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Title: Constructive content-based feedback in EAP contexts: lessons from a cross-border engineering-related pre-sessional course

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Abstract

This paper investigates a small-scale project concerned with establishing and sustaining an e-partnership between international students in the UK, and engineering students in Palestine. It focuses on the value of peer teaching and learning as an attempt to ensure a greater balance between knowledge and language on a UK pre-sessional English-language course, by involving more able peers from a Gazan student-body. At the same time, it was hoped that such an arrangement would enable the Gazan students to develop a range of transferable skills, of use in accessing employment at a distance. The article initially outlines the wider context to the Project, discussing the issues related to instituting peer learning/teaching schemes in an HE setting. At its centre though is the presentation and evaluation of a constructive feedback course, whose design and delivery aimed at facilitating the development of skills needed to perform as a peer mentor. It demonstrates students' attitudes towards feedback and the strategies they use when asked to provide their peers with content feedback in an e-partnership. In this way it provides food for thought to educators interested in developing similar cross-border schemes.

Though the potential issues that emerge in terms of First-world /Global South imbalance are very considerable, the paper suggests that telecollaboration projects of this nature may help overseas students start interrogating discipline-specific literacies, thus preventing the decontextualization of the learner, including those unable to pay to study at a prestigious HE institution.

Keywords

constructive feedback; EAP; ESAP; pre-sessional; telecollaboration; peer feedback; content feedback; Palestine; Gaza

1. Introduction

In universities within the English-speaking world, the significance of international students is clear - over 430,000 attend annually in the UK, for example (UCAS, 2016), almost 20% of the overall student body (HESA, 2016). The high fees non-EU students contribute (around 45% of the international student body in 2015/16) mean that this importance continues to grow. Entrance via a secure English language test such as IELTS is common, but increasingly many of these students opt for pre-sessional subject-specific English language programmes (English for Specific Academic Purposes – ESAP – as opposed to English for Academic Purposes only – EAP), seeing value in a mode that combines language, study skills and subject-content as preparation for their forthcoming studies. While such a combination seems appealing, it presents its own challenges. As subject lecturers often take leave during summer, the subject-related element of the ESAP course is often restricted to the use of disciplinary texts. Since EAP teachers may not be necessarily fully acquainted with discipline-related literacies, the development of language and study skills is often treated as a neutral, a-social, a-cultural and a-political skillset (Boughey and McKenna, 2016).

In Palestine, as a representative of the Global South, the challenges facing the tertiary-education sector are further complicated by the fact that 25% of the Palestinian population lives below the poverty line, with numbers in Gaza twice as high as those in the West Bank (World Bank, 2014). Specific to employment, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2015) classified 20.8% of Palestinians as unemployed, rising to over 46.2% in the Gaza Strip. The situation is particularly dire among university students, with 60% facing problems in finding work after graduation (World Bank, 2015). To tap into the knowledge, skills and strong motivation that this group possess, e-

learning and e-work are key, to help expand the job market beyond the physical borders of Palestine.

The mutual needs of the universities and student-bodies in each country could, we felt, in part be answered by instituting a technology-mediated partnership between the pre-sessional students in the UK and subject students in Gaza, centred around peer learning and teaching. Through peer interactions, the subject element of the pre-sessional course would be contextualized more effectively by demonstrating to the students that language is about appropriacy-driven social meaning-negotiation rather than a mastery of grammatical forms, and this could provide a springboard for interrogation of the related disciplinary literacies.

However, in order to establish such a peer-review scheme, the future peer-mentors required training in providing feedback concerned with knowledge rather than linguistic proficiency, and this is the focus of this paper. It presents the Constructive Feedback Course (CFC) on which the UK-Gaza partnership was built, analysing the design and delivery principles, and, more importantly, the students' output, in order to evaluate their strategies when grappling with the peer-reviewer role.

2. Project overview

Every summer the University of Glasgow (UoG) runs an intensive ESAP course for incoming international Master's students wanting to study in Science, Engineering and Technology-related (SET) disciplines. The course is high-stakes, as its successful completion guarantees entrance to postgraduate studies. As part of their assessment, in previous years students nominated a problem within their prospective field, researched solutions, and delivered them in written and oral form. Even though the course providers strive to demonstrate to the students which discipline-related literacies are valued in the

academy, due to time pressures, student-staff ratio constraints and market-driven agenda, the teaching approaches may still favour a skillful language use, particularly when it comes to feedback. Some of the pre-sessional students may have acquired some subject-knowledge through an undergraduate degree and are encouraged to co-construct new understandings through class interactions. The teachers who tend to be laymen may not be able to respond to these meaningfully. This information-gap is often rationalized as an opportunity for knowledge-exchange between students and tutors which requires levelling of the relationship between them. This, however, creates issues among the stakeholders, with teachers afraid of losing face, and students choosing not to contest their teacher's authority.

