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Feedback Literacy in Pre-University Education: Developing Students' Capacity to Interpret and Apply Academic Feedback

Dr. Stanley A. V. Paul[1]; Snr., Dr. Stanley A. V. Paul[2]; Jr., Dr. Andre Martin[3], Dr. Justin Joseph[4], Dr. Kobina Akim Wilson[5] and Dr. Genève Phillip-Durham[6]
[1,2,3,4,5,6]Professor, University of Excellence, Management and Business (U.E.M.B.), Georgetown, GUYANA

[1]Corresponding Author: principal@uemb.edu.gy

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ABSTRACT

Feedback is educationally consequential only when students can interpret its meaning, evaluate its relevance and translate it into defensible changes in their work. Pre-university programmes therefore require more than efficient marking systems. They need an explicit curriculum for learning from evaluative information. This conceptual article examines selected research published by Oxford and Cambridge university presses to develop a practical account of feedback literacy during the transition to university. It distinguishes receiving comments, understanding criteria, choosing a response and transferring learning to a subsequent task. A proposed instructional cycle connects these activities through exemplars, dialogue, selective revision and explanatory reflection. The analysis identifies tensions involving teacher authority, peer credibility, linguistic diversity, emotional vulnerability and the assessment of revision itself. It argues that feedback literacy should be evaluated through the quality of students' decisions, including justified disagreement, rather than compliance with every comment. The framework offers an adaptable basis for programme design and a set of propositions requiring contextual evaluation.

Keywords- feedback literacy; pre-university education; formative assessment; revision; peer review; academic transition.

I. INTRODUCTION

A student can receive detailed comments and remain uncertain about what to do next. Instructions to improve analysis, strengthen coherence or engage more critically may express legitimate academic expectations without identifying the intellectual operations required to meet them. This difficulty becomes especially consequential in pre-university education, where students encounter unfamiliar disciplinary conventions while preparing for greater independence. The central educational problem is not simply the availability of feedback. It is whether learners can convert evaluative information into purposeful academic action. Feedback literacy is used here to describe the capacity to interpret comments, relate them to criteria, assess their relevance and make reasoned improvements. This working definition places student judgement at the centre of the process. It also makes an institutional demand: programmes must provide occasions on which that judgement can be developed. A course that returns comments after every meaningful opportunity for revision has ended may document assessment thoroughly while offering little opportunity to learn from it. The article proposes a teaching framework for this transitional setting. Its distinctive contribution is to connect feedback interpretation with justified action and subsequent transfer. The framework does not assume that students should accept every suggestion. Academic independence requires the ability to distinguish a necessary correction from an optional stylistic preference, an unclear instruction or a recommendation that conflicts with the purpose of the assignment.

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II. REVIEW APPROACH AND CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES

The analysis is a purposive conceptual review of eight relevant scholarly articles, not a systematic synthesis or an empirical evaluation of a particular institution. The selected literature addresses written feedback, corrective feedback, peer reviewing and the interpretation of assessment criteria. Its settings include secondary language education and undergraduate mathematics. These differences matter: evidence about one age group, subject or feedback practice cannot establish an identical effect in a pre-university programme. Hyland (1990) treats student action as central to productive written feedback. Ellis (2009) distinguishes feedback strategies from the responses that students are asked to make. Together, these contributions support an important analytical separation: the information a teacher supplies and the learning activity a student performs are related but different design decisions. A detailed explanation does not automatically produce a more substantial response than a focused question. Berggren's (2015) secondary classroom study examines learning through giving peer feedback, while Albano et al. (2023) investigate students' engagement with criteria through digital peer workshops in undergraduate mathematics. Lyster et al. (2013) review oral corrective feedback and emphasise variation across learners, linguistic targets and instructional contexts. These sources provide bounded support for the mechanisms considered below. The proposed framework itself remains an analytical contribution requiring evaluation.

III. INTERPRETING FEEDBACK AS ACADEMIC JUDGEMENT

Interpretation begins with identifying the object of a comment. A teacher's concern may relate to factual accuracy, the adequacy of evidence, the logical relationship between propositions, disciplinary convention or presentation. Students who treat every comment as a request for surface editing may correct punctuation while leaving the central argument unchanged. Programmes should therefore teach learners to classify feedback by the academic decision it addresses. An annotated example can make this distinction visible. Consider a paragraph claiming that flexible working necessarily improves organisational performance. A comment requesting qualification could mean that the evidence supports only a particular sector, that performance has several dimensions, or that the relationship is associative rather than causal. Replacing necessarily with sometimes may soften the sentence without repairing the underlying inference. The appropriate response requires examining the source and reconstructing the argument.

