

Enhancing Student Engagement and Writing in Language Education

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Abstract

The topic of eliminating vague terms in student writing is used to exemplify three powerful instructional methods in language education: extensive instructor feedback, iterative draft writing, and student peer review. Together, these three teaching methods increase clarity of student writing *and* reduce the considerable time needed for effective instructor feedback. The instructor provided biweekly feedback on cumulative drafts written by each individual student. Instructor feedback drew student attention to vague pronouns with one-to-many representations (e.g., “this” and “that” [i.e., “ini” and “itu” in Bahasa Indonesia]). Students removed vague terms, edited sentences with more descriptive terms, and wrote a new section for their next draft. The process of instructor feedback and student editing and adding new writing was repeated throughout the semester. Near the end of the semester, students use their knowledge and writing skills in a structured peer review guided by a rubric. Ninety percent of students claimed removing vague terms was the most important writing strategy that they had learned during their academic careers. The three instructional methods of instructor feedback, student cumulative practice with writing, and student peer review apply to a variety of subjects, topics, and themes with a goal of improving student writing in language education.

Keywords: teaching methods, peer review, writing practice, instructor feedback, and language education

1. Introduction

Improving written communication skills is important in language education programs and several other academic programs such as accounting (Riley & Simmons, 2016), medicine (Melvin, Connolly, Pitre, Dore, & Wasi, 2015), healthcare (Vermeir et al., 2015), and teaching

(Martin & Penrod, 2006). Instructors have attempted to improve students’ writing by attending to spelling, grammar, punctuation, and clarity. Clarity is usually sought by decreasing wordy sentences, using active verbs in place of passive verbs, maintaining parallel ideas, and avoiding shifts in tense (see Riley & Simmons, 2016). Distinguished Indonesian Professor A. Chaedar Alwasilah wrote, “College writing

should be taught in relation to the content of individual experience, namely student's subject area. Writing then provides a particularly welcoming context for thinking deeply about their field of study" (Alwasilah, 2014, p. 235).

Learning goals for language education involve writing plainly, thinking clearly, and speaking simply. The relationship between writing and thinking was captured by Oscar Wilde (Irish poet and writer 1854–1900), "If you cannot write well, you cannot think well; if you cannot think well, others will do your thinking for you." A famous United States statesman, Benjamin Franklin, summarized the relationship between writing and individual experience, "Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing." Writing can provide evidence of a person's current knowledge, skills, experiences, and thinking.

Approaches to Writing Well

Three powerful instructional methods in language education are described in

this paper and in their book, *Empowering Higher Education in Indonesia* (also Bahasa Indonesia version—*Memberdayakan pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia*) by Prof. A. Chaedar Alwasilah and Prof. Judith Puncochar (2016). These three teaching methods enhance college students' writing: extensive instructor feedback, iterative draft writing, and student peer review. This paper describes two research studies. In the first study, instructor feedback is used to focus student attention on elimination of vague English pronouns (e.g., it, there, here, what, those, these, that, and this), often followed by a verb (e.g., "This is an example of *what* is going on."). Students practiced writing by editing seven iterative drafts throughout the semester to create a capstone final paper. Students engaged in a structured peer review of their fourth draft (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the peer review instrument). A second study was conducted to try to decrease the amount of time needed for effective instructor feedback. The study compared the influence of instructor oral feedback vs. instructor written feedback on students' use of pronouns in successive drafts.

Elimination of Vague Pronouns

The framework for understanding vagueness draws from Bertrand Russell's address before the Jowett Society in Oxford on November 25, 1922. Russell urged his listeners *not* to mistake the properties of words for the properties of things. Vagueness is a powerful characteristic of language, *not* of things. Vagueness applies to the words used to describe one's knowledge and representations of things (e.g., a photograph, map, or observations). Any description of one's knowledge or thinking is vague, but vagueness is not inherent in the actual things described. Vagueness is inherent in language. All language is vague, and all written communication is vague. Hence, from this perspective, elimination of all vagueness is not possible. However, surely, striving to reduce vagueness in students' writing is a worthwhile endeavor.

A word or representation of language is vague when the representation is

one-to-many. Pronouns in the English language such as "it", "that", "this", or "what" are examples of one- to-many representations (e.g., "it helped", "that is acceptable", and "what is happening").