Literature clearly offers strong theoretical support for a much closer marriage between language and context. Language is not a neutral tool used to transmit knowledge, but rather a powerful meaning-making resource (Christie, 1993), in line with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. Reading and writing are socially embedded practices which require the participants to attend to appropriacy of language choices, closely related to the system of values of a particular discourse community. The importance of this 'context of situation' (Halliday, 2009:62) means that effective ESAP pedagogy should be semantically- (rather than syntactically-) driven. Christie (1993:76) adds that any separation of grammar- from meaning-related feedback is potentially misleading, even 'damaging' as it may result in perpetuating the exclusion of international students, sometimes unjustly portrayed as suffering from 'a language problem' (Boughey and Mckenna, 2016).

To address these issues, in July 2015, an online peer-review collaboration was piloted with the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), the English for Academic Study

Telecollaboration (EAST) Project¹ (henceforth the Project). 20 Palestinian SET graduates (already working toward a degree, e.g. in electrical, civil or mechanical engineering) and 35 UK-based international students (from different cultural backgrounds, planning to undertake a SET-related postgraduate course at UoG), divided into small groups, worked together on authentic and highly-contextualised discipline-specific problems. The Palestinian students had devised the scenarios, and then acted as critical friends during the collaboration, providing content-oriented feedback via social media. With this guidance, the UK-based students researched, analysed and evaluated possible responses. At the end of the Project, they delivered videoconferenced presentations to the audience in Gaza. Successful performance in this presentation, and an accompanying 1,500-word essay, allowed them to access their Master's courses in September 2015 (see Guariento *et al.*, 2016). Such course redesign enhanced the classroom experience by bringing in 'live' and dynamic specialist knowledge as opposed to textbook-restricted content, and so created a natural space for the 'context of situation'. A mentoring scheme was needed, though, to ensure the Gazan graduates supported their UK-based peers constructively.

3. The importance of peer review

In social and collaborative learning, peer feedback can play a central role. Apart from being more immediate, plentiful and individualized (Topping, 2009), these feedback loops can allow students to communicate in a more discipline-appropriate manner, become familiar with quality expectations, develop metacognitive skills, and self-identify strengths and weaknesses (Sadler, 1989); all this requires considerable identity work, easier to negotiate in positions of equality than a power-laden student-teacher

¹ Project website: <https://easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com/>

relationship. Ladyshevsky (2006) adds that peer feedback improves critical thinking. When feeding back, students need to articulate their understanding, which may require more in-depth reading. While working on interdisciplinary projects, an increase in critical thinking may be substantial, as the collaboration will, by definition, involve divergent opinions. This creates ample space for interrogating and challenging various viewpoints, identified by Boughey and McKenna (2016) as legitimated ways of reading in the academy. Olsen (1990), referring specifically to group feedback (as used on the Project), suggests that it provides more effective final drafts than those utilising just teacher-originated feedback.

Students' preference for traditional teacher-led feedback, which may be particularly marked among students used to teacher-centred methodologies, must nevertheless be acknowledged. There are also other potential social-process downsides to feedback between *groups* of students (Topping, 2009:24): failure to participate, 'free rider effects', and diffusion of responsibility. These significant affective and social issues mean that teacher monitoring must accompany any peer-feedback initiative (especially early on), with teacher-workload implications. An effective peer-review scheme also necessitates significant resources upfront to provide an organisational framework that will host the feedback interactions, and training to ensure that the comments offered are constructive, as without this, feedback "might be too hard, critical, or misunderstand the assessment criteria" (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012:141). In the case of ESAP learners, the need for constructivism has to be articulated in terms of content-knowledge rather than language-form to better reflect the social aspects of academic literacies. Therefore, peer-reviewer training is crucial in trans-border and technology-mediated contexts to ascertain consistency of feedback quality and focus, and the following sections analyse and evaluate the input and output of the CFC as an

example of such training, assessing to what extent this learning experience attends to the 'context of situation' on an ESAP course.

4. The Constructive Feedback Course

The overall aim of the CFC² was to simulate the situation in which the Gazan students would find themselves during the actual peer-mentoring phase of the Project. It was important to mimic the conditions in every aspect, i.e. working via technology, together, to tight deadlines, and with infinitely-open tasks with no prescribed answers.

The intended learning outcomes were formulated to the Gazan students as follows:

By the end of the CFC, you will have:

- reflected on your experience of feedback;
- collaboratively researched constructive feedback to identify its key features and how it differs from non-constructive, descriptive or destructive feedback;
- evaluated feedback samples to deepen your understanding of (non-) constructive feedback;
- practised giving constructive feedback on a written sample.

The course consisted of six activities completed collaboratively within groups of three over a three-week period. They were released via Google Docs one-by-one and at regular intervals, and followed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model of exploration-integration-application (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007). It started with activating schemata through reflecting on personal experiences of receiving and offering (non-)constructive

² The CFC is an open-access resource under CC licence: <https://goo.gl/ifxdh7>

feedback. The students were asked to post their reflections in a textual and visual form, articulating tacit understandings in an online environment that perhaps still felt unfamiliar. This was followed by collaborative research to identify the key characteristics and principles of peer-feedback provision. Having consolidated and expanded their existing knowledge, the students started integrating it via a series of short tasks, distinguishing between constructive, non-constructive, descriptive and destructive feedback.

