



STAGE 6 ENGLISH ASSESSMENT

Providing effective feedback

This is the latest in an ongoing series of articles on assessment of the new Stage 6 English syllabus. In this article we highlight the differences between past assessment practices and assessing within a standards-referenced framework, examine the elements of effective feedback and offer a workshop based on students' responses to a recent Year 11 assessment task.

Feedback on Stage 6 English assessment tasks has traditionally consisted of a mark with sometimes a general comment linking the student's response to the terms of the task. Now, in a standards-referenced framework, feedback in the form of a mark and summative comments makes it clear to students how well they have demonstrated achievement of the outcomes being assessed, addressed the criteria that they knew would be used in the marking and, where appropriate, met the guidelines.

Students are quite adept at interpreting their marks and inferring where the marks place them in the class or year rankings. Teachers help by providing an overview of the range and spread of marks in the group, so giving a context for the mark.

However, students need to be given time, support and direction to read and think about the comments. Otherwise, many will simply celebrate or bemoan their mark, check their current aggregate and then file the task away in the dim recesses of their folders.

Teachers help students by providing verbal feedback to the class as a whole, discussing and emphasising the main points made by the assessors. They then either speak to some or all of the students separately, or invite and welcome students' requests for clarification or advice. Throughout this process, teachers focus on the outcomes and criteria, showing students how and where they did and did not take advantage of the opportunities offered by the task to demonstrate mastery of the outcomes.

Features of effective feedback

- **Effective feedback is specific.** It identifies where and how students have demonstrated achievement of the outcomes and where and how they have fallen short. With standards-referenced marking, it is possible to explain exactly how more marks could have been earned.

Summative comments such as, "To get a better mark in this paper you had to ..." or "If you had compared these two aspects ... rather than just described them you would have been awarded a higher mark for this assignment" are much more informative than just being given a mark. In most cases this will not be a new thing for teachers to do, as we have always done it. However, it is even more meaningful in a system where the meaning of the mark does not change as a consequence of the performance of other students. We can finally say, "If you do this ... this will happen", rather than "If you do this and others do something not as well, then your mark will increase." This aspect of a standards-referenced assessment model cannot be over-estimated.

Jim Tognolini, *A Standards referenced approach to assessment for the new HSC*, July 2000.

A copy of this paper is available on the New HSC web site. Go to <http://www.newhsc.schools.nsw.edu.au/> and select the *Resources* button.

- **Effective feedback is based on the criteria that are part of the assessment task.** Well-trained and well-organised students know how to address the criteria in their response to the task and, in so doing, how to demonstrate their achievement of the outcomes being assessed. The teachers then show in their marking feedback that they have based their judgment and comments on the requirements of the task and how these requirements are linked to the outcomes and the criteria, often quoting directly from the task and the criteria in their running comments.

Effective feedback also points out where students have missed opportunities to address important aspects of the criteria. Teachers use the opportunity provided by the feedback to train students to perform well in assessment. This includes issues like being aware of the outcomes being assessed, addressing all of the criteria and all aspects of the question, using time wisely and attending to basic matters of presentation.



- **Effective feedback is honest, balanced and sensitive.** It recognises strength and weakness in the same proportion as teachers have identified strength and weakness in the text. Both common sense and equity require that the mark and comments deliver the same message; for example, telling a student in a summative comment that a text awarded 5/20 is a “fine effort” is unhelpful, patronising and inaccurate. Such a comment causes a student to lose face as much as does a destructively critical comment. Students benefit more where the comment shows where the student has earned the five marks and what needed to be done to earn the other fifteen marks. When feedback is clear, honest and supportive, students can recognise what they have achieved, and they are more likely to reflect on how to do better in future tasks.

- **Effective feedback contributes to students’ learning.** It identifies the extent to which they have (and have not) achieved course outcomes. It also provides them with information about which particular skills, knowledge and understandings they need to attend to. Feedback works best when students are given the chance in class to think on and ask about the comments. When the feedback is written in a professional, supportive tone, students are much more likely to value the message, re-read it and reflect on how to use the advice in future assessment tasks.

- **Effective feedback is time-efficient.** It takes time to formulate feedback, and this is necessary and valuable time. What needs to be said in the feedback emerges during the marking process as teachers read and respond to texts, discuss issues with fellow markers, consult the outcomes, criteria and guidelines and allocate a mark.

