USING AUDIO FEEDBACK TO FACILITATE STUDENT REVISING

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I first came across an article about using audio feedback when I began teaching ESL writing classes sometime around 2012. I was immediately interested in the idea of recording my verbal suggestions for students' essay writing, and soon after that I began to experiment with audio feedback in a few of my writing classes. As I slowly started to incorporate it into my teaching repertoire, I found that my students usually reacted very positively: they enjoyed listening to it, they understood my comments, and they found it helpful to their essay revisions. So this cycle continued for a while—I researched more about audio feedback, and I continued to use it in my classes more often while keeping lines of dialogue open with my students because I was interested in what they thought about it.

In the fall of 2013, after receiving IRB approval, I designed a classroom research project aimed at collecting survey data on my university students' perceptions of audio feedback as a method to help them with their essay revisions. A total of 21 students from three different classes volunteered to complete the survey, representing both native-English speakers and second language learners. The research setting described here was within a large public university in the Western United States.

Brief Review of Literature

The literature in this section is divided into three categories. First is research done primarily on *written feedback* and how students perceive the quality of feedback they receive from teachers. Next, similar studies into student perceptions of *audio feedback* will be reviewed. Finally, studies that have compared students' perceptions of audio vs. written feedback will be considered.

Studies on Written Feedback

One of the primary themes that research on written feedback has revealed is the claim made by students that teachers' feedback on students' writing needs to be more specific (Bardine; Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan; Jonsson; Nicol; Sommers; Underwood and Tregidgo; Weaver)—*does that sound like an echo of the same thing we continually claim about our students' writing?* Reasons for a lack of specific comments include a teacher's misperception that his comments are in fact specific enough (Bardine; Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan) and the very realistic issue of not having enough time to write thorough comments on each paper (Weaver). The lack of specificity in our comments on students' papers oftentimes results in students not being able to make use of the comments on future revisions, rendering our comments a waste of time and energy.

A study done in 1999 by Bryan Bardine analyzed 12 high school students' perceptions of the written comments they had received from their writing teacher. Students reported that they "want comments that are thorough and well explained" (Bardine 243). However, in interviews students vocalized their dissatisfaction with the written comments they actually receive. While students were likely expected to revise their papers throughout the writing class, "the problem is that they are unable to revise because the comments themselves are not giving enough information to help for future writing" (244). This creates an obvious conundrum in our current era of process approaches to composition.

A more recent study by Nancy Sommers in 2006 studied 400 Harvard students over the course of their entire four-year span as undergraduates. These students "were asked as juniors to offer one piece of advice to improve writing instruction at Harvard. Overwhelmingly—almost 90 percent—they responded: urge faculty to give more specific comments" (251). A number of other themes emerged from Sommers' research including students' belief that "the opportunity to engage with an instructor through feedback" (251) ranked as one of their most favorable experiences as undergraduate writers. Students also reported that feedback on their writing was oftentimes the *only* actual writing instruction that

they received, which underscores the importance of providing feedback that students can make use of. In light of this research, one of Sommers' arguments is that

> feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback—a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction. (250)

This research highlights the overwhelming significance of teachers' feedback on students' writing. Sommers reported that the one issue that students brought up in every single interview conducted was the powerful impact that feedback had on their writing process, including both "its absence or presence" (251) as a resource.

Audio Feedback

Studies of audio feedback as the sole feedback method in a class (both online and traditional classroom format) show contrasting results when compared to studies of written feedback in regards to students' perceptions of the feedback method: students often report strong preferences for audio feedback because of the ability to readily comprehend it—along with its benefit of strengthening teacher-student relationships (Martini and DiBattista; Merry and Orsmond; Oomen-Early et al.).