Finally, they applied the skills by producing a written commentary on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of sample engineering-related 'essays', drawing loosely on the Gazan context (to be analysed in the 'Results' and 'Discussion' sections). These were written by the UoG organisers, i.e. EAP teachers with only limited knowledge either of engineering or of Gaza. For the purposes of the desired training in constructive feedback, we posited this limited knowledge as having two advantages. Firstly, the Gazan graduates would be presented with a lay analysis, similar to that which could be expected from many of the incoming UK-based pre-Masters participants, and would need to tailor their feedback accordingly. Secondly, we were aware that the pieces we had produced, with only limited understanding of the daily strictures facing Palestinians, might also frustrate our Gazan student-collaborators; we felt it was better that any frustration was expressed prior to rather than during the Project (when electing to leave would be more disruptive).

Regarding the technologies used, the selection criteria included robustness, user-friendliness, cross-device accessibility and flexibility. Simultaneously, we had to acknowledge the contextual constraints, for example the regular power-cuts, the extreme August temperatures in Palestine, and the fact that the Gazan students were participating during their holidays, without remuneration. For all of these reasons, they

were more likely to work from home, where the network infrastructure and electricity supply were less reliable than at IUG (which has a back-up generator). Because of this, as well as a difference in time zones and working day/weekend patterns, opportunities for synchronous communication were limited. Apart from one synchronous induction session, the CFC was mainly run through Google Docs (course content) and Facebook (communication and management). The students were already familiar with Google Docs via their studies at IUG. Additionally, Facebook and Google apps are smartphone-friendly, which further minimised access-barriers, and enabled quicker responses, which at least partially counterbalanced the lack of synchronicity and enhanced the social aspects of the Project.

The latter advantage was particularly important as, due to limited staff time and an already high workload, the teacher-presence as part of constructing an educational experience (see the Col framework, Garrison *et al.*, 2000) had to be approached creatively. It was hoped that the careful activity-sequencing provided sufficient scaffolding to deal with progressively more challenging tasks. The collaborative elements were also intended to develop a sense of support. The course organisers monitored from the background, stepping in only if it was deemed unavoidable, for example if the students had clearly misunderstood the task, or when the groupwork was malfunctioning. Some collective feedback was provided via the Project blog - for instance on students' contributions to the initial reflection on feedback provision - but not regularly. However, the provision of extensive and personalised feedback on the final student-group submissions was included in the course design, and the students were fully informed of this during induction.

5. Students' 'constructive feedback' submissions

The final CFC task asked the Gazan participants to produce their own feedback on a Gaza-relevant engineering-related issue. Each group was allocated one of the three extracts below, each discussing potential solutions to a Gaza-related problem, taken from a fictitious UK-based student's first essay draft:

- Extract 1: Provision of water supplies in Gaza (Figure 1)
- Extract 2: Electricity supply in Gaza (Figure 4)
- Extract 3: Food production in Gaza (Figure 9)

The participants were reminded that they were being asked to comment on a first draft fragment and that for this reason the analysis was likely to be incomplete and in need of targeted (and diplomatically-couched) feedback, drawing on the elements of constructive feedback learned in the CFC earlier. Each group was given three days to produce and post their feedback, and comments from organisers followed within five days.

The following section, 'Results', presents each of the extracts, followed by a sample group-response which, we felt, illustrated an interesting (and different) aspect of the constructive-feedback learning process, and then by the tutors' feedback. We were primarily interested in the students' understanding of their role in the mentoring scheme, and what, in their view, this role entailed in terms of content, form, tone and focus. Having this information could help us predict how effectively such feedback could later complement the EAP tutor's feedback in order to better account for the 'context of situation' on a prospective ESAP course with a telecollaborative element. This would also allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of such e-partnerships, and whether they can

be of any value in addressing the question of contextualizing language learning on pre-sessional courses, and levelling academic and employment opportunities in Global South contexts.

6. Results

Altogether, eight out of nine groups submitted their feedback responses; for reasons of space, only responses representative of main emergent issues are presented below (with original grammar and spelling), followed immediately by a corresponding response from the Project organiser.

Extract 1: Provision of water supplies in Gaza (input from [fictitious] UK-based student)

Gaza is naturally a very dry area, and water has always been a scarce resource. This scarcity has been exacerbated by destruction of power supplies, on which distribution and filtration depend, and of water pipelines. There has also been serious damage to the sewage system, with increased contamination of drinking-water supplies as a result.

Many of the longer-term responses will depend on effective funding from European Union sources, but in the short-term charitable bodies such as Water Aid need to ensure that bottled water is available for drinking purposes. Work to re-construct damaged infrastructure needs to be carried out, to isolate potable and waste-water systems. Ways to increase the provision of water supplies in the future must also be developed – the universities in Palestine may be able to offer a lead here, by collaborating with one another and with international partners to develop low-technology desalination and water-reuse technologies.

