

# EVALUATING WRITTEN WORK: WHAT IS BEST FOR STUDENTS?



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The task of evaluation falls on teachers in all disciplines. However, for teachers of French this task has a number of implications given that they are responsible for two important aspects directly related to their discipline: the consolidation of written language skills and the study of literary works (CEEC, 2001). Since this pedagogical act represents an essential dimension for college-level teachers (CSE, 1997), “it is important to understand the organic links that exist between teaching, learning and evaluation” (Ouellet, 2003, p.60) from a teaching perspective as well as from the perspective of competency-based learning.

It is in this spirit that we undertook a research project<sup>1</sup> in which we asked four teachers of French to mark the papers<sup>2</sup> of four of their students enrolled in the first general education French course. We then asked these sixteen students to write a second version of their papers in light of the comments made by their teachers who also marked this second version in order to see the changes between the two versions of the same text.

The goal of our research was to establish a list of comments that appear to be helpful to students.

## WHY THIS INTEREST IN THE UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS HAVE OF TEACHERS’ COMMENTS?

There are many indicators that can attest to the probable success of students in their college studies one of which is the general average at the secondary level (GSA). Another indicator of student persistence in college studies and of graduation is the successful completion of French course 601-101-04, the first in a sequence of four courses of general training in French. For purposes of this study, we worked with students that teachers believed to be “low-average” and whose grades, at the end of the 601-101 course, would be, according to the teachers, probably somewhere on either side of the passing grade which is still 60%. Our hypothesis was that an understanding of comments by these students could perhaps help them to perform better in subsequent written work and would increase their chances of success.

## WHAT DOES MARKING WRITTEN WORK INVOLVE?

Educational researchers are curious about what underlies the evaluation practices of teachers. To the question, “What does marking involve?” we propose this definition:

Marking student papers consists of reading the student’s paper, formulating written or oral comments which serve to indicate weak points and sometimes strong points, attributing a grade and also justifying the grade attained by the student. (Halté, 1984; Legendre, 1993, 2005; Roberge, 2001, 2006).

Even though writing comments on papers is the most widespread method of reacting to students’ written work, many teachers do not grasp the real pedagogical impact of the feedback they give to students in this way (Dohrer, 1991; Marcotte, 1993). The following questions arise regarding the marking activities of teachers. Are the comments always appropriate for the students? What do they offer to the students? Do the students understand the comments? A partial response to these questions consists of saying that teachers should teach students what a comment is, the role that it plays and how it can be useful for subsequent written work (Beck, 1982). To synthesize, here is the definition of a comment that we propose:

A comment can be defined as a fragment of dialogue between the teacher and the student. And this comment, which underlines the good and not so good aspects of a paper, appears on the student’s paper in a space reserved for this purpose: in the margin, heading, footer (Halté, 1984). These comments, whether long or short, deal as much with form as with text structure and content; they can be made in writing or orally (Roberge, 2001, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> The research was funded by PAREA from 2006 to 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Students wrote a literary analysis as a normal part of their French class.



What is important to understand about this definition is that anything written on a student's paper is a comment. Whether it is a line through a paragraph, an underlined word or an annotation written in the margin, all these indicators attest to the teacher's desire to transmit information to the students. However, few comments address the "how to" (Halté, 1984, Reuter, 1996; Roberge 2008) since comments are often used to justify the grade given (Halté, 1984). Nevertheless, comments could help students to focus on different parts of their papers and they might even help them to recall some of the strategies they have been taught: "Any comment should attempt to teach strategies which will transfer as the student writes other essays; but not all strategies can be taught at the same time." (Dobler and Amoriel, 1988, p.215). This observation shows that, beyond the grade and precise comments, it is desirable to teach strategies via the comments made on a student's paper; however, the comments made to students remain for the most part abstract or too general. It should come as no surprise therefore that the majority of students are mainly interested in their grades when they receive their corrected papers. They gauge the time the teacher spent on correcting their paper in terms of the number of comments made (Veslin and Veslin, 1992) and the grade given becomes the only expression of their success or lack thereof.