Tanya Martini and David DiBattista's 2014 study sought to examine students' perspectives on the knowledge gleaned from audio feedback comments received on a written paper and the transferability of what students learned towards a future essay on a different topic. From the 47 students who completed the survey, students reported that they thought the audio comments were "detailed and easy to understand" (3), similar to other audio feedback research, but the unique part of this study is that students also reported that they felt they could generalize what they had

learned from the audio comments and transfer it to a future writing assignment. This means that audio feedback has the potential to help students in the short-term of revising a particular paper as well as the long-term of becoming a stronger writer overall, being able to take lessons learned from one assignment and apply them towards other assignments with differing circumstances.

In 2015, Stephen Merry and Paul Orsmond's UK study with 15 university students in a biology program showed that students valued audio feedback for its personal and high quality method of providing feedback. As a result of their study, the authors concluded that "students perceive and implement audio file feedback in different and more meaningful ways than written feedback" (7). For example, students from the study reported that their audio feedback had the advantage of allowing them to pause or revisit different sections of the feedback—while simultaneously revising their papers—and actually engaging with the feedback by using their instructor's voice and tone to better interpret the meaning and significance behind the comments.

Audio vs. Written Feedback

Studies that have pitted written vs. audio feedback against each other by offering both feedback methods to students in classes have had mixed results. Some studies show students' strong preferences for audio over written feedback (Cavanaugh and Song; Ice et al. "Using Asynchronous Audio Feedback"; Sipple) while others have shown that students actually prefer a combination of both written and audio feedback (Ice et al. "An Analysis of Students' Perceptions"; Olesova et al.) or a preference for audio over written feedback (Morra and Asís).

Ice et al.'s 2007 case study used audio feedback with students in seven different online university classes. Results showed students' strong preferences for audio feedback "with no negative perceptions of the technique" (18). For instructors, they also valued the audio feedback for its ability to increase students' overall comprehension of course content (19). The reasons that students gave for their preference of audio feedback were categorized under

four themes. First, it was felt that nuance could better be conveyed through audio feedback. Second, students felt more involved in the course and felt a sense of community. Third, students reported that content was better learned through audio feedback. And finally, students felt that their instructors actually cared more about them as a result of receiving the audio feedback. Data analysis also revealed that students were "three times more likely to apply content" (3) they had learned from audio feedback in comparison to written feedback; this result is similar to Martini and DiBattista's 2014 study where students reported that they were able to transfer what they had learned from their audio feedback to future writing assignments.

One study with mixed results was done in 2013 by Jeffrey Bilbro, Christina Iluzada, and David Clark. Their research with 74 undergraduate composition students gave students first written, then audio, and finally their own choice of the two feedback methods. A series of surveys conducted throughout the course showed that students' preferences for feedback correlated with their motivation and engagement in the course. Those students who displayed higher motivation and engagement chose audio feedback as the preferred method. For example, results revealed that "students who were most unsatisfied with their written comments were the ones who most often elected to receive written feedback again when they had the choice" (59). A correlation was found between a small number of students who continually disagreed with survey questions about enjoying their English writing class and their growing decline for choosing audio feedback—"on each successive questionnaire an increasing portion of those students who were not enjoying the class elected to receive written feedback when given the choice on the third questionnaire" (59). This means that audio feedback is not preferred by all students, and preferences may change throughout a course. The authors suggested that offering students a choice of feedback methods in a writing course—or a combination of methods—may be a good way of providing students the best form of feedback based on varying needs and preferences.

Similar studies of audio vs. written feedback have been done with ESL students. Olesova et al.'s 2011 study included 39 non-native English speaking students in various online English classes. Overall, students reported a preference for both types of feedback; however, results also reported that audio feedback contributed to students' sense of community and belonging in the class. Another study done in 2009 at an undergraduate college in Argentina included 89 participating students split into different groups that received either audio, written, or no feedback at all. Audio feedback "was chosen by almost 100% of the students who experienced this type of feedback in the study and could thus compare it with the more familiar written type" (Morra and Asís 77). This was in comparison to 88% of students who had received only written feedback who reported a positive experience with that feedback method.