Faculties are developing systems for helping teachers make best use of time. One such strategy is to provide form sheets that teachers fill in while they are marking and then give to students as feedback. These form sheets might show the outcomes or the criteria, with space nearby for teachers to comment specifically on students’ texts in terms of these outcomes or criteria.

Another approach is to organise feedback according to the marking guidelines. Some faculties construct a grid that shows the guidelines and either the marks or a descriptor for each set of marks; for example, instead of the mark range, 13-15, the feedback sheet shows “Excellent” or “Outstanding”; for 10-12, “Commendable effort” and so on. The marker then ticks the box at the appropriate place to indicate how well the student did on each guideline. A mark and

summative comment reflecting the distribution of ticks are then placed at the bottom of the sheet.

Having all teachers use a standard format for feedback minimises duplication, supports consistency and makes the feedback accessible to the students. Students get used to reading the form and they soon realise that to succeed they need to address all the outcomes, criteria or guidelines that are made explicit when they are first given notice of the task.

Another strategy is to provide teachers with a bank of comments that relate directly to the task and reflect the criteria; teachers choose from these as appropriate for the summative comment.

Workshop

This workshop is intended to take English teachers through the process of providing effective feedback in a standards-referenced framework.

The material for the workshop consists of two sample tasks, two sample responses, and sample feedback on one of the responses. The tasks formed part of the sample assessment task published in the previous issue of **CURRICULUM SUPPORT for teaching in English 7-12** (2000 Vol. 5, No. 3) . They are reprinted below for your convenience.

STEPS IN THE WORKSHOP

1. Provide all teachers with a copy of the two sample tasks, the outcomes being assessed and the criteria being used to mark the tasks.
2. Ask teachers to discuss the assessment tasks, the outcomes and criteria and to develop a set of marking guidelines (or use the guidelines published in **CURRICULUM SUPPORT for teaching in English 7-12**, 2000 Vol. 5, No. 3)
3. Have teachers read *Response to Task 1* and *Feedback on response to Task 1*.
4. Ask teachers in pairs or small groups to discuss the feedback and its usefulness in supporting students in demonstrating achievement of the outcomes being assessed.
5. Have teachers read *Response to Task 2* and, in pairs or small groups, list feedback they would provide for this student.
6. Discuss as a whole group the possible implications for follow-up teaching and faculty organisation from the workshop activity.



The other fairies snickered from their beds. However Esther didn't pay any attention to them. She got laughed at so often that she didn't notice anymore. Instead, she stared sadly down at her green vest with the white wings attached. She had promised herself that this semester she would try harder to remember to wear them, but she was forgetful. Maybe if she had some prettier ones like the others ... no, that was impossible.

She was also upset that she had annoyed Miss Nix. She had always admired the wise old fairy and had learned much under her guidance.

Esther redressed, carefully pushing her wings out of the hole in the back of her dress. She then walked out of the school gates and down the road. She walked for what seemed like hours until she finally arrived at a small secluded waterfall and lagoon. So secret was this quiet little place that as far as Esther knew, only two fairies knew that a swim would help her think.

She undressed, taking off her wings then quickly put her dress back on — then folded the thin vest and dainty wings and placed them on a large rock. The water was icy cold on her delicate skin. She lay floating on the surface of the water, mesmerised at the feeling of all her problems sinking to the bottom of the lagoon.

It was some time before Esther dragged herself out of the water. She was waterlogged so wrung her dress out then wiped herself on a large leaf. As she started wandering off, Esther remembered her wings and briskly walked back to get them.

They weren't there. Nowhere to be found. Now she was in for it. How many times had Miss Nix told her not to take off her wings outside the dorm? With all the different punishments she could imagine getting spinning through her head, Esther trudged back to school. Unsure what to do when she got back, Esther made her way to the dormitory, lay on the bed and started sobbing.

Her best friend, Georgette, looked up from her jigsaw. It wasn't often Esther cried. Her scatterbrained friend had grown so thick-skinned when it came to doing something wrong so something serious must have happened. She stood up, and perched on the edge of the bed. "What's the matter, Esther?"

"Oh Georgy, I went for a swim by our waterfall and I'm going to get into so much trouble," cried Esther "and I looked everywhere for them — really I did, and I'm going to get a F this semester for practical because I don't have my wings to, and ..."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Georgette was now really confused "Don't have your wings? Went for a swim? What the ... hang on, I know. You went for a swim at the waterfall, took off your wings so they wouldn't get ruined and now you've lost them. Am I right?"