## WHAT COMMENTS ARE MADE TO STUDENTS?

Within the framework of our research project, teachers evaluated their students' papers using two modes of evaluation: the more traditional "paper and pencil" evaluation which consists of writing comments on the student's paper, and oral evaluation, which consists of an audio-cassette<sup>3</sup> recording of comments made out loud while reading the paper. In the latter case, only the signs or codes used to indicate errors appear on the paper. The written and oral comments made by the teachers were divided into seven categories as shown below in Table 1.

TABLE 1: THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF MARKING USED DURING EVALUATION (WRITTEN AND ORAL EVALUATION)

TYPE OF MARKING	WRITTEN MANIFESTATION	ORAL MANIFESTATION
1 Absence of comments	The teacher decides not to write anything (even if an error is detected).	The teacher decides not to say anything (even if an error is detected).
2 Marking of the error by the teacher	Writing on the word, between the lines, in the margin. Adding or crossing out letters, words, or parts of a sentence.	The teacher tells the student how to correct the error: e.g., "It is not 'oubliged' but 'obliged'."
3 Sign (or false code*)	Underlined word or sentence, question mark in the margin, stroke across a paragraph, a circle or square around text, a wavy line under words, etc.	Underlined word or sentence, question mark in the margin, stroke across a paragraph, a circle or square around text, a wavy line under words, etc. (WRITTEN SIGN)
4 Coded comment**	Codes referring to the quality of the language used (codes that can be understood by someone outside the class). E.g., "G" for grammar.	Codes referring to the quality of the language used (codes that can be understood by someone outside the class). (WRITTEN SIGN)
5 Exclamatory-interrogative comment	Varying in length, more or less helpful: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Who? What?"</li> <li>• "What do you mean?"</li> <li>• "Not really!"</li> <li>• "Really?"</li> </ul>	The teacher exclaims or asks a question: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "What were you trying to say?"</li> <li>• "Why did you say that...?"</li> <li>• "Well done! That was a good explanation!"</li> </ul>
6 Observation	Varying in length, more or less helpful***: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Paragraph poorly developed"</li> <li>• "Connection missing"</li> <li>• "Good connection"</li> <li>• "Way too many language errors"</li> </ul>	The teacher observes that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Your conclusion does not summarize your points in the same sequence."</li> <li>• "You have applied yourself in your writing."</li> </ul>
7 Improvement comment	Varying in length, suggestion or instruction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Connect the ideas together"</li> <li>• "Add an opening paragraph to your conclusion"</li> <li>• "To improve this paragraph, you should..."</li> </ul>	The teacher provides guidelines: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Reconstruct your fragmented subject"</li> <li>• "Add an opening paragraph to your conclusion"</li> <li>• "To improve this paragraph, you should..."</li> </ul>

See legend on page 29 for explanations pertaining to the asterisks.

<sup>3</sup> In order to make it easier to process our data during the research, the evaluation was recorded on an audio cassette. With today's technology it is possible to record on a CD or MP3 file using either Audacity or Sound Forge, two software programs designed for this purpose.



#### LEGEND FOR TABLE 1

- \* A “false code” is a sign left by the teacher (a circle or a line) that has a specific meaning. For example, the teacher may have decided to use a circle to indicate a vocabulary error while a verb within a rectangle could indicate that it is in the wrong tense. It is a “false code” because it is an arbitrary choice and there are no grammar rules that are referred to using geometric shapes.
- \*\* In contrast to the “false code”, the coded comment refers to a metalanguage of grammar rules: for example, using “VT” for verb tense provides a rule and a way of finding the relevant information in a linguistic work at the same time. In class a teacher would say, “Let’s look up the rules for verb tense” rather than, “Let’s look up the rules for the underlined or circled word”.
- \*\*\* A comment would be more helpful if it targeted a small section of the student’s paper (e.g., “poor indicator”) and clearly less helpful if it related to an error of greater magnitude (e.g., “poorly-developed paragraph”). The student would be at a loss as to how to respond to the latter comment.