Procedures

Twenty-one of my own writing students in one developmental composition (n=16) and two upper-level ESL classes (n=5) participated in this study. The developmental class consisted of resident students who spoke English as their first language. The two ESL classes were made up entirely of international students from various countries who all shared English as their second language. Both the developmental and ESL classes, while serving different student populations, were designed to prepare students for college-level writing and ultimately transition them into first-year writing courses.

All participating students were required to complete three major essay assignments—each consisting of a required rough and final draft version—during the course. Audio feedback was given on the students' rough draft essays for all three assignments with the goal of making suggestions to help students revise and submit their required final draft of each essay. The feedback was given in the form of a small audio file from the *sound recorder* that is built into most Windows computers and is located under the starting menu bar.

The feedback process consisted of reading through a student's paper while taking notes about mostly content-related issues. Surface-level issues such as grammar and spelling were marked directly on the paper in a manner that highlighted recurring or major errors. However, my main effort during the feedback process was on the content of the student's paper. After the initial read-through, I would start the audio recording and talk my way through the various content issues I saw in the paper while briefly noting any surface-level error patterns that I marked on the student's paper.

Surveys were administered to students towards the end of the class, after having received audio feedback for three different essay assignments in the class. An administrative assistant from the university came into the class to supervise the survey procedure with the class while I remained outside the room until the entire procedure was completed.

Results

All 21 of the participating students agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred audio feedback (see Figure 1). This was a very simple and one-sided response by students. While other survey questions revealed differing or opposing opinions, it was clear from this first question that students had positive experiences with audio feedback.

Further survey questions (see Figure 2) revealed that only two students preferred written *instead of* audio feedback, and only one student *did not* feel that audio feedback had helped him/her improve as a writer. Students' satisfaction with written feedback—as a method they were familiar with from past writing classes—was reported as significantly lower than their satisfaction with audio feedback.

