

A marked improvement? A review of the evidence on written marking

Introduction and background

Marking is a central part of a teacher's role and is integral to progress and attainment. Previous research such as the studies of feedback reviewed in the Teaching and Learning Toolkit produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the Sutton Trust and Durham University – found that the provision of high-quality feedback led to an improvement of eight additional month's progress over the course of a year.

Marking is also extremely time consuming. It was identified as the single biggest contributor to unsustainable workload in the Department for Education's 2014 Workload Challenge. In 2016, the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, *Eliminating Unnecessary Workload around Marking*, suggested that providing extensive written feedback has become disproportionately valued by schools and that the quantity of feedback has become confused with quality. They recommended an approach based on professional judgement.

In spite of the centrality of the issue of marking, there is little high-quality research in this area; this review aims to begin to plug the gap. In order to inform the review, the EEF commissioned a national survey of teachers' marking practices through the NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus which was carried out in November 2015. A panel of 1,382 practising teachers from 1,012 schools completed the survey. Fifty-one per cent of the teachers were in primary schools and 49 per cent were in secondary schools. The full document includes case studies and a series of useful discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

Key points

Grading pupils' work

- Many school marking policies specify that pupils should be given a grade for their work, sometimes accompanied by formative comments. This practice is much more common in secondary schools where 52 per cent of respondents stating that they graded most or some work, compared to 12 per cent for primary teachers.
- Previous studies into this practice have mainly been conducted in schools and findings are fairly consistent.
- A British study in the 1980s found that pupils who were only given grades made less progress than pupils provided with other types of feedback.
- The practice of grading seems to have a different effect on different groups of pupils. A large longitudinal study from Sweden found that boys and lower attaining pupils who received grades at the end of each year made less progress than pupils who did not, whereas grading appeared to have a positive effect on girls. Researchers hypothesised that boys and lower attaining pupils were more likely to overestimate their performance and be demotivated by the grade while the opposite was true for girls. There is also evidence that grades can reduce the impact of formative comments.
- A study conducted by King's College London found that pupils of all abilities were less likely to act on feedback when grades were awarded alongside comments. This conclusion is confirmed by a number of other studies.

Corrections

- The key question with regard to corrections is the extent to which the teacher should spoon feed pupils the right answer. Most studies conducted in this area are from EFL and higher education. In the survey, teachers were asked how often they indicated mistakes in pupils' work without correcting them. This appeared to be a common practice. At primary level, 21 per cent of teachers did this with all pieces of work and 34 per cent with some pieces. The figures at secondary level were 32 and 31 per cent respectively.
- Most research distinguishes between a 'mistake' – something which a student can do correctly – and an 'error' which occurs when there is a lack of mastery or a misunderstanding. Research tends to suggest that correct answers should not be provided when a mistake has been made. One study of undergraduates found that providing the correct answer to mistakes was no more effective than not marking the work at all.
- In cases where errors are made, research suggests that the best approach is to remind the student of a related rule or to provide a hint or a question which leads them to a correction of the underlying misunderstanding.
- Many teachers use coded feedback, e.g. using 'sp' in the margin to indicate a spelling error. Research suggests that coded feedback is as effective as uncoded, i.e. it would appear that pupils understand the codes.



Thoroughness

- The thoroughness with which a piece of work might be marked can vary widely from a simple tick of acknowledgement to intensive forms of marking where every error is identified.
- No school-based studies appear to have explored the impact of different degrees of thoroughness with regard to marking, but there are a small number of studies from higher education and EFL.
- There is no strong evidence that simple acknowledgement marking contributes to progress.
- There is some evidence to suggest that when teachers mark essays, most of the comments relate to spelling, grammar and word choice rather than content, organisation or the construction of arguments.
- EFL studies have looked at the impact of 'selective marking' i.e. focussing on and correcting all errors in limited sections of a piece of work. This would appear to have a positive effect.

Pupil responses

- There is wide variation in how pupils are required to respond to teacher feedback. The key question considered in this section is whether or not pupils should be given designated time to reflect on marking in lessons - sometimes known as Dedicated Improvement Reflection Time (DIRT) - and at what point pupils undertaking extended pieces of work should be provided with feedback.
- The teacher survey showed that the provision of dedicated lesson time for reflection on feedback was a common practice. At primary level, 22 per cent of teachers adopted this practice for all pieces of work and 33 per cent for some pieces. The corresponding figures at secondary level were 28 and 30 per cent.
- The evidence base on the impact of student responses is limited, with most studies coming from higher education and reliant on student survey responses rather than direct examination of attainment.
- While no high-quality experimental studies appear to have looked at this issue, surveys in schools and higher education settings show that pupils do value the opportunity to respond to feedback, and that there is therefore a case for providing dedicated class time to consider and respond to marking. It would, however, be valuable to investigate the most effective ways of using such time; if pupils simply provide superficial responses, it is unlikely to improve outcomes.
- Some studies have considered when pupils should be provided with feedback about longer pieces of work. There is evidence that pupils who receive mid-project written feedback are more likely to act on it and find it helpful.

Creating a dialogue

- Schools have a range of options regarding how pupils are asked to respond to teacher feedback. Approaches include 'triple impact marking' whereby teachers provide a written response to student responses, and 'dialogic marking' in which a written 'conversation' is developed over time between teachers and pupils.
- The teacher survey indicated that the practice of triple marking is fairly common at both primary and secondary

level. Forty-seven per cent of primary teachers use it for some, most or all pieces of work with a corresponding figure of 49 per cent at secondary level.

- A small number of studies have been conducted in this area, although almost all rely on surveys rather than academic achievement as outcome measures. No high quality studies appear to have evaluated the impact of triple marking.
- Although it is difficult to reach conclusions about the impact of dialogic or triple impact marking, qualitative evidence suggests that such approaches merit further evaluation. For example, a US study which analysed 600 written feedback journals used in middle school literacy lessons concluded that the use of teacher questions in the feedback helped to clarify understanding and stretch pupils. No studies have compared the impact of written dialogue to verbal dialogue.

Targets

It is common for teachers to provide explicit targets for children, often expressed in terms of a 'wish' or 'even better if'. In the teacher survey, 89 per cent of primary teachers said that they set targets on some, most or all pieces of work and the corresponding figure for secondary teachers was 95 per cent.

Very few studies have focussed specifically on the impact of writing targets on work, although a number of studies have explored how useful pupils perceive targets to be. Wider evidence on effective feedback points to the importance of the specificity of feedback in impacting on performance. Studies from higher education have found that providing clear success criteria for a piece of work is associated with higher performance. It would therefore appear that setting clear targets in marking and reminding pupils of these before they complete a similar piece of work in the future is a promising approach which should be evaluated further.

- In some cases, targets may be more effective if pupils have a role in setting them, or are required to re-write them in their own words. Studies suggest that teachers can overestimate the degree to which pupils understand success criteria.

Frequency and speed

- The frequency of marking and the speed at which it is returned are key drivers of teacher workload. A small number of studies have been conducted on the speed of marking with EFL teaching, but there are no studies on the frequency of written marking.
- The studies looking at speed of marking in EFL have found that next lesson feedback had a positive impact on student progress, although the size of this impact has not been measured. The suggestion that faster feedback is more valuable is consistent with studies of verbal feedback.
- Given the limited evidence base related to speed and frequency, both issues should be considered along with other aspects of marking. For example, given the relatively weak evidence base for 'acknowledgement marking', it would not appear to be advisable to adopt a high-frequency or high-speed approach if it led to a decrease in the precision or depth of marking.

The full document can be downloaded from :

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/EEF_Marking_Review_April_2016.pdf