An explanation is needed at this point. For mathematical reasons, a sign or coded comment may appear on the student’s paper even though the evaluation was made orally. The teacher must count the number of language errors based on the number of signs in order to be able to determine the grade to give for the “language” criterion of the different evaluation grids. All these comments, whether written or oral, have to do with language, text structure, content and the paper (as a whole). Table 2 categorizes the written comments as well as the oral comments made by the four teachers, based on these four observable elements.

The first observation that it is possible to make concerning the data presented in Table 2 is that there is a clear predominance of oral comments over written comments. This tells us that the oral medium allows for much more

information to be transmitted to students than comments that are written on their papers. In general, oral comments are also much longer than written ones given that, as human beings, we talk faster than we write. A more explicit comment (often longer) is therefore more helpful. What we can also observe is the preponderance of oral comments that are related to content compared to other types of comments.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMENTS

	LANGUAGE		STRUCTURE		CONTENT		TEXT		TOTAL	
	WRITTEN	ORAL	WRITTEN	ORAL	WRITTEN	ORAL	WRITTEN	ORAL	WRITTEN	ORAL
1. Absence	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Correction	-	-	0	0	5	0	0	0	5	0
3. Sign	-	-	7	0	10	0	0	0	17	0
4. Code	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5. Exclamatory	13	12	5	9	18	2	0	0	36	23
6. Observation	17	114	14	27	40	123	5	0	76	264
7. Improvement	13	18	10	9	10	76	0	0	33	103
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>390</b>
	<b>187</b>		<b>81</b>		<b>284</b>		<b>5</b>		<b>557</b>	

#### A FEW DEFINITIONS GIVEN BY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Before examining the understanding of comments that students have, we should define what counts as a good paper, taking into account the ultimate goal of all parties involved: that students produce a paper of good quality. Teachers and students have somewhat different points of view when it comes to this definition (Table 3).

TABLE 3: TEACHERS’ AND STUDENTS’ POINTS OF VIEW ON WHAT MAKES A GOOD PAPER

TEACHERS	STUDENTS
First criterion for teachers: a well-structured paper.	First criterion for students: the quality of language.
A good paper demonstrates the abilities of students to structure their ideas and to explain them in correct French.	Students do not see their paper as an integrated whole, but rather as several separate elements, the most important of which is the absence of errors.

For teachers and students alike, the concept of a piece of writing has more to do with the product than with the writing process; and their different perceptions show us that they are not in agreement as to what each group expects from the other. Teachers lean towards making comments on structure, while students expect comments on the quality of the written language. Moreover, Table 2 indicates that structure is one of the elements that received the fewest comments of the four elements observed. Of these elements, we might think that language appears to be the “simplest” given that there is little room for discussion regarding this type of error: the plural of “writer” will always take an “s”! However, the definitions that teachers and students give of language do not correspond (Table 4).



TABLE 4: DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE ACCORDING TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

TEACHERS	STUDENTS
All the characteristics of the French language: <i>orthographe d'usage, orthographe grammaticale, syntaxe, ponctuation and vocabulaire.</i>	Two elements of the French language characteristics: <i>orthographe d'usage and orthographe grammaticale.</i>

As we can see, teachers and students do not have the same perception of what counts as the quality of language in written work. The view of students is more reductive than the view that teachers have which encompasses all the elements of language. Therefore, it will come as no surprise if students do not understand certain syntax codes (linked to language) given that they do not consider syntax to be an element of language.

Another evaluation element is text structure (Table 5).

TABLE 5: DEFINITION OF TEXT STRUCTURE ACCORDING TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

TEACHERS	STUDENTS
Includes an introduction, development and a conclusion.	Includes an introduction, development and a conclusion.
Integration and proper presentation of quotations.	Content of quotations, of the development and the conclusion. Sentence structure and punctuation.

For teachers, text structure comprises only the inclusion of an introduction, development and a conclusion. For students, everything seems to be confused when it comes to text structure: the inclusion of elements such as what they have to say, sentence as well as paragraph structure and the inclusion as well as relevance of quotations. It is therefore not surprising that students tend to confuse that which relates to text structure (which is easily transferable from one written work to another) and what relates to content (which is harder to transfer from one written work to another) given the particularities of the work under study.