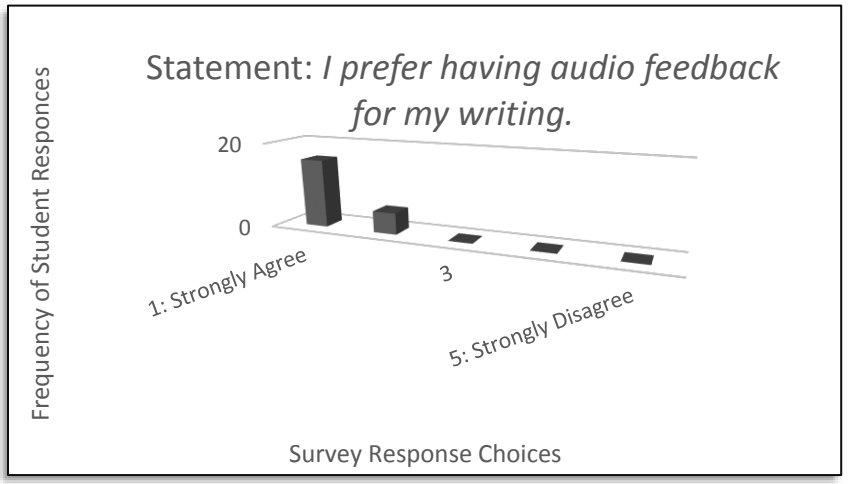

Figure 1: Sample Student Survey Responses

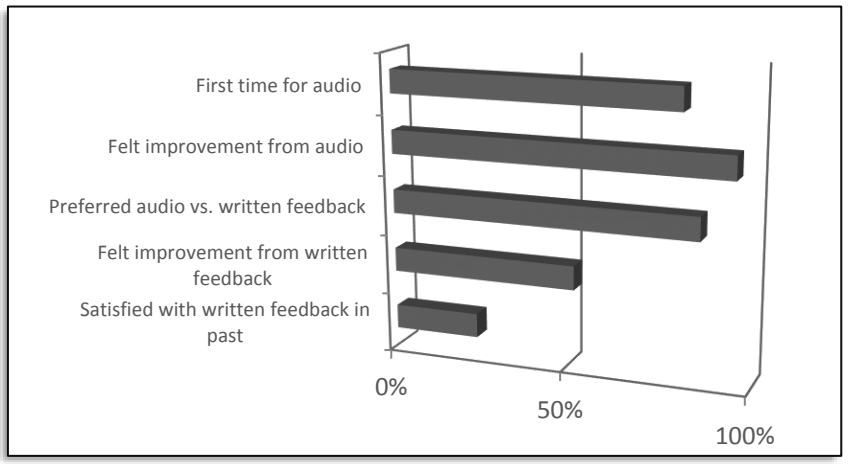

Figure 2: Survey Results

Even though about half of the students felt that written feedback had been helpful to them, only a little less than a quarter of the students actually liked written feedback (see Figure 3). With audio feedback, the feelings of satisfaction and usefulness were much more closely represented: students liked the experience *and* felt it was useful.

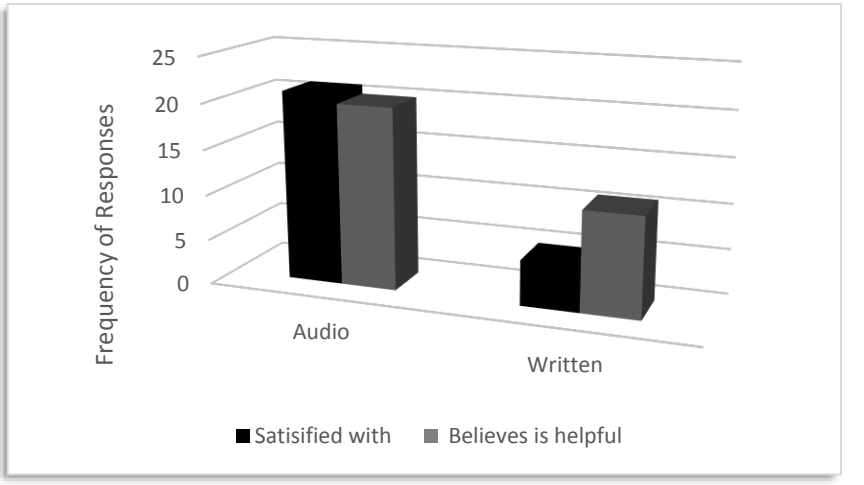

Figure 3: Student Perceptions of Audio and Written Feedback

The responses about written feedback seem to indicate that students don't think very highly of it while their belief in its usefulness as a form of feedback is also considerably low, especially when compared side-by-side to their feelings about audio feedback.

Discussion

Three themes that appeared predominantly among students' qualitative survey responses were 1) students' ability to easily understand the comments given through audio feedback, 2) the personal connection between students and teacher that audio feedback creates, and 3) the ease in which students could use audio feedback to work on essay revisions.

High Comprehensibility

The high comprehensibility of audio feedback was one of the most frequently made comments among students in this study and highlights the power of the spoken word in conveying the complex and nuanced messages that writing teachers send to their students. Students reported that audio feedback grabs their attention and enables them to make sense of the comments about their writing

with more clarity than they have been used to with written comments. As one student mentioned, *"Reading is boring and no one gets the exact same meaning out of it but with audio you can have a more clear idea of whats going on."* As that comment highlights, a student reading a written comment may be able to interpret it in several different ways, but the verbal commentary from a teacher can better explain the kind of complex ideas that are inherent in a teacher's comments aimed at coaching a student to revise his/her paper.

From my perspective as the teacher, I agree with the student's comment from above because I can better explain myself and address the nuances embedded within my comments by speaking about them. Comments that I write on paper will take more time and effort to articulate while becoming increasingly illegible as I speed through comments in anticipation of the next essay at the top of a large stack.