Fig. 1

An example of Gazan student-feedback on extract 1

After reading the text, there is a some data need editing.

Provision of water supplies

The Gaza Strip, is the southern part of Palestine, lays on the Mediterranean region, which arid and semi-arid regions.

Shortage of water is perhaps the most crucial environmental problem. This shortage may be associated with deterioration of water quality.

Climate change and rapid population growth increase water demand, also the dominance of the Israeli occupation over the Palestinian water and land resources exacerbates demands on limited freshwater supplies.

Currently, water demand exceeds the available water supply. The gap between water supply and water demands is steadily growing and is calling for the adoption of integrated water resources management approach and the mobilization of any additional conventional and non-conventional water resources.

The overall water demand in the Gaza Strip is expected to increase to 265 MCM by 2020 due to the increasing population as shown in the figure.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to conserve and protect freshwater resources and to use the water of lower quality for irrigation. The use of treated wastewater in agriculture is one of the strategies adopted for increasing water supply to face water scarcity, and is justified on agronomic and economic grounds but care must be taken to minimize adverse health and environmental impacts.

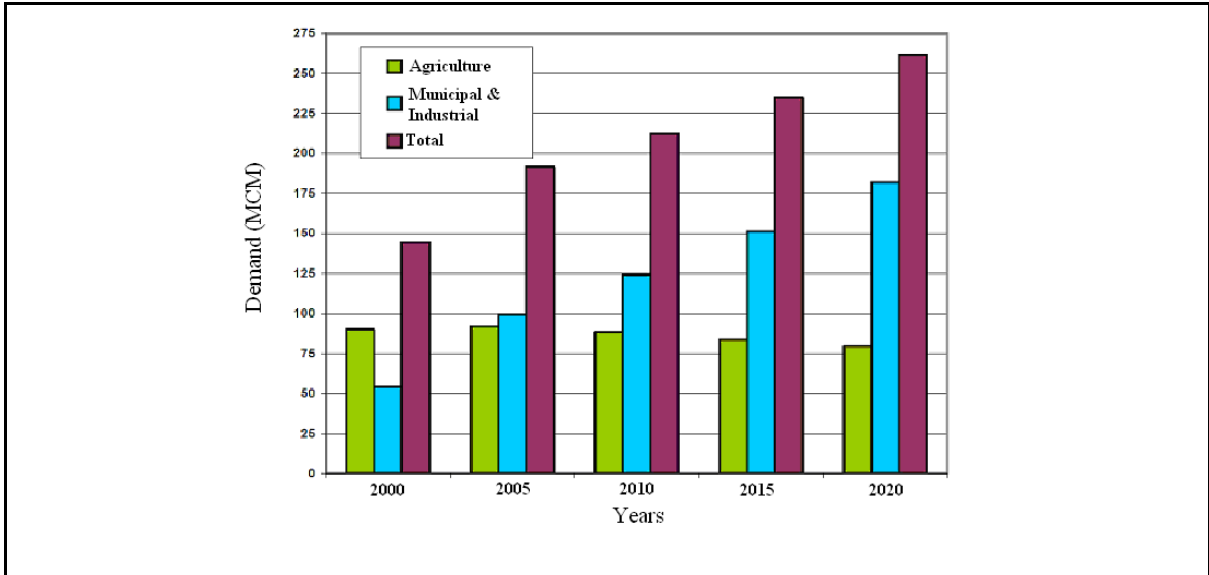


Fig. 2

Organisers' comments on student feedback on extract 1

This is a lovely piece of writing with a well-chosen visual...

but....

you have to remember your role.

Your job is to provide constructive feedback. So, instead of giving the students the rainfall figures, you could say 'this would be a stronger piece of writing if you can include some statistics, e.g. rainfall figures'.

Your job is not to write the student's work for them. If you do this, the work that they submit at the end of their course will be your work, not theirs.

Fig. 3

Extract 2: Electricity supply in Gaza (input from [fictitious] UK-based student)

In July 2014 the only power plant in Gaza was badly damaged by shelling, leaving the fire extinguishing systems unusable and resulting in the destruction of the fuel tanks; without fuel, electricity cannot be generated.

Various responses are possible. In the short term, rationing of electricity must continue, ensuring that the limited supplies which are available are evenly distributed. All those who are most in need, such as in hospitals and in schools, need to be prioritized, but the businesses which provide work for the young and on which reconstruction depends must also be supplied with power. At the same time, European Union reconstruction funds need to be accessed, to help in the speedy rebuilding of the damaged fuel tanks and the provision of smaller generators to overcome the interim energy shortfall. Finally, to ensure longer-term energy autonomy for Gaza, exploration of offshore gas reserves should be encouraged.