The third element to compare is the actual content of the literary analysis, depending on the work under study. Table 6 presents what teachers and students think about this.

TABLE 6: DEFINITION OF CONTENT ACCORDING TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

TEACHERS	STUDENTS
Explanatory links with the content of the text to be analyzed.	Explanatory links with the content of the text to be analyzed.
Explanations in the development regarding the content of the text to be analyzed.	Students hesitate in their definition of content: they do not know what falls under structure or content. For example, since we often tell them that information on the author is usually found in the introduction, they are not sure if Molière's date of birth falls under content (literary knowledge) or if it is an element of text structure (part of the introduction).

Students believe that content deals only with the links they make to the work under study for the purpose of the literary analysis. It is probably for this reason that they are reluctant to receive comments on the content of their analysis: they think teachers will question their understanding of the extract or the work, something that they consider to be very personal. They do not see why they should lose marks because they had a different understanding of the required text.

If teachers' and students' definitions of the different elements of a written assignment are not quite the same, their points of view on the definition of a good evaluation have more in common (Table 7, on the next page).

Overall, what is said by teachers is that it is a must to prepare students to do written assignments in order to help them to succeed and that comments are necessary to help them in their development. Students agree with this point of view, but they do not always know how to process the comments they receive on their papers. It is often the principle of trial and error that they apply. They hesitate about how they should say things and the teacher points out their awkwardness; students then write differently, often tentatively, without really being sure if they have done any better. Given that students are not able to prioritize the comments their teachers have written on their papers, the quantity of comments does not seem to be a good marking indicator.

*[...] teachers and students do not have the same perception of what counts as the quality of language in written work.*

Nevertheless, students are disappointed when there are few comments on their paper, as if teachers had not done their



job properly. In the student's mind, the quantity of comments is most of the time connected to a feeling of having received a fair evaluation.

**TABLE 7: POINTS OF VIEW OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ON THE DEFINITION OF A FAIR EVALUATION**

TEACHERS	STUDENTS
The purpose of evaluation is to show how students are progressing in their learning.	They want comments so they can improve – do better next time.
They aim for an improvement in the knowledge and the competencies of the students.	Students want to do better next time, but they feel a little helpless.
Marking is a heavy part of a teacher's workload.	They are aware of the amount of work that marking requires of teachers. They say they are aware of it, but they cannot quantify the number of hours their teachers spend marking.
They agree that students must prepare students to produce a written assignment.	They say they prepare themselves for what they have to do – even though they do not always properly identify the characteristics of a literary analysis.
They say that students do not always come to them when they have questions.	They we met said they do go to see the teacher when they have questions.
They want students to succeed.	They are not under the impression that teachers want to “fail them” – quite the contrary.

### WHAT MAKES A GOOD COMMENT?

In absolute terms, a good comment allows students to spot their errors, to identify and to correct them. Whether they are given in writing or orally, the purpose of comments remains the same: to explain what is not right with a paper and to help students to transfer this information to their future writing.

A previous study (Roberge, 1993) concluded that students obtained better results when they rewrote their texts if the comments received were given orally rather than in writing and this was corroborated in our 2008 study. Fortunately, students obtained better results on the second version of their papers for both modes of evaluation (written and oral). However, the degree of improvement was greater for papers that were evaluated orally (Table 8).

**TABLE 8: RESULTS OBTAINED IN VERSIONS 1 AND 2 ACCORDING TO THE MARKING MODE USED**

	VERSION 1	VERSION 2	POURCENTAGE OF INCREASE
<b>1993 Study</b>			
Written comments	63,7 %	75,7 %	+ 12 %
Oral comments	68,2 %	83 %	+ 14,8 %
Difference in favour of oral marking			+ 2,8 %
<b>2008 Study</b>			
Written comments	59,3 %	68,6 %	+ 9,3 %
Oral comments	59,1 %	71 %	+ 11,9 %
Difference in favour of oral marking			+ 2,6 %

When we asked students after they had written their second version, what percentage of their teachers' comments they believed they used, they answered an average of 73% when the evaluation was done in writing and an average of 80% when the evaluation was done orally and recorded. It is when we asked teachers the same question that we noticed the better use of oral comments: teachers said that their students took into account 52% of written comments and 68% of oral comments. So we can see that, according to both teachers and students, the latter are more likely to make use of oral rather than written comments.

