Marking strategies: an approach to introducing secondary school pupils to assessment for learning

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Assessment for learning (AfL) is any assessment where the first priority is to promote pupils’ learning. It is increasingly seen as an essential feature of classroom teaching and learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). AfL is about trying to provide assessment of pupils’ learning that is sensitive and constructive, is centred on clear learning goals and encourages pupils to take an active role in the process (QCA, 2009). The work reported here was carried out to investigate what the pupils thought about two different strategies for marking pupils’ work. It offers one potential way, which is both engaging and informative, in which an element of AfL can be introduced to pupils.

Method

The work was carried out with pupils aged 11 and 12 in a year 7, mixed-ability (levels 4–7) class in a comprehensive school in England. The pupils were new to the school and the notion of AfL and we were interested in exploring the responses of pupils representing a cross-section of abilities. Two contrasting approaches to marking were introduced using the same piece of work, a DART worksheet with a gap-filling activity (Figures 1 and 2). The work was on a topic that the class had recently studied. The response to the worksheet was created under the pseudonym ‘Gabrielle’ and two contrasting styles of marking were applied. One, under the pseudonym ‘Professor Fung’, had ticks and crosses and a mark out of 7 (Figure 1). The other, under the pseudonym ‘Mr Ali’, had comments only (Figure 2).

The pupils were asked to look carefully at the two styles of marking and then, independently, to complete a short questionnaire (Box 1) designed to explore their perceptions of the usefulness of the different marking styles and the impact that they might have on their learning. The idea was to help ‘Gabrielle’ correct her incorrect answers (she had six out of seven answers wrong) and then to answer the questionnaire on the marking styles of both her teachers.

Findings and discussion

We felt it was important to establish first what differences the pupils recognised between the
two styles of marking. Almost all pupils, 23 out of the 24, thought there was a difference. Pupils were asked to explain how they were different; all 23 who thought that there was a difference gave reasons. Most (18) mentioned the fact that Mr Ali used comments, targets or explanations as to why answers were wrong, with five commenting that Professor Fung used ticks and crosses while Mr Ali did not.

The numerical mark that Professor Fung awarded the pupil was not commented on as a difference. The pupils' responses placed emphasis on the presence or absence of comments rather than marks, ticks or crosses. This possibly highlights the expectation by pupils that their work will be given a mark, making it unremarkable and thus not worthy of a comment. An alternative explanation is that the phrasing of

| Figure 1 | Worksheet marked by Professor Fung |
question 2 (Box 1) may lead pupils to comment on how the methods of Mr Ali differ from those of Professor Fung rather than the other way round.

The one pupil who answered ‘no’ to question 1 may have been confused by the question. It is interesting to note that he subsequently discussed the differences between the marking schemes and identified clearly which teacher he would prefer to mark his work. This highlights the fact that it is important to ask similar questions in different ways within a questionnaire in order to verify answers and check for misunderstandings that can create bias.

Does either marking scheme help the pupils to learn science?

Of the 24 pupils, 23 (96%) believed that the ticks-and-crosses style of marking was not helpful to Gabrielle’s science learning. This is in agreement with Cowie (2005), who found pupils believed ticks and crosses were of limited help in moving forward their learning. The pupils were asked whether the comments-only style of marking would help a pupil to understand ‘more, less or the same’ as compared with the ticks-and-crosses style. The majority of pupils believed that better understanding of science would come from the comments-only style of marking as compared to the ticks-and-crosses method, with 22 responding ‘more’, one ‘less’ and one ‘the same’.

Which style of marking did the pupils prefer and why?

The responses to these questions provide further support for a comments-only style of marking. All 24 pupils chose ‘comments only’ as their preferred style of marking in a situation where they were given choices including a neutral position. However, this does not per se indicate that marks are unimportant. Markwick, Jackson and Hull (2003) have reported contrary results, where 90% of their sample preferred a grade, with only 26% of pupils wanting comments of a formative nature. The results from this study are similar to the findings of Black and Harrison (2001) that pupils were not bothered by the omission of grades from their marked work, but were happy with constructive written and verbal comments.

Table 1 lists the reasons given for preferring the comments-only marking style. The three most popular reasons were related to the level of assistance the teacher gave, such as targets, tips and explanations as to why answers were not correct. The use of encouragement was also a popular reason.

Pupil feelings

In question 3 pupils were asked how they thought Gabrielle felt after receiving the marked piece of work from Professor Fung (ticks and crosses). Every pupil thought that Gabrielle would experience a negative emotion after receiving the marked work. ‘Sad’, ‘upset’, ‘confused’, ‘not very confident’ and ‘disappointed’ were the most common pupil descriptors. It is difficult to extract from these alone whether this was felt to be entirely due to the marking scheme or whether it was also due to the fact that Gabrielle had done so badly in the task. Several pupils qualified their
answers in reference to the marking style, saying, for example: ‘Upset and useless because there was [sic] no tips or targets’, ‘Maybe confused and upset because she wouldn’t know where she went wrong’, ‘A bit upset for getting so many wrong and angry because she didn’t know how she could improve’.

When pupils were asked how they felt Gabrielle would feel after Mr Ali (comments-only) had marked her work (question 5), they expressed a mixture of thoughts and explanations. In summary, 17 out of 24 (71%) thought Gabrielle would feel better to some degree about receiving this marked work. Some were very positive about Mr Ali’s style of marking; they described Gabrielle as feeling ‘quite pleased’, ‘happy’ and ‘more confident and happy’. Others wrote: ‘a bit better’ and ‘disappointed but also relieved’. Sixteen of the sample explained that the more positive feelings were because of the hints and targets that Mr Ali gave to help her improve. Only one pupil wrote just negative emotion, with no reference to the comments in the marking scheme; for example ‘disappointed because she got such a low score’. This is further evidence that suggests that the comments-only method is preferred.

It is interesting to note that pupils made comments about the personality of the teacher from the way the work was marked. One pupil felt that the comments-only teacher (Mr Ali) was a ‘nice teacher’ because ‘he marks it in a nice way’. Another pupil said ‘he wants to know if Gabrielle is OK with the work and I would like that’. This gives strength to one of the aspects of formative assessment, namely that teachers should demonstrate a willingness to understand the pupil as an individual and to encourage them, regardless of the achievement level. All abilities of pupil preferred the comments method of marking. Other research has found that encouraging comments made some pupils ‘Real happy and they’ll try ... again’ (Cowie, 2005: 142). The comments made by pupils in this study offer a valuable insight into why they held particular preferences.

**Table 1** Reasons given by pupils to justify choice of preferred teacher-marking style (multiple comments recorded) (N = 24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of pupils</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Targets were given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Tips on how to improve were given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Better explains what was wrong, or why answers were wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Gave ‘comments’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Gave encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Was a nice or understanding teacher / wanted to know if I was OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Did not put a score</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

Overall, pupils and teachers should view marking as essential recorded dialogue. It serves as a reference for the pupil and teacher to show progression and growth of learning. Just as a teacher needs to be approachable in person, this work also shows how important it is that the teacher is approachable through written dialogue too.

The influence that marking can have on the emotional status of the child should not be underestimated, nor should its impact on the learning of science.

**References**


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