Without a referent or context, pronouns have an exceptional degree of vagueness. Just as scale matters to the relative clarity of a map, the extent of one-to-many representations matters to the clarity of written expression.

Students tend to use a considerable number of vague pronouns in their English writing, such as "what", "it", and "this" followed by a verb (e.g., "this helps students learn"). Vague pronouns allow students to write about concepts and related contexts without clarifying their understanding of either the concepts or contexts. Vagueness is such a powerful characteristic of language that students might be surprised by instructor feedback to eliminate vague terms and write with more clarity. Yet, the goal of many academic programs is to improve the clarity of written communication. Reducing vagueness is thought to promote clarity and

understanding of course concepts, which could increase student performance and program accountability.

A. Method

This research consists of two studies. Results follow each study. The first study examined whether providing instructor feedback to eliminate vague pronouns would increase the clarity of students' writing over an academic semester. The second study investigated whether oral

instructor feedback to an entire class could be as effective as instructor written feedback to individual students to improve students' writing clarity..

Study 1 Design

Participants were 86 pre-service teacher candidates who were enrolled in a teaching certification program and 36 professional teachers and administrators who were enrolled in a master's degree program at a regional United States university. Participants wrote at a proficient level, as determined by passing scores on a

Professional Readiness Examination in writing.

Throughout the semester, students submitted seven drafts of a capstone paper. The capstone paper provided evidence that pre-service teacher candidates and master's degree candidates were able to apply educational theories, analyze their observations of classroom students' learning and behaving with high quality knowledge expertise, and write with a professional command of written communication. Each draft consisted of approximately one to two single-spaced pages of new writing (or two to four double-spaced pages of new writing) and carefully edited sections of previous writing guided by instructor feedback. In each student's

draft, the instructor highlighted vague pronouns, such as "this", "it", "there", "those", "what", and "these" followed by a verb. The ctrl+h function in Microsoft Word was used to find and highlight specific vague pronouns. Instructor feedback often included yellow highlighted vague pronouns and several comment bubbles

with statements to draw students' attention to next steps in editing: *"Rewrite all sentences with highlighted vague pronouns throughout your paper for greater clarity in professional writing."*

The teaching philosophy of mastery learning was used in this study. "Mastery learning" includes high self-expectations for success, additional chances to demonstrate knowledge, and mutual respect of learning for students and the instructor. Students are expected to attain competence in course concepts and improve their professional writing abilities. A student who does not know a concept on Monday and demonstrates the concept on Wednesday is able to earn Wednesday's grade. Mastery learning contributes to a process through which students expand their writing skills, support their peers' development, achieve foundational knowledge of educational processes, and become lifelong learners. Several educational researchers champion mastery learning as a teaching

method to increase student success (Block, Efsthim, & Burns, 1989; Guskey, 2010). However, redoing work to demonstrate mastery could lead to frustration and falling behind in course assignments. These concerns are moderated by placing major assignments early in the semester, working on assignments in segments, providing substantive feedback, and allowing sufficient time for mastery. On rare occasion, a student might request to forego mastery for a lower score. Students' comments indicate the positive impact of mastery learning, and students continue to strive and receive full credit for achieving mastery.

Students were required to eliminate highlighted vague pronouns. If a student did not eliminate vague terms, the paper was returned for editing before the student received points for their capstone assignment. Multiple rewrites were possible, but only a few students needed extra chances to edit their drafts. No points were deducted for use of vague pronouns; however, final capstone papers were not accepted until all highlighted vague pronouns were eliminated from the paper.

The research had *no* impact on the grades of the students. The instructor expected students to eliminate all highlighted vague pronouns.

Students wrote Capstone Draft 1 before receiving instructor written feedback. The instructor provided written feedback on Draft 1. Students then edited Draft 1 based on instructor written comments and eliminated highlighted vague pronouns *before* writing the new sections of Draft 2. The instructor provided feedback on the entirety of Draft 2, including the edited version of Draft 1 and newly written sections of Draft 2. Students edited and reviewed previous writing to eliminate highlighted vague pronouns *before* writing new sections of Draft 3, and then students submitted Draft 3.

