KungFu Writing, a New Cloud-Based Feedback Tool

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Abstract. As a part of language learning at schools and universities, students write a variety of texts, such as essays, short compositions and reports, which are then read by teachers who typically comment on the content and grammar of these texts to help the students improve their skills as writers. Although teachers can simply use pen and paper, or a text processor, to provide written feedback, the traditional annotation methods do not usually allow easy and systematic re-use of self-explanatory comments for helping the students to revise their writing. For these reasons, we have developed a new online-based commenting/annotation tool, KungFu Writing, which was designed for giving more elaborate feedback on written assignments. As the system is accessible online through a web browser, the tool also allows new opportunities for teachers to collaborate in teaching writing skills at all levels of education. This paper describes the main features and typical uses of this new feedback tool.

Keywords: writing, feedback, online, commenting tool, collaboration, blended learning.

1. Introduction

At many levels of education, students are expected to make a variety of written assignments, such as essays and reports, as a part of their learning process. Similarly, teachers are expected to read and grade these assignments as well as comment on the texts. The content and extent of written comments and feedback, of course, may greatly vary from teacher to teacher and subject domain. Nevertheless, particularly in teaching writing skills, a teacher can offer a valuable contribution to the learning process by giving feedback on a student's written assignments.

Language teachers frequently read and comment on texts written by students in order to help them become better writers or simply to improve their language skills. Depending on the teacher's pedagogical approach, the students may simply read

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through the written feedback they have received on their writing or revise their texts based on the written teacher feedback.

However, it is very time consuming to provide clear explanations and examples for frequently appearing writing problems. Some teachers spend a considerable amount of time manually re-writing or typing feedback and explanations on student papers. Due to lack of time and limited commenting options available in regular text processing tools, teachers may be able to give less feedback on student work than they would desire. In addition, using these traditional methods, teachers cannot easily collect and analyse statistics of typical language problems in student texts and to study the impact of teacher feedback on learning.

To address these challenges in teaching writing, we designed and created a tool for annotating and commenting on texts, known as KungFu Writing, which allows teachers to give flexible feedback on almost any type of written text. Although some feedback tools already exist on the market, they often lack functions that we felt would improve user-friendliness of the feedback process as well as would allow easier sharing of knowledge and teaching materials among teachers. This paper briefly describes important features of KungFu Writing and gives an overview of main approaches to giving feedback on student writing.

2. Approaches to written feedback on writing

There has been considerable debate over the effectiveness of different approaches to giving written feedback on second language (L2) writing. One such approach, grammar correction, is to some degree regarded as an ineffective form of feedback (Ferris, 2004, 2006; Truscott, 1996), particularly when the teacher only corrects the grammatical errors on behalf of the student. As opposed to grammar correction, so-called non-corrective approaches seem to promote learning more effectively, by letting students independently find solutions, for example, to grammatical problems in their text (Ferris, 2004; Milton, 2006). These non-corrective approaches are expected to result in deeper learning and understanding because the students spend more time actively thinking and analysing their own writing.

It is not always self-evident how specific or detailed the feedback should be for the students to revise their own text. In some cases, it is enough to add simple marks, symbols or short comments on the students' text, after which the students are able to understand the feedback properly and improve their writing (Ferris, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). When possible, the written feedback can also be supplemented with face-to-face feedback where the teacher can further explain any unclear segments of the written feedback.

In our writing courses at the Aalto University Language Centre, students have often said that they want to see concrete examples that illustrate and explain grammatical rules or stylistic recommendations. In such cases, a simple comment may not suffice as

an explanation, and extended written feedback is needed. For some stylistic principles and grammar rules, the Internet can provide useful learning materials, and the teacher can include links to written feedback, especially for those students who need detailed explanation.

3. Feedback process

Although text processing programs, such as MS Word and OpenOffice Writer, include simple tools for adding comments to texts, the process of extensive commenting with these programs is somewhat laborious since these programs are primarily designed for text editing and not for text commenting.

However, giving unique comments is not usually very practical for teaching purposes, particularly in courses with specific learning goals and a large number of students. When giving feedback on writing in a course setting, it is usually the case that many students share similar problems in their writing, and in these situations, using a text annotation tool saves time, as standard comments with explanations and examples can be reused simply by highlighting the error and adding a comment by clicking a button. Naturally, KungFu Writing also includes the same possibility to adding unique, freeform comments as text processing programs do, but often it is enough to quickly modify an existing feedback item to a new situation. Figure 1 illustrates the teacher interface of KungFu Writing feedback tool with a simple reusable feedback item.

