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Doing it the *Wimba* way - an initial evaluation of a voice tool for learning

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Abstract

The internationalisation of the higher education sector presents many challenges for both learners and educators. One challenge is the provision of effective feedback on the assessment of written tasks. Such feedback forms part of the assessment process of the Introductory Academic Program (IAP), a five week pre-semester program to induct international postgraduate AusAID students at the University of Adelaide, into a western-style academic culture. During the most recent IAP students were required to complete several written tasks, one of which was an extended piece of academic writing. This task presented the opportunity to trial a new technology that might provide another dimension to the written feedback. Students were therefore given written feedback and an individualised podcast from the assessor, via the *Wimba*² voicetool. This enabled the students to be better informed about their writing from discussions with peers and also in formal meetings with academic staff. This paper will focus on the information obtained from survey data and staff observations about the usefulness of the *Wimba* Voice tool in a multicultural teaching environment.

Introduction

International students, particularly LBOTE (Language Background Other Than English) students, face a number of challenges when studying at Australian universities. The increasing number of such students suggests that support systems that relate to their academic well-being need to be both established and maintained. Such academic support for international students can take many forms. Helping students to maximise their academic potential involves, amongst numerous other dimensions, the provision points of access to the academic culture itself.

A major issue facing international students involves adapting to the conventions of an unfamiliar academic environment and the number of challenges therein, both skills based and interactional. Moreover, the academic environment itself is in a state of flux. As Beattie and James (1997, p.186) point out, "academics face changing roles, moving from a facilitative role in the classroom to 'manager/supporter of student learning'". With such shifting sands, the need to provide support for LBOTE students is greater than ever if we are to provide such students with points of access to engage with the academic culture (Robertson et al. 2000).

The parameters of such demands are recognised in a wide body of research, both in higher education and applied linguistics. These parameters can cover such influences as language, cultural and educational background (Biggs 1997; Cadman 1997; Cargill 1994; Sinclair 2000) and, as Woodward-Kron (2007) observes, such influences can impact upon how well LBOTE

students relate to the writing requirements of the academic culture. So, when designing a program to meet the academic acculturation needs of any group of international LBOTE students, it is imperative that such students have access pathways to writing practices and expectations embedded within the program content. One way this can be achieved is through exploring the language and media used to express feedback. In this paper, the particular focus lies in evaluating the provision of such feedback to LBOTE students in relation to writing draft argumentative papers. The aim of the study was to determine whether or not the incorporation of the *Wimba* (2008) Voice tool, in the form of an individual podcast from assessor to student, would have positive impact from both a student and staff perspective, in the process of writing essay drafts.

In the study, the students were AusAID (Australian Government) sponsored and were studying on the pre-semester Introductory Academic Program (IAP) at the University of Adelaide. They received traditional written formative feedback on essay drafts alongside three-minute individualised voice tool (*Wimba*) oral feedback, prior to discussion on their drafts with their lecturer. In this case, the multi-sensory experience and backtracking allowed students to be better prepared for their one-on-one meetings (1-1s) with lecturers. Moreover, students commented positively on the experience, in a follow-up survey.

Introductory Academic Program

The five-week long, pre-semester IAP functions as a bridge to help acculturate international LBOTE students to the demands of postgraduate life. An important dimension to a successful postgraduate experience is students understanding the expectations of and achieving control over their academic writing, so they can become better managers of their own learning. The route to this expectation/control paradigm can be opaque though; with this in mind staging of both content delivery and tasks is a very important part of the processes in the IAP.

During the IAP, the students are required to complete several writing tasks. The major writing task involves students writing a 1,000-word argumentative essay in their own subject area. Students decide on the title of their own particular paper in negotiation with their lecturers. In preparation for writing the paper, students are given (amongst many other aspects):

- workshops on the dimensions of critical reading
- workshops on various aspects of academic writing
- sessions on database searching in the University of Adelaide library
- feedback on their drafts.

This last element, the giving of feedback on student drafts had in previous IAP courses, followed a more traditional model of written comments on draft text (using 'Track Changes' in *Microsoft Word*), combined with marker's summary comments (Appendix 1). This was followed up with 1-1 meetings with students and assessors. Anecdotal evidence suggested that rather than coming to the sessions having actually acted upon the assessor's comments, students tended to use the sessions to ascertain what the written comments actually meant. This seemed due in part to the necessary brevity of the comments and also possible limitations in the English language ability of the students. Such a situation often necessitated further meetings which (in a time poor environment) impacted on other dimensions of the program. Situational pragmatics led to an examination of ways in which students could get more meaningful feedback on their drafts, and thus attend 1-1s better informed and with the conditions for further development of their drafts already in place.

One way to address this issue was to consider different media for the delivery of feedback prior to the 1-1 meeting. A previous study in the University of North Carolina incorporated

the audio commenting feature in *Adobe Acrobat* to give audio feedback at paragraph level on student assignments (Ice, 2008). Student response showed a preference for audio feedback over written feedback in their courses, preferences which continued over time, suggesting that it was not merely the novelty value effect which determined the preference levels. However, this study was conducted in a different context and did not consider the possibilities of a combination of both written and oral feedback. In the IAP, the LBOTE dimension adds to the complexities of both delivery and reception of feedback. As Bartlett (2000) notes, there is often a disjunction between what LBOTE students can produce and what the lecturers expect from them. In the IAP, it was important to consider pathways which were both multi-sensory and experiential, to maximise student benefit from the process and enable them to better meet lecturers' expectations.

