez et al. 2012); peer assessment (Double et al., 2020; Headington, 2018); providing extensive feedback; only giving feedback and not marks for formatives (Laflen & Smith 2017); incorporating reflections or giving the opportunity for students to decide on what piece(s) of work to submit. In all cases, however, while pedagogically valid, these tasks still lead to students' perception that comments are there to justify grades (Kohn, 2013). As a result, only some students fully engage with the tasks in the spirit that they are intended.

Changes to assessment

To emulate the principles guiding the rationale for *ungrading*, I have placed increased focus on engagement with feedback in line with current recommendations for dialogic feedback (Winstone, 2019; Winstone & Nash, 2024) and as part of a series of draft-plus-rework tasks (Winstone & Carless, 2019) where students were asked to not only accompany their work with a reflection but to also verbalise how they engaged with previous feedback through a commentary. This builds on research that has outlined the value of a continuous, open and less formal approach to feedback between learner and educator (Pitt, 2021). This should also be situated against the backdrop of student dissatisfaction towards too distant and impersonal a use of feedback in the sector (OfS, 2018.)

In the past, I would give students throughout the year a series of tasks which consisted of:

a) Section 1: main task
b) Section 2: a reflection in which students would be asked to 'explain the approach that [they] took and the choices that [they] made.'

In contrast, I introduced this year a first sub-task whereby students were invited to reflect on the feedback that they had received so far, and how they acted upon it.
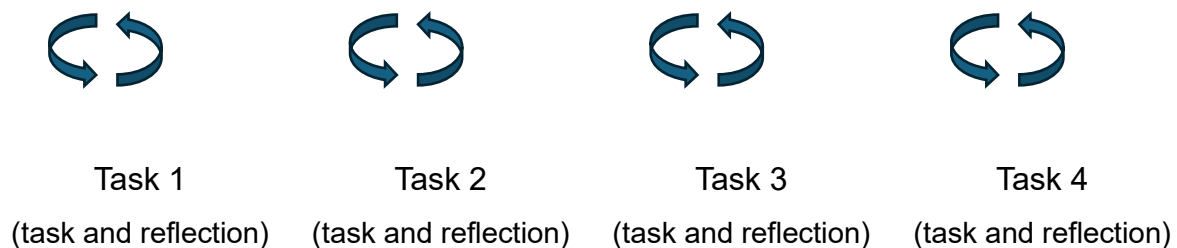
The instructions for each task were as follows:

a) Section 1: in a short paragraph, explain what you learnt from the feedback you have received so far; and explain how you acted upon it.
b) Section 2: main task.
c) Section 3: reflection: explain the approach you took, the choices that you made.

Section 1 created a platform for students to verbally make sense of, respond to and act upon the feedback that they had received so far.

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The level of the course means that the frequency of the formative assessment is high – roughly every other week –, which creates the perfect medium for a regular, scaffolded and personalised exchange between instructor and learner.
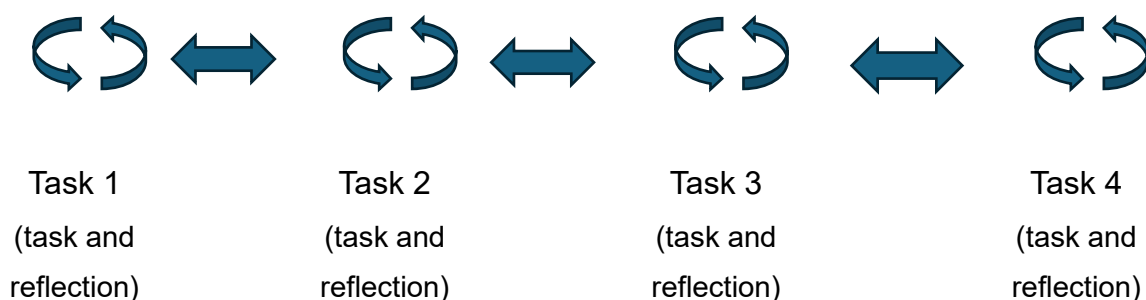
For a number of years the team have been using reflection tasks which have aimed to serve the purpose of enhancing metacognition. While these generally work well, engagement circles back to the actual task. It encourages but does not necessarily place students in a position where they have to reflect back on previous performances and verbalise this. This means that only the most engaged and metacognitively aware students naturally make that connection. Section 1 in the new assessment format enables students to create a bridge between tasks, or more accurately, adds an additional step to the students' learning journey linking tasks with one another. Section 1 functions as a concrete link to tasks that would previously have been perceived by some students as standalone.