"Yes" Esther gulped "And now I'm going to annoy Miss Nix again"

"Well we'd better go and talk to her about it, she'll know what to do." Georgy gave Esther a quick hug and helped her to her feet.

After an hour's discussion in the headmistress's office, they both walked back into their room, their faces shining with delight. "I knew Miss Nix would help" said Georgy "And to think that you and I will meet Mr Lenny. He is *the* most magical giant in the forest, you know. Fancy Miss Nix coming up with such a good idea"

"Yes, and he is the only one who can issue me with new wings"

"Uh huh, I'll have to thank him for mine if I get a chance. "If I ever lost mine, I don't know what I'd do — they're so pretty" Georgette looked proudly at the reflection of her wings in the mirror but then noticed the time "Oh my gosh, look at the time. We're supposed to meet Miss Nix out the front in a minute — and just look at my hair. We better hurry."

Miss Nix was waiting by the gates when they arrived. "Come girls, we shall have to hurry" the headmistress said "It will be dark soon. Esther, you will have to take one of the giant leaves. I know it is highly irregular but we need to get there quickly. Have you learned how to fly one yet? Just stand on it and say 'Go'. OK? It's quite easy."

By the time they arrived at Mr Lenny's drab and lonely castle, Esther had mastered the art of leaf flying, only falling off twice. They landed and knocked on the door. An old wrinkled ogre with a long, greying beard and glasses perched on top of his head opened the door and squinted out.



“Who’s there? You’re not selling anything, are you?”

Mr Lenny, it’s Miss Nix from the Fairies Grammar School for Girls. Ummm, one of my students seems to have misplaced her wings. Would you be so kind as to issue her with a new pair?” Knowing fully well that Mr Lenny had a quick temper and that he wasn’t worried about using his size to teach insolent fairies a thing or two about manners, Miss Nix made sure that she always used her most polite tone to him.

“Ah, Miss Nix. Sorry but I seem to have lost my spectacles and didn’t recognise you. Could you just quickly help me find them?”

Once he had found his glasses and had asked Esther a lot of questions, the old wizard led the fairies down many different hallways until they came to a glittering room. Esther and Georgette stared around open mouthed. Hundreds of wings, in every colour of the rainbow lined the walls.

“I though maybe these would suit you” Mr Lenny held out a pair of magnificent green and red wings. Esther couldn’t believe it!

After that, Esther tried even harder to not be forgetful. She literally passed the semester with flying colours. In her spare time, she goes to visit Mr Lenny and now is in the process of brightening up the castle. And Miss Nix now only has to complain about one thing: “Esther, how many times do I have to tell you — do *not* go to bed with those wings on. They will get ruined. You really are a most forgetful fairy when you want to be”

Feedback on response to Task 1

| Criteria | Comment (+) | Comment (-) |
|--|---|---|
| (a) use of language which is effective and appropriate for purpose and audience | Realistic dialogue, esp. differentiating Esther and Miss Nix. Skilful use of colloquial idiom. Clever conceit: “She literally... flying colours.” Good strong verbs, especially early in the text. | Inaccuracies in punctuation and indentation in direct speech. |
| (b) development of an idea, issue or theme | Cohesive narrative with well developed introduction, complications and whimsical resolution. Sustained focus on Esther in plot structure and narrative voice. | |
| (c) creation of a fresh and/or original piece of writing | Clever manipulation and blend of fairy-tale and school adventure. Traditional sub-genres with contemporary feel. Entertaining blend of fantasy and reality; e.g. the problem of being a winged creature wearing a dress. | |
| (d) reflection on your own draft writing and development of it into a completed piece of writing | Editing tightened prose, improved sentence structure and strengthened words, e.g. adjectives. | |
| | | Mark: 13/15 |



TASK 2

Dialogue or script writing

Select a photograph, drawing or painting that contains two or three characters and items, for example, people, animals and inanimate objects. You must include either a clear photocopy or the original image with your response. Write the dialogue that might take place between these characters.