Fig. 4

An example of Gazan student-feedback on extract 2

- *He gives a good brief introduction that could explain simply the situation in Gaza power plant. However some problems of coherence and construction of the passage can be noticed. Here are some suggestions to improve this piece of writing.*
 - *The first sentence of introduction might be: In July 2014 the only power plant in Gaza was badly damaged by shelling, resulting in the destruction of fire extinguishing systems and fuel tanks. Consequently, electricity cannot be generated.*
 - *Various solutions are possible instead of responses.*
 - *“Firstly and temporarily, rationing of electricity must continue...etc.” instead of what is written above.*
 - *He could strengthen the expression “European Union reconstruction funds need to be accessed” by writing “European Union reconstruction funds is a must to*
 - *A speedy rebuilding instead of the speedy rebuilding.*
 - *“the businesses which provide work” need an example to illustrate the exact meaning.*
 - *Leave tab space before the beginning of each paragraph.*
- *This passage do not reflect an engineering viewpoint. I mean anyone of any discipline can represent the problem and suggest these solutions.*

Fig. 5

Organisers' comments on student feedback on extract 2

You are giving very useful feedback on the student's use of English. But the most relevant part of your feedback is the final sentence - we would like you to comment on the content of the student's work, rather than the language they use to express it.

I can see that your own English is obviously very strong, but I hope you can remember your role here. It is our students' role to write in the best English possible (but it has to be their own work, of course). It is our role as teachers to comment on our students' English, and try to work out ways to improve it. It is your role, in the EAST Project, to think of areas of content that the UK-based students can explore.....are there areas they haven't considered (or haven't considered in enough depth) / have they said anything that is wrong?!

Perhaps, if the EAST Project is a success this summer, we can think of ways to expand in future years, to allow some form of language- (as well as content-) feedback; it's good to see that your own command of English is so strong.

So, to help this student, I would suggest that you think of ways to expand on your final sentence - specifically, what engineering issues should our UK-based student work on?!

Fig. 6

Second example of Gazan student-feedback on extract 2

Everyone needs electricity in hospitals, companies, schools and homes. So, What the methodology to be followed for the rationalization of electricity?

On the other hand if there is support for the rebuilding of the damaged fuel tanks, which ensures that this tank not destroyed and return the problem again?

Fig. 7

Organisers' comments on the second student feedback on extract 2

You have highlighted an important point here with your first comment - how is it possible to 'prioritise' certain areas, when all of the areas are so important? I agree that you are right to ask the UK-based students to go into more detail, i.e. to say which areas they would prioritise, and why. It would also be useful for the UK-based students to look at places with difficulties similar to Gaza's (though there are few in such very challenging circumstances).

Your second comment is totally understandable - like you, I can see that an engineering-based response will be futile if (for example) the energy plant is bombed once again. But I hope you will be able to try to limit your comments as far as possible to the technological aspects of the problem. By linking Gazan and UK-based students to discuss the technological challenges, the underlying political issues will emerge automatically - I don't think it is necessary to state them directly. But please be assured that one of our main reasons for setting up the EAST Project is to help highlight the day-to-day suffering of people in Gaza.

Fig. 8

Extract 3: Food production in Gaza (input from [fictitious] UK-based student)

The high population density within the Gaza strip, coupled with an arid climate and Israeli restrictions on access to the Mediterranean for fishing have all limited the population's ability to feed itself.

One response is to enable farmers to maximise currently available water supplies, by repairing distribution systems destroyed in 2014 in order to reduce the high levels of water-loss, and to encourage the use, where possible, of closed pipes as substitutes for open canals (which lose more to evaporation).

The high density of urban living necessitates an urban response, too, and the development of aquaponics is being explored. This involves a combination of aquaculture (the farming of fish) with hydroponics (the cultivation of plants without soil), gaining two products (fish and vegetables) from just one input, with very economical use of water. Tanks and piping can be constructed locally, though the systems need a pump to ensure year-round circulation of oxygenated water.

Finally, the possibility of instituting a microcredit system, as in Bangladesh, may help farmers meet funding shortfalls.

Fig. 9

An example of Gazan student-feedback on extract 3

It is a good starting draft, but there is a few comments and suggestion that would make your report more comprehensive.

- *The report stated that Gaza-strip has a high population density, Can you include official sources that cited how high the population is in numbers comparing to the geographical area? You could also compare the Gaza area and population with a known place or famous city to help the reader knowing where it is located in the map (i.e. Gaza strip is 360 km² which is nearly half the area of london (607 mi²) with estimated 1,816,379 of population ...etc). May be including figures or actual map will be helpful and dependable.*
- *You could also make the "Israeli restrictions on access to the Mediterranean for fishing" more cleaner by finding how far in meters is the legitimated fishing zone due the controlling of borders by Israeli? You can even compare the quantity fishers gain to the demand inside the strip then argue the needs which insisted us to investigate other food production methods. The statement will be more convincing and impactful.*
- *The report mentioned that one of the responses is to maximise water supplies the farmers used, but the solution did not address any information about the farming status in Gaza-strip. For instance, What if there is no enough agriculture area to serve the population? Or how do farmers in Gaza-Strip irrigate their crops? Do they actually use "open canals" to suggest the usage of closed pipes instead? Similarly, The solution should*

explain the difference between both methods and explain the degree of damage that influence the distribution systems in 2014.