The addition of the first task, however inconsequential looking, has been instrumental in moving from a reflective model that *assumes* that students build from previous work:

| Task 1 | Task 2 | Task 3 | Task 4 |
| (task and reflection) | (task and reflection) | (task and reflection) | (task and reflection) |

To a model that *enables* a back-and-forth across tasks and encourages dialogic engagement between student and tasks, and between student and teacher:

Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
(task and reflection)	(task and reflection)	(task and reflection)	(task and reflection)

Students are henceforth placed in a position to be both reactive and proactive in their learning: through this initial subtask inviting them to reflect on past feedback, they are given a platform to engage with past tasks so these can feed into future pieces of work.

Student submissions: how did engagement with feedback facilitate metacognition around language learning?

This approach was taken in the context of a beginner module in French in the Centre for Foreign Language Study, which is significant in so far as it cannot be assumed that the learners will have acquired the mechanisms behind language learning that a student with an A Level in a language will have. Such learners therefore more than ever benefit from developing strategies in this regard.

Without replicating in scale the premise and purpose of *ungrading*, creating such platforms for dialogic feedback has enabled some of Carless's (2015) aforementioned key principles to be met in terms of promoting deep learning, supporting what constitutes quality in the discipline and involving student investment:

- Students engage with the instructor's feedback:

For this formative, I incorporated some of the main issues revealed for my last submission; namely using the correct grammar for possessives (sa, ses, son)

and remembering that they agree with the possessed subject rather than the possessive subject. This was my main feedback from my previous formative that I considered when writing this work. (Student A)

- Students develop metacognitive skills in language acquisition:

  o Grammar*:*

Feedback from the instructor requested that I explain what unfamiliar grammar I have used and why. Consequently I wrote detailed footnotes describing my choices. I mistakenly described 'te' in 'je veux te dire' as a reflexive pronoun. Having looked into it further, I now understand it's an indirect object pronoun. (Student B)

  o Lexis, grammar, coherence and cohesion:

In the second formative I feel more confident constructing sentences in French and using a dictionary to explore new vocabulary which helps convey meanings more accurately. However the feedback reminds me of the importance of carefully examining verb conjugations and using the correct tense. The consistence of tense through the article is also essential. Additionally it would be beneficial to explore various ways to connect and integrate sentences, such as using structures like "tu penses que", to enhance the constitution and clarity of my writing. (Student C)

- Students reflect on the requirements and purpose of the task, and engage with the material:

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Last time I aimed to utilise vocabulary that I knew rather than fit it to the context of the trigger document. This time I will stay specific to the situation and to the characters. (Student D)

I have also applied the feedback from previous work by taking care to ensure that my work is relevant to the brief and complete all sub parts of the instructions as I was off topic. (Student E)

- Students develop agency:

For this formative I wanted to challenge myself and learn how to say I/we 'could' and 'should' do something so that I could give suggestions to my sister Marie for what to do for the party. I also researched how to use 'que' and possessives so that I could say phrases expressing my opinion and common actions such as 'I think that' and 'serve some popcorn' [....] This formative was very helpful in developing my ability to express my opinions and ideas and to write about different activities and foods. (Student B)

From my feedback from the last formative I have learned that I need to be more adventurous in my writing and to take risks with the language. I did this by using more complex sentence structures which I needed to look into further. (Student F)

- Students constantly reflect on their performance and self-assess their work:

In my last writing task I used the wrong punctuation on occasion. I expected this to be easy to fix. Rereading my work I think I got the punctuation for

dialogues right but I'm now thinking I should read more about the use of commas in French. (Student G)

Findings

The addition of a task requiring from students to verbalise their engagement with feedback has led to a more consistent use of the latter. As seen in the figure below, when carried out meaningfully, students consistently engage with their teacher's input as a key part of their learning experience, showcasing sustained involvement throughout the learning process:

Figure 2: Student access to feedback in Turnitin submission at various points in the year with use of dialogic feedback.