Criteria must also be interpreted in relation to disciplinary practice. Precision in a legal problem differs from precision in an exploratory management essay. The former may require identifying a governing rule and distinguishing an authority; the latter may require specifying a construct and comparing competing explanations. A single institutional rubric can provide shared language, but examples from the relevant subject are needed to reveal what that language demands. Albano et al. (2023) provide a useful point of connection because their work explicitly concerns students' engagement with criteria for success. The implication developed here is that criteria should become objects of discussion before they become instruments of judgement. Asking students to explain why one response is more convincing than another can expose uncertainty that a rubric alone leaves concealed.

IV. A CYCLE OF INTERPRETATION, DELIBERATION AND REVISION:

The proposed cycle begins before submission. Students examine two or three short exemplars representing different approaches to the same task. They identify a relevant criterion, locate evidence of its fulfilment and explain their judgement. Teachers then clarify disagreements. This preparation gives later feedback a shared reference point and reduces dependence on unexplained evaluative adjectives. After receiving comments, students produce a brief interpretation statement. They paraphrase the principal concern and identify the passage to which it applies. Where meaning remains uncertain, they formulate a specific question. This step is deliberately modest: a long reflective essay can turn interpretation into an administrative burden. The purpose is to make misunderstanding visible while revision remains possible.

Deliberation follows. Students rank potential changes according to their significance for the assignment's purpose. An unsupported central claim should normally receive attention before minor repetition. A short revision plan records the proposed action, its justification and any additional evidence required. The plan helps distinguish conceptual revision from mechanical correction without treating surface accuracy as unimportant. Students then revise a selected passage and explain the relationship between the original problem and the revised version. An adequate explanation might state that the new paragraph distinguishes two competing interpretations and narrows the conclusion to the evidence available. Merely reporting that more references were added does not demonstrate that those references strengthened the argument.

The final stage is transfer. In a later assignment, students identify one previous feedback principle that remains relevant and one that requires adaptation. Ellis's (2009) distinction between feedback provision and student response helps explain why this stage must be designed explicitly. Revising a marked text and independently producing a stronger new text are different accomplishments. A programme should provide evidence of both before concluding that feedback literacy has developed. Prioritisation also deserves explicit instruction. In a position paper on second-language writing, Lee (2019) argues for focused corrective feedback and examines obstacles to replacing comprehensive correction. This argument supports

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asking which comments a learner can use productively during a particular revision. It does not establish that fewer comments are invariably better. A pre-university writing conference might therefore identify one consequential reasoning problem and one recurring language problem, explain their priority and schedule a later review of issues temporarily deferred.

V. PEER REVIEW, CREDIBILITY AND PRODUCTIVE DISAGREEMENT

Peer review offers opportunities to practise judgement, but its educational value depends on preparation. Students need examples of useful commentary, boundaries around the reviewer's responsibility and permission to express uncertainty. Asking an inexperienced reviewer to certify the correctness of unfamiliar legal doctrine would exceed a defensible role. Asking that reviewer to identify an unsupported inference or an unclear connection between sentences is more appropriate. Berggren (2015) reports that students acting as reviewers developed awareness of audience and genre within a particular secondary English-language classroom. The study supports attention to what reviewers learn, rather than treating peer assessment only as a source of additional comments for writers. It does not establish that peer review automatically improves every form of disciplinary reasoning. The instructional challenge is to match the reviewing task to students' existing knowledge.