- *It would be interesting if you clarify the next point in a bit more detail. For example what is the development of aquaponics? How does the combining of hydroponics and aquaculture in Gaza-Strip will be economically efficient? (Can you include cost) what is required to construct Tanks and piping locally?*
- *The report mention that Bangladesh has experienced the funding of microcredit groups which leads to fruitful results.*

Can you indicate why do you think they are (Gaza-strip and Bangladesh) similar?

In addition, Why do you think the microcredit will be successful in Gaza-strip too?

Do they (Gaza-strip and Bangladesh) share the same obstacles, area, population, and/or occupation so the solution project will be relevant? The point will be cogent if you include more justifications.

Final:

Generally speaking, you successfully introduce this crucial problem as if you were from Gaza-Strip region. I hope that you will find my comments useful, and please feel free to ask for any clarification or discuss any further suggestions.

Fig. 10

Organisers' comments on student feedback on extract 3

This is very effective feedback. It points out positives, at the same time as pointing out negatives. I like the way the writer asks the UK-based student questions - the UK-based student still has to do lots of work, but now s/he knows what direction to go in. The bullet points are very clear, and where you think that the UK-based student has made a mistake (e.g. you say 'What evidence is there for open-canals in Gaza?') you point this out. You point out the value of details, e.g. statistics regarding the fishing zone permitted by Israel / the infrastructure damage in 2014. You also point out the need for the student to look more closely at the overall agricultural demands of Gaza's large population. Finally, you ask the student to justify why Bangladesh might be a useful example for Gaza in terms of raising credit. I also think the closing summary is both useful and encouraging. This student will go away with a clear indication of what s/he needs to do in order to improve the essay, and with a strong sense of motivation.

Fig. 11

7. Discussion

These examples of student-feedback are illustrative of the four broad directions that the Gazan students elected to travel in, giving an insight into their perceptions of the peer-mentor role. The first three turned out to be inappropriate to the 'content mentor' role the Gazan students were about to adopt in their partnership with UK-based students, in differing ways.

The first group (Fig. 2) had elected to provide much of the content for their UK-based partner, 'telling' the students what to do, rather than guiding them toward further

research, investigation and evaluation. As little room is left for the recipient to question the associated literacy practices, such feedback represents a one-way transmissive process rather than Nicol's conceptualisation of feedback as dialogue (2010), and is of limited value for the development of a student's disciplinary expertise (Sadler, 2010). Similarly, the second group's feedback response (Fig. 5) allowed little scope for the feedback-recipient to negotiate their own interpretation of the message, a condition for the peer-review process to deliver learning (Nicol *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, the feedback focused on correcting the UK-based partner's language, which would only replicate Christie's argument for the language as a mere communication instrument, rather than a resource, a theoretical and practical conundrum on many ESAP courses. Despite asking open questions which would require deeper engagement with the research problem, the third group's response (Fig. 7) showed a frustration with the wider issues facing their community which, though understandable, affected the message in a manner inappropriate to the task at hand.

Despite such a range of approaches to the feedback task we accepted their diversity and unpredictability as a risk of the Project, hoping that this in itself creates an opportunity to have a dialogue about what feedback, review and revision mean in the particular disciplinary discourse-community. We acknowledged the efforts by noting strengths of each feedback response and making recommendations for improvement, remembering that the course is developmental in nature and ensuring that we model good practices ourselves. The groups' constructive feedback, alongside with the tutors' comments, was posted on the Project website for everybody to see, providing a space for a reflective conversation about the different approaches and their varying levels of appropriacy, specificity, and even politeness. We hoped that the feedback of the final group (Fig. 10) would be recognised as a possible model for the next stage of the

Project, mainly because it seems to mimic the associated disciplinary practices quite accurately, for example through asking for specific evidence to precisely support the claims.

As mentioned earlier, not all the groups completed the task, and in the case of those who did, the extent of each team member's participation was hard to quantify, so it was impossible to track individuals' engagement and progress (a weakness of the study). It would also have been useful to track progress in order to see how our feedback actually influenced the student-reviewer's feedback later during the Project and whether the later attempts were better aligned with how the subject-lecturers approach the feedback issue in the academy.

Since the Project had a developmental function, and in order to acknowledge the students' diversity of backgrounds (current undergraduate student, current master's students, master's graduate, a PhD student), apart from analysing the content of the responses, we also administered a questionnaire to gain an insight into the students' perceptions of the impact of the CFC on their understanding of constructive feedback and the ability to apply their learning.