As seen above, engagement with feedback remained consistent through the year with 95% of students accessing the latter at the end of the term, in contrast with 24% prior to the adoption of the dialogic feedback component. This has in turn translated into the majority of students moving more quickly from a 'good' performance to a 'very good' or 'excellent' performance within one term.

Not only is access to feedback more regular, but it also more importantly becomes more meaningful in the sense that students demonstrate a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation by being given agency in shaping and influencing their learning. A clear progression can be seen from one task to the next as exemplified by this learner who goes from a somewhat superficial first submission:

I have now learnt that double spacing means to double space between lines as below. Also I have learned I need to be more detailed in my referencing when I use not only unfamiliar grammatical structures but also new conjugations of irregular verbs e.g. pouvoir and vouloir. I have also learned how to footnote properly so it is easier to read. (Student H)

To a submission demonstrating greater awareness of language acquisition:

In the previous writing task my writing was relevant to the trigger text but didn't flow very well from it. This time round I incorporated a transition through the form of a paragraph reiterating where the characters were and contextualising what they were about to do. Reading my work I also realise I needed to add more connectors so that the writing flows better. It is something I will do more consistently in my next piece. If I use unfamiliar vocabulary I will make sure to look more closely at how it is used in a sentence so that I use it correctly. I have for example tried to use 'aussi' in the correct place within sentences. (Student H)

Considerations

Unlearning poor habits

Given marks have played an essential part to our learners' education it takes some time to unlearn bad habits. One observation I have made is that the process is far more arduous with finalist students than with first-year students. If anything, incoming students are more open to – and welcome – having their views on learning challenged. Three or four years of learning under their belts, finalists have by that stage ingrained habits that become difficult to overcome. Assessment at that stage of their degree is also high stake and explains why they will tend to revolve around the safe go-to format that they are familiar with. With this in mind, it becomes paramount to take extra steps to articulate and regularly remind students of the value of the exercise.

Managing student expectations

A key element for the success of the exercise is therefore to manage student expectations and the fact that the university as an institution has so far tended to remain committed to the use of marks. It would be disingenuous to operate in a vacuum and discount external factors that remain key in many stakeholders' eyes. It is not uncommon for example to be asked by students in the context of an unmarked task what mark their performance equates to, or for them to question the very purpose or relevance of the approach. For this reason it is paramount to clearly convey and reiterate to students the rationale for embedding such tasks. One can do so by clearly explaining to students, and regularly discussing, the mechanisms at stake when it comes to language learning, showcasing through example how dialogic feedback enables them to improve, and embedding this within wider discussions pertaining to the use and relevance of marks and feedback.

Fostering a horizontal and dialogic dialogue between teacher and learner

Just as the onus is on the teacher to create a meaningful community of practice in the classroom, creating a truly meaningful dialogic platform requires taking the time to define, refine and reiterate the rationale for the exercise; and to clearly convey expectations. This is all the more important when it comes to developing the horizontal and dialogic nature of the relationship between teacher and learner with the view to building the dialogue on trust, transparency and mutual understanding. Regular discussions in class alongside the sharing of examples of good practice become instrumental in ensuring such meaningful communication occurs:

> *Thank you for the feedback on the last formative. I have read it through and attempted to rewrite my transitions as best as I can, according to your advice! Would you mind please checking? (Student B)*

> *The feedback from the previous work was to ensure that I double check my spelling especially with accents. Can you please check that I have been using a and à correctly? (Student C)*

Conclusion

While dialogic feedback is not synonymous with *ungrading*, it nevertheless espouses in spirit many of its overarching principles and objectives, namely promoting deep learning, developing metacognition and agency amongst learners, and increasing intrinsic motivation towards learning the discipline in question.

Designing a process where dialogic feedback is fully integrated – be it in verbal or written form – turns a discussion that was previously encouraged or assumed into a

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discussion that is expected and that plays an integral part in the learning contract between learner and instructor. As such, a greater degree of responsibility, ownership and accountability is placed on the learner.

By virtue of the fact that active pedagogy and assessment for learning are at the core of the principles governing Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, it ensues from this that the introduction of dialogic feedback is not exclusive to the study of languages. Instead, it holds a place in all courses irrespective of the discipline.

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Ethics

Research was approved through Durham University's School of Modern Languages and Cultures' ethical review processes.

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