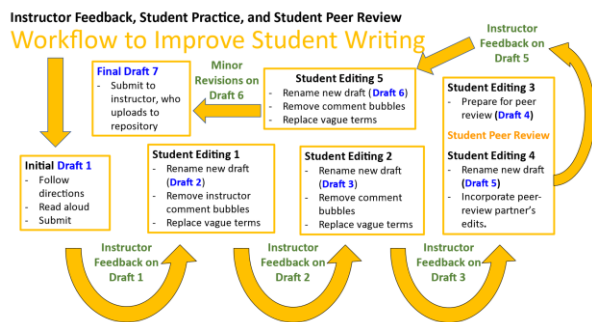
Students edited Draft 3 and prepared Draft 4 for student peer review. Student peer review offered students an opportunity to engage with a peer colleague, demonstrate their knowledge of course concepts, and practice their newly honed writing

skills. Peer review also provided a break for the instructor in the biweekly cycle of providing written feedback to students. After student peer review, students received feedback on their draft and incorporated the feedback into an edited Draft 5 for instructor written feedback. Draft 6 was the students' edited capstone paper with the professional writing goal of writing with no vague pronouns in the final paper. Instructor feedback on Draft 6 usually resulted in minor revisions for the Draft 7 Final Capstone, which the instructor uploaded to the university's repository for program evidence of student learning outcomes.

Figure 1 exemplifies the three instructional methods of extensive instructor feedback, iterative draft writing, and student peer review across a single semester. Instructor feedback is in green font, student iterative editing is in black font, and student peer review is in orange font. The instructor uploaded the final capstones to the university's department repository for evidence related to program assessment of student learning outcomes.

Figure 1. *Workflow management using three*

instructional methods of biweekly instructor feedback, student practice writing, and student peer review across a single semester.



Study 1 Results

The frequency of vague pronouns in students' writing decreased noticeably with each successive draft. The final Draft 7 capstone contained no vague pronouns. Students wrote self-reflections on their writing at the end of the semester. Ninety percent (90%) of participants reported an increased awareness in the importance eliminating vague pronouns on writing for clarity. The following three students provided evidence representative of instructor feedback

effectiveness on increasing writing clarity by eliminating vague pronouns in professional writing.

Student 1. *“While I write now, I find myself using a vague term, but I stop and ask myself, ‘How can I eliminate this vague term to make my paper sound better?’ This type of self- reflection I have never done before, and I see a big improvement in the tone of my writing.”*

Student 2. *“I think that my writing skills have improved the most during this semester. Constantly having to eliminate vague terms from my Capstone Field Report has allowed me to see these vague terms before they are pointed out to me. My increased ability in professional writing skills has increased my confidence in expressing my reflections in a way that not only makes sense to me, but also makes sense to others reading my material. Another factor that leads me to believe my writing skills have developed maturely relates to my ability to relate theory to practice. I am now able to put into words why a situation played out the way the situation did.”*

Student 3. *“At the start of this project I did*

not think that I would make it through with the amount of success that I have. My professional writing style has transformed. My ability to write professionally has improved in ways that I never thought it would, but I still have considerable room for improvement. My greatest development is that I now write more specifically, leaving out vague terms. My words seem to flow, which makes my work easier to understand. I believe that my ability to write professionally has advanced before my own eyes.”

Considerable time is needed for instructor feedback on drafts submitted every two weeks. To reduce instructor feedback time, a research study investigated whether oral instructor feedback to the entire class could be as effective as instructor written feedback to individual students to improve students' writing clarity.

Study 2 Design

At the start of a new semester, 40 pre-service teacher candidates completed

a one-page written assignment with three associated drafts. The instructor provided feedback to each individual student and highlighted vague pronouns. Student writing was examined for vague pronouns under three conditions of *no feedback* for the first draft, *oral feedback only* for the second draft, and *highlighted vague pronouns with comment bubbles* for the third draft. Two trained research assistants counted the number of highlighted vague pronouns in each of the three drafts. The number of vague pronouns was analyzed for the three consecutive drafts.

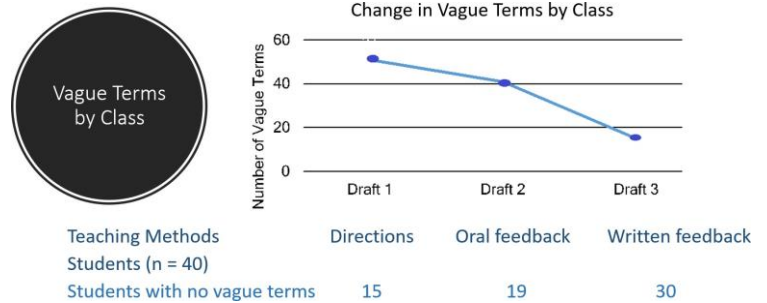
Quantitative results were determined for instructor feedback under the three conditions. Results were announced in class.