General frustration with written comments was a common complaint by students when mentioning the advantages they experienced with audio feedback. One student claimed that audio feedback is a more efficient method to deliver feedback: *"He's able to give me a wider and better review of my paper in those 5 minutes of audio feedback compared to other teachers that might write a paragraph reviewing my paper. It gives more information and it's faster to use."* This student highlights one of the great *potentials* for audio feedback, which is its capability to deliver highly comprehensible commentary in a shorter amount of time than it takes to write down comments on a student's essay. The real trick here is time management, though. I've wasted a lot of unnecessary time in the recording preparation phase by previewing each essay, arranging all of my ideas thoroughly on paper, and then finally making a lengthy recording to address each issue. That kind of approach is likely to take much longer than extensive written feedback, and it was one of the reasons I went away from using audio feedback for a time. Now, I've found that I can quickly read through an essay to get a feel for what I want to focus my comments on—making *very brief* notes here and there when necessary, and then I begin recording as I focus on

different areas while giving specific comments related to the student's content. This is a similar sequence that many of us take for written feedback; at the end of the recording, once I have a better overall picture of the essay, I can make some final summative advice similar to what we might annotate at the end of our written feedback. If I don't strictly follow this pattern, I will waste a lot of time, and then the audio feedback process becomes more of a time-consuming burden than an effective teaching tool for me.

Overall, students' comments about the clarity of the feedback I gave them in my study are reflective of other studies where students also reported the ability to readily comprehend audio feedback. According to Martini and DiBattista's study with audio feedback, "Positive student comments focused predominantly on the high level of specificity of the audio feedback, which allowed them to clearly understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the paper" (3). In this way, we can think of audio feedback as the *specificity-antidote* to written feedback.

Personal Connection

Students in this study described audio feedback as a kind of personalized response to their writing that shows them that they've been taken seriously as writers. This benefit to students becomes even more significant in a class with around 20 students and one teacher, where the amount of individual teacher-to-student time may be very low or none at all. The following student comment describes audio feedback as a stand-in for a live teacher-student conference: *"I feel like I'm actually having a conversation with my professor not just reading."* That comment highlights the communicative nature of audio feedback: even though it's a one-way conversation directed at the student, the concise and personalized comments are something students reported to be very valuable.

The personalized nature of audio feedback is something I highly value as a teacher as well. When I am recording feedback, I feel as though I am connecting personally to students—speaking directly to them about their writing in a way that I am better able to keep

up with my thoughts and maintain a positive coaching attitude, rather than falling into the monotonous humdrum of writing down comments on paper.

I remember a workshop day I had in a first-year writing class a few semesters ago, and as I was making my rounds and briefly meeting with students about their papers, I recall having distinct recollections of what students had written; as I had just finished giving audio feedback to this class of 21 students a few days before, I felt I had genuinely connected with them during the recording of their feedback. Had I not been aware that this kind of experience had been likewise reported by students in other audio feedback studies, I might not have taken the experience very seriously. One student in this current study reported that, "a*udio-feedback is much better than written feedback. It has strong emotion on the essay. Also I think it will bring the teacher more close to students."* Once you've made individual connections with several students, the sense of community can become very apparent in a classroom. Also, this student's reference to the "strong emotion" is something that can get lost in our written feedback. When I am talking into the recorder about a student's essay, I easily get excited about interesting parts in the essay, and I feel enthusiastic about helping the student improve his/her writing—this emotion very easily comes across in an audio recording. Also, when I get to a part that frustrates me—maybe because of what I see as lazy or poor writing—I am better able to turn my frustration into a constructive form of advice, something that I could not as easily do through written feedback; I would likely come off in a negative tone that might end up being useless or even counter-productive to the student I am trying to help.

