

Grading grading: Training for consistency, efficiency, and effectiveness in marking linguistics writing

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Undergraduate linguistics students are often expected, sometimes only implicitly, to demonstrate and develop discipline-specific writing skills, even in introductory courses: explaining concepts, articulating and defending a logical argument in favour of a particular analysis, etc. Despite how common such writing may be, linguistics courses are often not taught with much, if any, explicit writing instruction, so instructors and graders may not be effectively helping students develop the expected writing skills. In this talk, we discuss a program for training linguistics teaching assistants (TAs) in marking discipline-specific writing. We highlight two particular activities: *benchmarking* (in which TAs score the same sample essays and discuss differences between their marks) and *feedback on feedback* (in which TAs' written feedback is evaluated). Both activities help to ensure consistency in marking between different TAs, streamline the overall marking process, and provide more effective feedback to students to help them develop their writing skills. We conclude by offering strategies from our program that can be adapted to different types of assignments, courses, and institutions, from problem sets to term papers, from small seminars to large lectures, with or without support from TAs, graders, or writing centres.

Benchmarking and feedback on feedback provide ongoing, practical, discipline-specific training for TAs. Such training can shape how TAs view themselves in their roles as instructors, increase their confidence in those roles and provide them with tools to improve their teaching practice (Becker et al., 2017; Haque & Meadows, 2020; Rodrigue, 2013; Sandi-Urena & Gatlin, 2013). Furthermore, practical, discipline-specific training helps make theoretic teaching concepts more concrete and relevant, while giving TAs the opportunity to practice and reflect on their skills (Bale & Moran, 2020; Haque & Meadows, 2020)

In fall 2020, TAs in two linguistics courses for non-majors participated in 2-hour benchmarking sessions and received feedback on feedback for two writing assignments by an experienced TA. The TAs' comments were assessed on structure and four criteria for effective feedback (issue identification, suggesting a solution, specificity, and tone). Feedback included comments on what TAs did well, how they could improve, and time-saving tips, as well as assessment of structure and numerical scoring of the four effectiveness criteria on a rubric. The TAs' feedback improved from the first assignment to the second, with mean rubric scores improving by +7.85%, from 80.55% to 88.40%. This process allowed the course instructors to identify and address issues to ensure consistency in grading and in the feedback TAs provided to students, to ensure grading matched the instructors' expectations, and to assess TAs' progress in learning to provide effective feedback. For the TAs, benchmarking allowed them to seek clarification on marking guidelines, while providing feedback on feedback for two assignments allowed them to apply the feedback they got on the first assignment to the second and get an idea of their own progress.

To conclude the talk, we offer concrete ways to incorporate benchmarking and feedback on feedback into linguistics courses for different kinds of assignments (for example, problem sets versus essays) and at different levels of time commitment and resources. At a lower end, benchmarking can be incorporated into existing TA meetings, and feedback on feedback can take the form of spot-checking TAs' grading and providing guidance when problems arise. With more available time, these elements can increase in priority and scope, including multiple workshops to reinforce long-term improvement in consistency and efficiency of grading and in effectiveness of feedback.

References

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