18 out of 26 participants completed the evaluation survey. We asked them to rate their perception of understanding of constructive feedback before and after the task and how that understanding related to their confidence in giving such feedback to peers. Inspired by the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs and Tang, 2007), which describes the process of learning as progress through a series of stages, we tried to construct answer-options in such a way that the students could report on their perceived knowledge and skill at that particular time with a degree of accuracy.

Before undertaking the CFC, half of the students reported from none to very basic understanding of constructive feedback, while the other half reported a good

understanding (Fig. 12); two participants already felt able to give constructive feedback. At the same time, the two middle categories of answers were more popular than the extreme ones, confirming that the course could provide valuable learning experience.

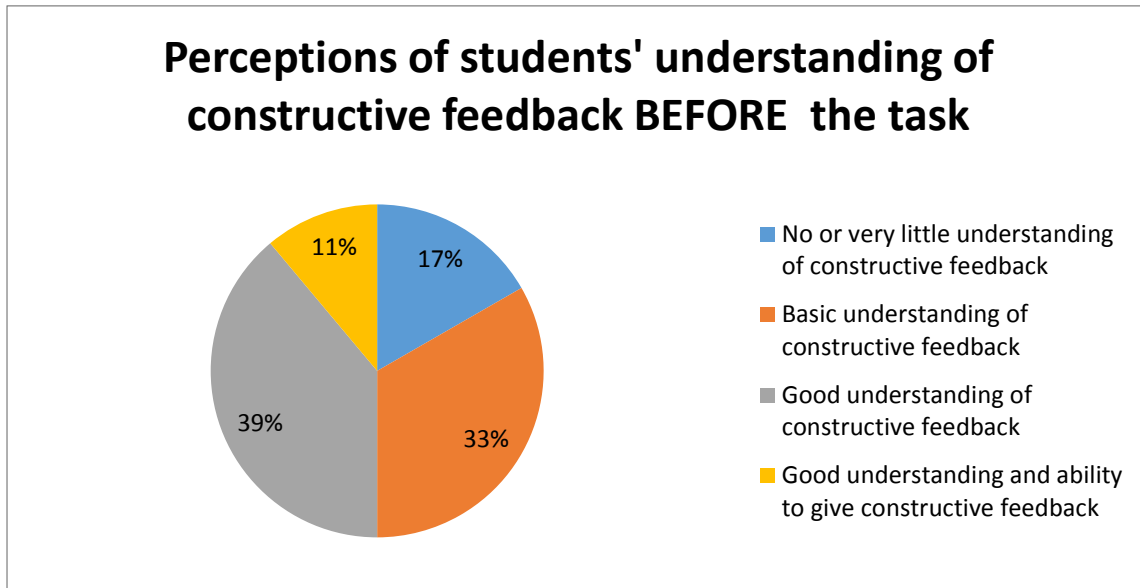


Fig. 12

The changes in the perceived understanding of the constructive feedback after completing the course (Fig.13) were noticeable, with the overwhelming majority of the student body now reporting a good understanding of the skill under discussion. It was reassuring to see this increase, suggesting that the students generally felt better-prepared to mentor UK-based students. Interestingly, the two students who initially believed they both understood and could apply constructive feedback lowered their rating, i.e. their initial perception was re-evaluated in the course of activities. Being able to link these responses with the actual contributions to the group feedback responses could help us deepen our understanding of their progress and decide if any remedial practice was still necessary. It is possible that more discussion of feedback practices within the SET disciplines needs to be built into the course tasks to increase the understanding of critical reading and writing, as suggested by Boughey and McKenna (2016).