Finally, audio feedback can be used to accomplish what might normally take place with written feedback and face-to-face conferencing combined. I think this student was a bit too excited that s/he didn't have to make a separate trip to my office to discuss their essay: *"I love how I got to converse about my essay without having to schedule an appointment!"* But in reality, this student has a good point. Even though I value one-on-one conferencing with students, I also

see the value of audio feedback as an alternative method. With audio feedback, there is potential to save a lot of time and cut out the need for setting up individual conferences with each student.

The benefit of audio feedback in helping to create a sense of classroom community and closer relationships between students and teachers has been found in studies with audio feedback in online environments (Oomen-Early et al.). But traditional classroom environments have shown this benefit as well. According to Sipple's 2007 study of audio vs. written feedback with 33 university writing students in traditional classroom settings, results showed that, "Audio commentary strengthened their perceived bond with the professor, whereas handwritten commentary sometimes damaged the bond" (24). The lack of clarity that students have mentioned about written feedback may be a contributing factor to a breakdown in student-teacher bonds. Because audio feedback does not require the same amount of interpretation on the part of students, the tone and message of audio feedback have less chance of being misinterpreted in a negative way by students.

Conducive to Revisions

Students in my study received their audio feedback as formative comments and suggestions aimed at helping them to revise and resubmit their essays as required final drafts. As the teacher who is giving students these audio feedback files, the usefulness of my feedback to students' revisions is a top priority. Above other advantages—even if students easily understood it and benefit from an enhanced sense of community, if students did not actually use my comments to revise their papers, the entire feedback process, of any kind, would be a waste of time. One particular benefit that students report, as the following student comment makes mention of, is the fact that audio feedback is separate from the physical essay itself, making it easier for students to listen to their comments while simultaneously revising their essays: *"The audio-feedback was great I was able to listen to his comments while looking at the paper. Oppose to having to read his comments and switch back and forth between comments and essay."* And the following student—while possibly admitting to

have hired some kind of *an editor* for their paper—also points out the advantages of having audio feedback during their revisions: *"I can listen and look over my paper while making notes. I can pause it and not have to worry about the editor loosing focus on my paper."* Both of these comments bring to the forefront audio feedback's ability to engage with students and their texts in ways that streamline the students' revising process by allowing them to listen to a teacher's comments at the same time that they begin revising their essay, making effective use of their time by combining both activities.

Finally, students often mention the diverse nature of audio feedback. As the teacher commenting on a student's paper, because I am not physically restricted to writing out my comments, it's much easier for me to explore various ideas for how students can apply the suggestions I give them about their paper, depending on their own preferences as a writer. This student comment highlights the *flexible* nature of audio feedback: *"In the feedback he gave us different examples and different ideas to add and I was able to choose one that fit me and my writing."* The flexibility of audio feedback also reinforces students' ownership of their writing. By offering multiple suggestions for how students can improve their writing, I communicate to students that *they* have the ultimate say about what choice to make for their revisions, thus giving them a significant sense of control over their writing.

A UK study done in 2013 with audio feedback showed that students valued audio feedback for "the ability to re-access and listen again and its ability to facilitate feed-forward learning." (Carruthers and McCarron 105). This *feed-forward* learning refers to a transferable kind of feedback that was designed to increase students' overall abilities as writers at the same time as helping them use their feedback to prepare for future writing assignments. A similar kind of feed-forward learning was reflected in student comments in my study in how they were able to apply their audio comments to a revised draft of their writing.

Drawbacks

Using audio feedback is not always as positive an experience for instructors as it often is for students. From my own experience, the drawbacks for a teacher looking to use audio feedback are primarily due to issues of practicality, time efficiency, and addressing lower order concerns in students' writing.

I suppose the practicality of using audio feedback depends on a few factors. Firstly, someone has to have a basic understanding of how to use computer technology in order to record and send audio comments to their students. For me, that wasn't much of an issue; not because I consider myself in any way tech-savvy, but because I used probably the simplest technology available. To record my feedback I used the built-in sound recorder installed on my computer, which has no more functions than start, stop, and save. Once recorded, I attached the file to an email or electronic message on our class webpage and sent it directly to each student. Done. Now, there are other high-tech options for audio feedback, some that even integrate the ability to annotate comments and record audio commentary, but those options likely require more specialized technology skills. The bottom line is that audio feedback is highly accessible to a very wide range of writing teachers, including those with high and low levels of tech-proficiency.