Study 2 Results

Interrater reliability of the two trained research assistants was measured with Cohen's kappa ($K = 0.923, p < .001$). Fifteen of the 40 students (37.5%) had no vague pronouns in their first draft under the *no instructor feedback* condition. After receiving *verbal instructor feedback* on the elimination of vague pronouns, four additional students (10%) had no vague

pronouns in their drafts, bringing the total to 19 students who wrote drafts with no vague terms (47.5% of the students). On the third draft, 11 additional students (an increase of 27.5%) had no vague pronouns, resulting in 30 students (75.0% of the class) who wrote with no vague pronouns after receiving no instructor feedback, verbal instructor feedback, and written instructor feedback and highlighted vague pronouns. The number of students who wrote with no vague pronouns on their third draft doubled from 15 to 30 students following instructor written feedback.

Counting vague pronouns across the 40 initial papers *without instructor feedback* added to 51 vague pronouns for the class. The number of vague pronouns ranged from 0 to 6 vague pronouns per paper. Following *verbal instructor feedback only*, an edited resubmission resulted in a total class count of 41 vague pronouns. *Written instructor feedback and highlighted vague*



pronouns on an edited third draft resulted in a total class count of 15 vague pronouns across the 40 students and 3 drafts. A student submitted a first draft with five vague pronouns and a third draft with five vague pronouns, so one student accounted for 1/3 of the vague pronouns in the third draft.

Figure 2. Types of instructor feedback, number of vague terms by class across three drafts, and number of students whose drafts contained no vague terms

DISCUSSION

Participants in Study 2 were relatively skilled writers who had passed a writing proficiency test. Instructor written feedback still required considerable time on each individual paper. However, student writing increased in clarity on Draft 2 following students' editing efforts based on

instructor feedback. Instructor feedback appeared effective in improving the clarity of students' writing in the subsequent draft. Importantly, the ease of instructor understanding of students' writing was faster with each iterative draft when students wrote with more precision.

The one-page limitation of the second study could have influenced results. Students seemed to write with fewer vague terms when limited to a single page. Longer writing assignments beyond one page might have produced more opportunities for students to practice eliminating vague pronouns for their second draft and thereby practice increasing the clarity of their written expression. Longer assignments require considerable time for the instructor to highlight vague pronouns and provide written comments in comment bubbles on individual student papers.

Ninety percent (90%) of students in their written reflections claimed eliminating vague pronouns was the

most important writing strategy that they had learned during their academic studies. These anecdotal statements suggest additional research about students' perspectives on written communication strategies that matter most to writing clarity (see Riley & Simons, 2016). Further research could include an examination of active versus passive verbs and noun choice to inform writing clarity. Another area of research could address whether increasing writing clarity improves student understanding of course concepts. The effects of reducing vagueness in linguistic expression might promote greater knowledge in the student's subject area. These research studies could be repeated with a range of oral and written communication skills and with students who have not yet passed their writing proficiency exams.

Implications for "Teaching for Learning"

A supportive collaboration is needed to communicate editing feedback shared between instructor and student (see Faust & Puncochar, 2016). Students occasionally needed additional time to rewrite a paper. Work on extra drafts could lead to

frustration for both the instructor and student. Clarity tended to increase with each successive draft, but an instructor could feel frustrated by thinking the student has ignored the feedback, and the student could feel frustrated by thinking that the paper was “good enough” or that eliminating vague pronouns did not enhance the meaning of the sentence. The positive impact of eliminating vague pronouns on the clarity of students’ writing was apparent in students’ qualitative responses. A student rarely opted for a lower score, but several students requested additional time to complete the edits. Providing additional time to students who have extenuating circumstances is just and allows the instructor to provide feedback to students who submitted their papers on time in the order of submission. Papers submitted late should receive instructor feedback before the next draft is due.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, instructor feedback, student practice in writing, and student involvement in peer review are powerful teaching strategies to reduce vagueness in student writing. If vagueness in writing were analogous to vagueness in the appearance of a photograph or thing at a distance (see Russell, 1923), then eliminating vague pronouns in writing could be like bringing a photograph or thing closer to the perceiver. Clarity of writing seems greater when writing is more precise. Using Russell’s terminology, vague pronouns have one-to-many associations. Reducing vagueness in writing (and speaking) starts with careful attention to the precise meaning of words in instructors’ directions, lectures, feedback, and writing. Instructor feedback to replace vague pronouns with words with more precision appears to improve clarity of students’ written communication and might help a writer, as in the words of Bertrand Russell (1923), “be as little vague” as a writer knows how to be if the writer is “to employ the English language”.