Figure 1. KungFu Writing teacher interface
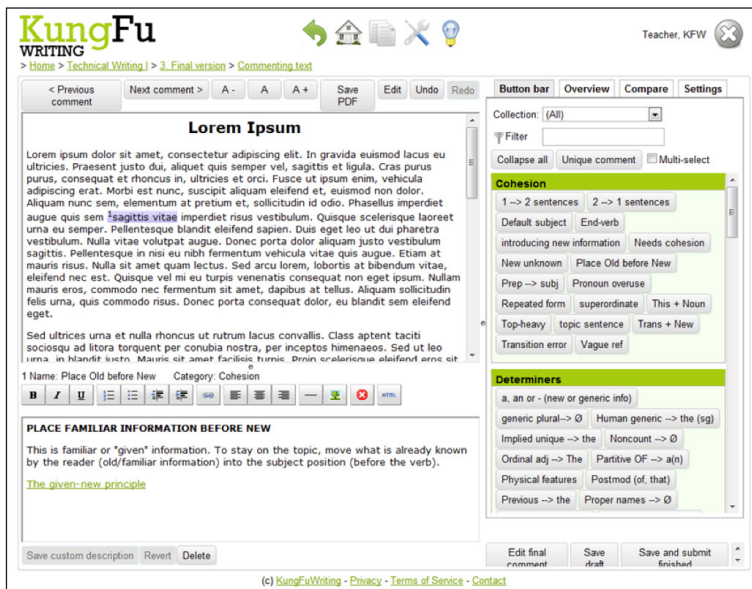
4. Giving feedback using KungFu Writing

The most basic approach for implementing the KungFu Writing tool in a writing course entails three phases. In the first phase, a student writes a text on a given course task and submits the text to the teacher. Second, the teacher reads through the student text and gives feedback, after which the teacher submits the text back to the student. Finally, the student reads through the feedback and revises the text accordingly and re-submits the text to the teacher who then reviews the revised version of the text. Depending on the learning goals or in order to deepen the student learning, the teacher can add more phases to the writing process, such as peer feedback, face-to-face consultations or extra revision tasks.

KungFu Writing allows the teacher to compare changes made between the different versions of the student text, as the tool automatically highlights the changes in the text. In this way, the teacher can quickly see how well a student has understood and responded to the written teacher feedback. KungFu Writing can compile statistics of given feedback on, for example, an individual student or an entire group. This is particularly useful when planning in-class teaching because this information can help the teacher to decide which areas of grammar or style should be reviewed or emphasized in the class lesson.

5. Benefits of an online feedback system

Most of the existing feedback tools require that the users install the program on their work or home computer, which sometimes causes compatibility problems with different versions of operating systems. In addition, many students as well as teachers are not particularly keen on spending extra time and effort on installing and configuring computer programs. With ever-faster network connections, the problems related to stand alone programs can be avoided with an online feedback tool. Therefore, KungFu Writing is designed to be used via a web browser, such as Mozilla Firefox, thus making the tool platform independent. A cloud-based system also eliminates the need for transferring the student texts as well as standard feedback templates between computers. Overall, this cloud-based tool offers a number of benefits by allowing:

- Easy reusability of pre-written comments or feedback;
- Ability to link online instructional material to the feedback;
- New possibilities for educators to share pedagogical knowledge and expertise;
- A platform for teacher/instructor collaboration in content creation;
- Consistent quality of feedback through standardization.

The new ability to share pre-written comments can also help new instructors to learn from experienced instructors who typically have tacit knowledge that may not

otherwise be easily shared. An alternative approach to using a text commenting tool would be to use it either in the review or grading process. In this way, each grader or reviewer can rely on the standard evaluation criteria, thus enhancing the transparency and consistency of assessment.

6. Future Developments

Since autumn 2011, over twenty teachers of writing from different universities and upper-secondary schools in Finland have participated in piloting the KungFu Writing tool. With the help of the teacher feedback, we are working on adding new features to the system that would extend its usability. Such planned features include Shibboleth and/or OpenId authentication; features that would expand ways of collaboration between colleagues; increased flexibility in assignment submission and commenting processes (e.g., email); and offline support.

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