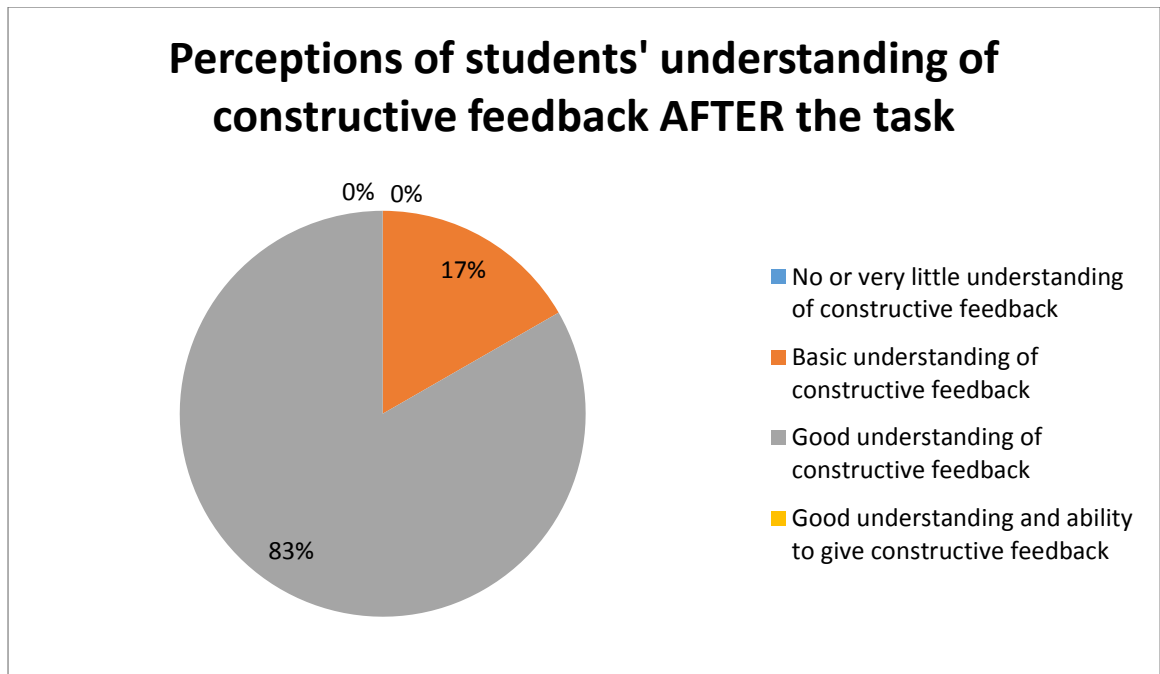


Fig. 13

This proposition is in line with some of the more open comments made by the students in reply to a question about the best feature of the course and suggested improvements. Interestingly, most students focused on aspects of the course structure and delivery but some commented on the content, recommending that more models and examples be given. Thus a revised version of the CFC in summer 2016 featured more extensive tutor feedback modelling the dialogical aspects and specificity of feedback, increased opportunities for inter-group feedback, and self-evaluation protocols for the peer reviewers to develop a better understanding of the disciplinary practices.

8. Conclusion

Gibbs and Simpson (2004) list three prerequisites for effective feedback – that it be detailed, promptly received, and understandable to students; and we would argue that it should also reflect relevant disciplinary academic literacies. Since ESAP courses

often attend to the development of those in rather superficial ways, we feel that introducing a telecollaborative element with an associated CFC as outlined here may constitute a potentially useful response to the issue of content and context. Relevant training offered prior to the Project permits prospective peer reviewers to develop an understanding of the task, as well as opportunities and modelling for them to develop the necessary skills, before they step into the mentor's role. With some modifications, mostly directed at increasing reciprocity and interactivity through introducing a dynamic, real-time, live form of input from the UK, the CFC could really help the student-mentors to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of feedback in a SET context.

Pedagogically, the need for a two-way element to the feedback process seems clear. Snowball and Mostert (2013) point out that a constructivist paradigm, in which students can both see and comment on one another's feedback responses (and so further refine their understanding of the appropriate academic literacies), is of mutual benefit, going beyond what Nicol (2011) defines as mere 'delivery' (the UK participants as passive receivers). This would clearly require the students to see language as a resource rather than a mere instrument. The 'gatekeeping' element of the UK course remains the chief obstacle, but emphasizing the pedagogic value of bi-directional feedback may be the most effective way to ensure that *both* universities buy into any future expansion of the Gazan students' role.

We need to make this pedagogical case forcefully, as the underlying ethical dimension of non-reciprocity is less likely to serve as a motor for change within UK institutions "firmly located within a capitalist, market-oriented philosophy" (Pennycook, 1994:164). The EAST Project was deemed a 'success', because every single UK-based student passed, but they did so based on assessment oriented mainly toward the language. In other words, international students, despite being the 'privileged'

beneficiaries of Glasgow's pre-sessional course, do not get a full opportunity of becoming acquainted with disciplinary literacies. What is even less ethical, however, is the fact that the participating Gaza-based students are unable to receive credits, let alone join their peers in the UK. It is very hard to put a developmental gloss on current pre-sessional practice in the UK, and this additional aspect of the Gaza-Glasgow 'partnership' certainly had an ethical dimension, of which we were aware throughout and which was only tangentially addressed by the CFC outlined above.

The system extant is, without doubt, doubly unfair. Any meaningful change will only be realised once Global South (in our case, Palestinian) students can also gain credits or (why not?) even travel to study within the partner institution. In lieu of these longer-term goals, we have set ourselves more immediate objectives for our next iterations of EAST. Firstly, the CFC should be adjusted to provide more opportunities for practice, so that the peer reviewers can confidently step into their role and become true stakeholders in Halliday's 'context of situation'. Secondly, the CFC needs a closer integration into the wider project, to foster more active participation; one possibility is to make the students co-researchers rather than mentors. Flattening the relationship means that the student would still provide peer feedback but, by being immersed in the collaboration more equally, they may develop ownership of the project and so become motivated to engage in more productive work at the level of ideas and relevant disciplinary literacies, thus truly requiring the language to be seen as a resource. This may mean changes to the workload and set-up of such a course, and the 'gatekeeping' factor remains. But there is certainly potential in balancing gains by the reviewers and reviewees in student partnerships across borders and cultures as this would help to re-address the issue of development of disciplinary academic literacies as well as diminish

the divisive line between the First World and Global South and thus account for 'context of situation' more fully.

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