The more complicated part for me was in finding a suitable place to record the audio feedback. Because I share an office in a large department, I have to schedule certain times when I know I won't be disturbed. But that's never for sure with the possibility of pop-in visits by colleagues or students. As a result, I would often try to do my recordings in one of two places: a small cell-like room available for use from our university library, or the semi-quiet confines of my office at home. They both worked relatively well with the former lacking any windows and requiring me to carry along my laptop, while the latter meant that the audio feedback sent to my students might include the sounds of overexcited toddlers playing and screaming in the background.

Honestly, I'm still not sure about how time-efficient audio feedback really is in relation to written feedback. Some studies with

audio feedback have shown different results ranging from no significant time savings from audio feedback (Carruthers and McCarron; Martini and DiBattista) to significant time savings compared to written feedback (Ice, et al. "Using Asynchronous Audio Feedback"; Lunt and Curran). In Lunt and Curran's 2010 research that used audio comments with a group of 60 university students in the UK, comparing the time it took to *talk* with audio feedback with writing out comments for students showed that "one-minute of audio is equal to six minutes of writing" (761). By that math, I could complete 10 audio comments in just 10 minutes compared to an hour that it would take to write out those same comments. My own experience *does not* coincide with those kinds of time savings though. Even though I did my best to streamline the entire process, I felt that audio feedback took up much more of my time due to previewing, preparing, and finally recording my comments; I felt I needed time to formulate my response before actually recording. Perhaps I would be able to make audio feedback into a time-saving method by cutting down even more on the amount of prep-time that takes place before recording the audio feedback. In short, I believe that audio feedback has great *potential* for time-efficiency, while maximizing the other advantages it can offer—but this requires sticking to a very regimented feedback routine.

A final drawback of audio feedback is that it's not very conducive to addressing lower order concerns. Issues such as grammar and punctuation are easier to address with annotations directly on a piece of paper. Because of that, I often use a mix of written and audio feedback where my audio recordings primarily address content-related themes, while at the same time I address sentence-level errors on the student's physical essay.

Conclusion

Students in this study overwhelmingly preferred having audio over written feedback for their writing. Reasons for these preferences were primarily because students felt that audio feedback was easier to understand, created a personal connection

between students and me, and helped them in making revisions to their writing. However, the results from this study are small and can't be taken to generalize that audio feedback works well for all students—because it doesn't (Bilbro, Iluzada, and Clark; Carruthers and McCarron; Ice et al. "An Analysis of Students' Perceptions"; Olesova et al.). To that end, one option for writing instructors to consider in choosing how to respond to students' writing is "to offer students a taste of different types of feedback for them to choose from, thus responding to students' individual needs" (Morra and Asís 78). This is something that I have had success with in recent writing classes, and I think that students value the ability to choose from various feedback methods. Before I give students these options, I always have a small class discussion to go over the basics of each type of feedback in order to give students the most information possible before they decide what feedback they want, and my students can always change their feedback preferences in future essays.

Additionally, there may be a significant novelty factor with audio feedback—for better or worse—that catches students' attention because it is usually the first time they have ever received personalized audio commentary about their writing from a teacher. This could mean that while initial use of audio feedback may prove successful with students, continued use may lose its original spark of interest as students begin to view it as just another form of feedback on their writing.

Be that as it may, the way we choose to communicate our feedback to students is one of the most important parts of the writing process (Straub) and may have effects on students' emotions and self-efficacy (Treglia). In other words, students should receive feedback that is conducive to positive revisions of their writing (Underwood and Tregidgo), and audio feedback has shown that it definitely *can* provide that kind of feedback for students.

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