### WHAT DO STUDENTS UNDERSTAND FROM THE COMMENTS?

In absolute terms, students say they understand the comments given by their teachers; however, they do not always know what to do with them. They can explain the comments, but they have no real strategy for making use of them, since their knowledge of the writing process is sorely lacking. At the same time, teachers are under the impression that students do not understand their comments. This situation is probably normal to some degree, since few of the teachers' comments effectively show the students what needs to be done to improve their work. Written comments are more often signs, codes or observations that do not necessarily indicate what the student should do. When it comes to oral comments, they consist mainly of observations and suggestions for improvement that do provide more information that the students do not always manage to use. The teachers we met all said that making comments on written work is a necessary evil in the marking process, but that they are somewhat dismayed by the students' lack of understanding of the comments they make, having the impression – and rightly so, as we just saw – that their comments are not being put to use. Could they be somewhat responsible for this situation? The students we met also all said that comments on their papers were necessary for their learning, but that they did not always understand what the teacher was trying to say. Could we be trying to square the circle, or to solve the unsolvable equation of the chicken and the egg?





## WHICH COMMENTS ARE HELPFUL AND WHICH ARE LESS HELPFUL?

Different types of comments do not all serve the same purpose in terms of what they should point out in the student's paper. For example, it is not the purpose of coded comments or of signs that point out a language error to provide guidelines for rewriting the text; their role is rather to identify a language error.

With their knowledge of grammar and syntax, students should be able to understand the errors noted and to correct them in the second version of their paper. This is why they want understandable codes to identify the language errors. Sometimes it is the meta-language itself that is at fault, given that students do not always understand such codes, even though they may refer to a sheet on which the teacher has written the codes and their meanings. The code allows students to correct their mistakes without always having to proceed by trial and error: "A 'V', it is clear, is a vocabulary error". Signs (circles, strokes, wavy lines, etc.) are less helpful for identifying language errors: students see that there is an error, but they are often incapable of recognizing the nature of the error. Teachers, for their part, hope that their corrections serve to help students improve their future written work. However, if students do not have clear codes that identify their language errors, how can they possibly identify which are the grammar rules that they have not yet mastered? They notice the overall number of their mistakes, but they are unable to stop repeating them.

In order to identify errors in text structure and content, teachers tend to use exclamatory-interrogative comments, observations and improvement comments, in both the oral and written forms.

### The exclamatory-interrogative comment

If it includes a precise question the answer to which will help students to improve a specific section of their paper, this type of comment can be seen to be a helpful comment that gives students rewriting guidelines; that is, to the extent that it is not too ironic which students do not understand very well and they are not very accepting of their teachers' irony.

### The observation

This type of comment, which basically states when something works or does not work in the paper, does not have the role of providing students with guidelines for rewriting the text. Furthermore, some comments are factual ("Wrong character name") and are therefore impossible to transfer to any other written project. It is often the observation that indicates when the student has done something noteworthy: "Good choice of indicator". Students always appreciate it when teachers point out their good points. The oral observation, the comment most often used in oral evaluation, allows teachers to comment on errors for which they would not otherwise provide written comments because to do so would take too long; for students, these oral comments are helpful because of the length of the explanations.

### Improvement comments

Improvement comments are the best understood, especially when they are given orally. However, they must target a limited aspect of the work and propose solutions to the student. This type of comment gives students more precise guidelines for rewriting

the text, insofar as it is not overly encompassing, that is that the guidelines are not too general. The fact of saying or writing, "Improve the appropriateness of your writing" provides little support given that it is not a very precise comment. However, because oral evaluation is more similar to teaching activities carried out in class, once they have made their comments, teachers have an easier time explaining to students what they need to do. The choices of words used by teachers are also important: a comment such as "Reformulate the overly heavy idea" does not help the student, given that the verb "reformulate" contains little direction. However, "Rewrite your conclusion by systematically taking up the main ideas developed in your paper" is a very helpful comment for students given the limited scope of the error detected and the guidelines provided for rewriting the text.