Vagueness in writing, if not heeded sufficiently, could lead to overconfidence in

one's knowledge (see Puncochar & Fox, 2004) and a lack of clarity in knowledge being taught (see Don Faust, IUT 2022, *Helping Our Students to Overcome Barriers to Understanding the Nature of Scientific Knowledge*). The three powerful teaching strategies of instructor feedback, student practice writing, and student peer review help to draw attention to the uncertainty of words used to describe knowledge, observations, and opinions and help to increase student understanding of the development of their knowledge and skills. This focus could increase the likelihood that students will be able to clarify their knowledge, observations, and opinions so that they can articulate current evidence for next steps in creating a better world than the one we currently inhabit.

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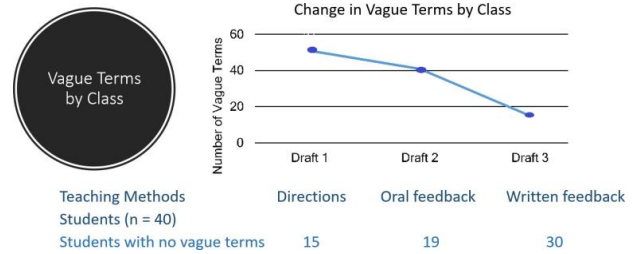
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Wishing you best efforts in your striving to teach your students to write with precision

Figure 1. Workflow management using three instructional methods of biweekly instructor feedback, student practice writing, and student peer review across a single semester

Figure 2. Types of instructor feedback, number of vague terms by class across

three drafts, and number of students whose drafts contained no vague terms



Date: _____ Author(s): _____ Peer-Reviewer: _____

Purpose
A peer review is an opportunity to improve the Capstone Reports. A peer-review consists of two parts: (1) a supportive review of the Capstone with comments and suggestions for improvement, and (2) completion of this peer-review assessment sheet. Offer suggestions to enhance readability and organization. Identify strengths, limitations, and any omissions. Complete the review items below and self-evaluation of your own peer-review skills.

Directions
Discuss goals related to the Capstone section under review. Suggest at least two ideas to improve the content of the Capstone (e.g., theoretical implications for teaching for learning and/or possible improvements for content organization). Place suggestions in the Capstone using a different colored font. Edit your comments. Use constructive, objective terms. Remain encouraging throughout the peer-review process. Complete this entire peer-review sheet. Provide your partner with comments on the Capstone and this peer-review instrument. Upload your completed peer-review documents to the peer-review forum AND the IN-CLASS peer-review assignment box to obtain credit for the peer review.

Section 1: Peer-Review – Place your comments as peer reviewer

Ideas in Progress	Substantial Development	Robust (Strong)	CRITERIA	REVIEWER'S COMMENTS
			Organization of sections with subheadings for educational theories on teaching for learning	
			Ethics and confidentiality – Professional and ethical guidelines used in citations and reporting	
			Implications of theories for teaching for learning	
			Mechanics – Spelling, grammar, punctuation	

Organization – Were subheadings of sections appropriate?

Ethics & Confidentiality – Were professional and ethical guidelines followed (e.g., confidentiality maintained)?

Citations – Did the author include citations with page numbers where appropriate?

Grammar & Style – trans,itions, spelling, gram,mar, and writing mechanics.

Content – Suggest two additions to theories, models, or concepts to assist the analysis of classroom observations.

Advice – Capstone?

Section 2: Self-evaluation of my Peer-review Skills – Place self-

Ideas in Progress	Substantial Development	Robust (Strong)	Criteria	My Reflections on my Peer-review Skills
			My feedback to improve organization of ideas	
			My feedback to improve mechanics, spelling, grammar, punctuation	
			My feedback to improve overall effectiveness	

Thank your partner(s) for an opportunity to learn through the peer-review process.