Credibility should be made discussable. A student may accept feedback because a confident classmate supplied it, reject a useful suggestion because the reviewer performs poorly, or follow the teacher's preferred phrasing without understanding it. Teachers can interrupt these patterns by asking writers to evaluate the reason supporting a comment. A defensible response can include acceptance, modification, a request for clarification or reasoned rejection. Disagreement nevertheless requires accountability. Students should not dismiss an inconvenient observation by declaring it a matter of opinion. Where a reviewer identifies an unsupported factual claim, the writer must supply evidence, qualify the claim or remove it. Where two structures are equally defensible, the writer can explain why one better serves the intended audience. This distinction protects academic standards while cultivating intellectual agency. Rollinson (2005) reviews arguments for and against peer feedback in second-language writing and stresses the importance of appropriate procedures and training. This strengthens the case for preparing reviewers before asking them to assess a classmate's draft. Preparation can include distinguishing a reader's difficulty from a demonstrable factual error, locating the passage that prompted a comment and proposing a question the writer can answer. The reviewer's responsibility is to make the response intelligible and warranted; the writer retains responsibility for the revision.

VI. EMOTIONAL AND LINGUISTIC CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Feedback involves vulnerability because it places work, and sometimes a student's sense of competence, under scrutiny. An instructional system should neither confuse discomfort with harm nor assume that embarrassment is educationally productive. Comments become more usable when they identify a specific feature of the work and indicate a feasible next step. Judgements about a student's character contribute little to that process. Students also differ in their familiarity with the language of assessment. Terms such as synthesis, qualification and methodological limitation may require direct teaching. A multilingual learner can understand a disciplinary concept while misinterpreting an idiomatic instruction. Short conferences, examples and opportunities to paraphrase comments can help reveal this difference without lowering the intellectual demands of the assignment.

Lyster et al. (2013) show why feedback cannot be separated from context, learner characteristics and the target of correction. Their review concerns second-language classrooms; it does not establish a general formula for all academic feedback. Its relevance here lies in resisting a uniform prescription. Immediate correction may be useful for a tightly defined language target, while a complex argument may require time for comparison, dialogue and reconsideration. Teachers should also consider the distribution of revision opportunities. Students with substantial employment or caring responsibilities may struggle to attend optional consultations. Essential guidance should therefore be available within normal teaching arrangements and in accessible written form. A programme cannot fairly interpret unequal participation in optional support as a straightforward measure of motivation.

VII. PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Implementation should begin with a limited number of assignments that allow genuine revision. Teachers can identify one important criterion per task and design a subsequent opportunity to apply it. This selective approach is preferable to requiring lengthy feedback portfolios that accumulate evidence without making learning visible. The objective is to improve the relationship between assessment, teaching and student action. Staff moderation should examine the usefulness of comments as well as the consistency of grades. Colleagues can compare whether a sample comment identifies a problem, clarifies its significance and permits a feasible response. Hyland's (1990) discussion of productive feedback remains relevant to this practical issue: commentary must be connected to what students are expected to do with it.

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Evaluation requires several kinds of evidence. Interpretation statements can show whether students understand comments. Revised passages can demonstrate immediate improvement. A later independent assignment can indicate transfer. Brief student accounts can identify barriers, but satisfaction alone cannot establish learning. Similarly, a larger number of corrections does not necessarily signify stronger judgement. Three propositions follow from the framework. First, opportunities to interpret criteria should improve the specificity of students' revision decisions. Second, requiring explanations for selected revisions should reveal misunderstandings that corrected texts conceal. Third, transfer should be stronger when successive assignments share an identifiable principle while changing the substantive problem. These are testable propositions, not findings reported by the present article.

Feedback literacy should also encompass spoken interaction. Lam (2025) introduces worked examples that guide language learners through features of peer interaction using contextualised extracts and supporting questions. This pedagogical resource suggests a practical extension to seminar preparation: students could examine how a speaker requests clarification, acknowledges a contribution or develops a disagreement. The proposal concerns making interaction visible for analysis. Its effectiveness in a particular pre-university cohort would still require evaluation, including whether students transfer what they notice to subsequent discussion.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The framework draws on a deliberately bounded literature and does not estimate the comparative effectiveness of feedback methods. Several sources concern language learning, and the undergraduate mathematics evidence requires careful adaptation. Pre-university programmes also differ in assessment regulations, class size, staffing and students' previous educational experiences. Local evaluation should therefore precede broad claims of effectiveness.

Feedback literacy is best understood as a developing capacity for reasoned academic response. Its cultivation requires clear criteria, opportunities for interpretation, credible dialogue, selective revision and evidence of transfer. The practical standard is demanding but achievable: students should be able to explain what a comment means, why a proposed change is warranted and how the resulting principle informs later work. When programmes teach these activities explicitly, feedback becomes part of academic preparation rather than a record of completed marking.

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