*Improvement comments are better understood, especially if they are given orally. However, they must target a limited aspect of the text and propose solutions to the student.*

Because of the quantity and the length of the formulated comments as well as their vocal characteristics (flow, intonation, etc.), the oral comment is more helpful for students. They really get the impression that their teachers are addressing them individually and that they are explaining various elements of their papers to them. They feel less "concerned" about written comments because they feel teachers "write the same thing for everyone". Helpful comments are often those that teachers have "reflected upon": these teachers know their students, their strong points and their weaknesses. It is when this – crucial – condition is met that teachers are able to make comments that are truly helpful.



Teachers also have to prioritize their comments, whether written or oral: not everything is worth saying. Being able to understand a comment in absolute terms and being able to take from it all the relevant information to be used in another written project are two very different activities. For instance, students may know a certain grammar rule; but, when faced with the many challenges of writing a paper (developing an idea, integrating a quotation, composing a sentence or paragraph), the knowledge or application of this rule can disappear. This is known as cognitive overload. Students also experience this overload when they receive their marked papers: how are they to manage all these written or oral comments from their teacher? How to prioritize them since they are not all of equal importance? How to understand them? How can knowledge of the processes of reading and writing be helpful? How can it be put to use? And how to produce a “good” paper? So many questions for which students do not always have the answers – answers which teachers do not provide within their comments.

*Because of the quantity and length of the comments as well as their vocal characteristics [...] the oral comment is more helpful to students.*

Of course, all formulated comments only become meaningful when teachers take the time in class to return the marked papers and to explain the comments that they have written or said.

## CONCLUSION

Students are faced with double trouble: added to teacher comments that do not provide real guidelines for rewriting is their flagrant lack of writing and revision

strategies. We must therefore get teachers to provide comments that will really give students specific guidelines by providing them with writing strategies and by giving them better tools for developing their writing strategies. It would also be important for teachers to keep abreast of research in the field of writing processes.

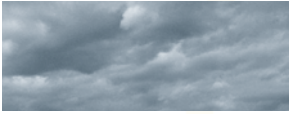
Because coded comments on language dealt with a specific and hardly negotiable part of a paper, they resulted in the greatest changes in students' papers. For written evaluation, it is the exclamatory comment that led to the highest number of effective corrections. However, most of these were minor and often aesthetic in nature. Observations and improvement comments were, for the most part, too few and not very helpful in getting students to make real changes. In any case, students do not know what to do to improve the content or the development of their ideas because written comments do not propose any real rewriting guidelines. Having to change a paragraph in the development section for example, demands an important cognitive effort on the part of the student who needs a helpful comment in order to do the work.

In the case of recorded oral evaluation, the observation and the improvement comment produced the best results, thanks to the length of the explanations provided by the teachers. Whether the evaluation was oral or written, having to change a paragraph requires the same amount of effort; but since oral comments offer more detailed and precise guidelines for doing so, students managed to achieve this more easily. Indeed, they were also reasonably successful at transforming observations into improvement comments which then allowed them to modify the content or structure of their papers.

In recent years, formative evaluation, the marking of one part of the paper, peer evaluation and self-evaluation have been activities that have modified teaching and learning practices associated with writing. So, in order to evaluate papers, one must read the text, detect its strong and weak points and make comments on the paper in a manner that will help the student to progress. The marking of written projects takes a considerable amount of time in the workload of French teachers and it has a major impact on the learning of students who are entering college. We must therefore ensure that the time invested by teachers is helpful to the students! In light of the success rates for course 601-101-04 in the different colleges, it seems appropriate to examine teachers' ways of doing things in an effort to help “medium-weak” students to be able to understand the teachers' ways of marking, to appropriate the meaning of comments and, ultimately, to make use of these comments in future written projects. When we observe the difference in the rates of student persistence in college studies and in the graduation rates of students who pass or fail the 601-101 French course, it goes without saying that we must find ways to support students so that they successfully complete this course.

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