Length: 500 – 750 words

Task 2 criteria

You will be marked on how effectively you demonstrate, through your text and the draft, the following:

- use of language which is effective and appropriate for purpose and audience
- development of an idea, issue or theme
- creation of a fresh and/or original piece of writing
- reflection on your own draft writing and development of it into a completed piece of writing.

Response to Task 2

Early draft

Osiris: You mean to tell me that my brother's fate in his next life is up to me?

Ma'at: ~~Yeah~~ Yeah. But you can't ^{and all that} be biased just because he's your brother. You have to analyse all the facts and judge fairly.

Osiris: I've never had to do all that before - analyze the facts that is.

Ma'at: Yes - well, we do things ^{a bit} differently here. ~~And you know everyone is equal. It doesn't matter what their social status was on earth, just whether they were good or evil.~~ ~~Other than pharaohs, you, and as everyone is equal, it doesn't matter what their social status was on earth, just whether they were good or evil.~~ ~~And you know everyone is equal. It doesn't matter what their social status was on earth, just whether they were good or evil.~~

Bes: You'd have to live with the decision. ^{that might be impossible for you but you mean!}

Osiris: If I get to reincarnate ~~that~~ ^{all these people} though, how come there are so many people here.

Bes: Ma'at and I were to look after things here until someone worthy became King, and - well - we kind of

**Version submitted**

Characters: Osiris—King of the dead and Judge of the underworld
Bes and Ma'at—Osiris' protective falcons

Osiris was "King of the dead" and "judge of the underworld" in ancient Egyptian mythology. Osiris was a good Pharaoh who was murdered by his evil brother, Seth. Eventually, his son Horus avenged his father's death and Osiris was brought back to life as mummiform king of the underworld. The falcons Bes and Ma'at are appointed to assist and protect the king in his new environment.

Scene 1: We find ourselves in the underworld of Ancient Egypt, people everywhere going about everyday life.

(Osiris, Bes and Ma'at enter)

Ma'at: Are you settling in all right Osiris?

Osiris: Yes, Yes fine

Bes: Do you know who the latest member of the underworld is? Who the first person you'll have to judge is?

Osiris: No, I haven't yet. But I'm sure you two would be so kind as to tell me.

Ma'at: It's Seth

(Osiris stops. Bes and Ma'at stop too)

Osiris: (disbelievingly): My brother Seth?

Ma'at: The one who killed you? That's right.

Osiris: You can't be serious

Bes: Dead serious in fact.

Ma'at: Why would we say otherwise?

Osiris: (quietly): What happened to him?

Ma'at: Your son Horus avenged your death last night

Bes (calmly): From what I hear, it was pretty much slice and dice.

Osiris: Let me get this straight. My brother killed me so my son killed my brother. Is that correct?

Bes: That's right. And now you get to judge for the first time at Seth's trial.

(All start walking again)

Osiris: OK. So what do I have to try him for?

Ma'at: To how good or bad he was during his life on earth.

Osiris: And how exactly do I do that?

Bes: You will have to weigh his heart on the scales of justice. Don't worry, the other gods Anubis and Thoth will help. Then you decide what he gets reincarnated as.

Osiris: You mean to tell me my brother's fate in his next life is up to me?

Ma'at: Yeah. But you can't be biased because he is you're brother. You have to analyse all of the facts and make your decision on that and judge fairly.

Osiris: I've never had to do all that before — analyse the facts and all that.

Ma'at: Yes, well, we do things differently here

Bes: And you have to live with that decision. Well, that might be a bit impossible for you but you know what I mean.

Osiris: If I get to reincarnate all these people (waves towards people), how come there are so many people here?

Bes: (sheepishly): Ma'at and I were left to run this joint until someone worthy — that would be you — became king and, well, we kinda got over our heads. Some people aren't reincarnated either. I mean, you couldn't exactly be the king of the dead if there were no dead people, could you? Who stays is up to you too.

Ma'at: Sure you can do the job?

Osiris: I think I will be able to handle it.

Bes: (All start walking off stage): Great! Now I suppose we had better get to work, your highness. We've got a busy few days ahead of us, what with meeting the other gods tomorrow and Seth's trial the next day. (He and Ma'at exit but Osiris stops)

Osiris: Meeting the other gods? You didn't tell me about that before! Why do I have to meet all of them? (starts shouting) Bes?! Ma'at?! I demand you come here at once! Hey, did you hear what I said? (exits)

End of scene. Curtain draws for change of scenery