Aims of Project

- To provide a scaffolded process for the delivery of feedback which better met the learning needs of IAP students.
- To provide multi-sensory feedback media to engage different types of learners.
- To make better use of the limited time available for feedback from both a student and staff perspective.
- To enable students to better understand academic expectations.

The *Wimba* Voice tool is a possible means to help achieve these ends. The decision to incorporate *Wimba* was made approximately one month in advance of the IAP, as part of a broader drive to improve assessment and understanding, both on the part of the lecturers involved and the students themselves. Yet initially, there was some hesitation on the part of the IAP staff, as to the feasibility of *Wimba*. In the first instance, it was observed that in a time poor environment, recording of the *Wimba* podcast would severely impact on the lecturers involved. Moreover, there was the possibility that the students would already have the information needed from the written feedback and thus the spoken feedback would be largely superfluous. However, it was observed that the students made use of *Wimba* in ways which had not been widely anticipated by the IAP staff.

Method and Materials

A total of 26 students (Male=10, Female=16) were enrolled in the IAP in Semester 2, 2007 (for further details, see Appendix 2) and were taught by four different staff members. Each student submitted an on-line version of their draft to the assessor. The assessor put comments and made some suggested changes on the paper using the Track Changes feature in *Microsoft Word* as had been done on previous courses. Students were also given a written marking category sheet (See Appendix 1) which was divided into several categories and included an overall written summary.

The assessor, through the medium of *Wimba*, recorded a 3 minute podcast individual to each student, which elaborated upon the written comments by way of:

- giving further explanation to what was written
- providing additional exemplification for the students to locate
- providing an overall summary of the draft.

Both the draft with comments and *Wimba* podcast were emailed to students at the beginning of an IAP session in a computer suite. They could listen to the podcast as they read through the track-changed drafts and the written feedback sheet. They were able to listen to the podcast as many times as they wished and were able to ask any related technical questions

to the three IAP academic staff present. All the students managed to access the podcast and listen/read concurrently without any technical hitches. Following the *Wimba* session in the computer suite students made individual appointments to discuss their drafts with the IAP academic staff. At the end of the IAP, the students were asked to anonymously evaluate the effectiveness of the Track Changes/*Wimba* Voice tool combination in a survey, which was produced by the IAP team. (See Table 1 below & Appendix 3.) The questionnaires were analysed using a mixed methodological approach: Questions 1-6 were analysed quantitatively and Questions 7-11 qualitatively.

Table 1: Student Evaluation Questions

Q1:	How useful was 'track changes' editing?
Q2:	How useful were the comments in the text (i.e. those that were in brackets)?
Q3:	How useful were the marking sheet comments?
Q4:	How useful were the audio comments?
Q5:	How useful was the combination of written and audio comments?
Q6:	Approximately how many times did you listen to the audio in the computer room?
Q7:	What particular information were you listening for in the audio?
Q8:	If you listened to it more than once why did you do that? For example, were you unclear about some particular words or meanings or were you trying to find out something else?
Q9:	Was there anything in the written/audio feedback on your paper that you think you could apply in your future assignments? Please explain.
Q10:	Did you discuss your feedback with anyone else (staff or students) in the session? If so, what kinds of things did you talk about?
Q11:	Do you have any other comments/suggestions about this feedback session?

Evaluation of Results

Student Reflections on Track Changes/Wimba combination

Overall, the responses from the students with regard to the value of the Track Changes/*Wimba* Voice tool combination were positive. All of the students made use of the combination. Of particular note was the fact that students 'moved' between the two types of feedback during the computer room session to inform their understanding and they felt this gave them a greater appreciation of the issues with their texts which informed the 1-1 meetings. Their responses to the first five questions in the questionnaire are summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Students' responses to Questions 1 to 5

	1-Not Useful	2-Quite Useful	3-Useful	4-Very Useful	5-Extremely Useful
Q1	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	2 7.7%	15 57.7%	9 34.6%
Q2	0 0.0%	1 3.8%	0 0.0%	15 57.7%	10 38.5%
Q3	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 11.5%	16 61.5%	7 26.9%
Q4	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 11.5%	14 53.8%	9 34.6%
Q5	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 11.5%	15 57.7%	8 30.8%

n=26

As the results of Questions 1-3 demonstrate, the majority of the students indicated that written comments, both in Track Changes and in the course specific feedback sheet, were of great use to them in the feedback process. Several students wrote in the optional comments that the written feedback helped them in grammar related issues and in the editing process, rather than at broader text levels, while the marking sheet comments allowed them to categorise and analyse the development of their draft.

The students' written responses regarding the audio comments were all positive and the major issues which arose from the question were that students felt that the audio comments complemented the written comments and helped them to focus their attention. In comments following Question 5, the issue of the written and audio comments were again seen as being complementary to one another, with the audio comments seen as being providers of greater detail and helping to bring a greater overall clarity than the written comments alone. The combination was seen as being more comprehensive in its scope.

Table 3: Students' responses to Question 6

Once	Twice	Three times	Four times	Five times	More than five
1	9	9	2	4	1
3.8%	34.6%	34.6%	7.7%	15.4%	3.8%

n=26

In relation to Question 6, as can be seen from Table 3, only one out of twenty six students listened to the audio just once in the computer room. The most common responses were two or three times for 69.2% of the students and 26.9% of the students listened to the audio more than three times.

Questions 7 and 8 were open-ended questions designed to elicit what they were hoping to get from listening to the audio comments and why they listened more than once. In terms of what they were listening for, the responses received covered a variety of categories, but the two most popular focus areas were weaknesses/errors and lecturer comments/feedback. Such responses were not markedly different from the responses to the written feedback. In terms of listening more than once, there were again a variety of responses. The most popular responses pertained to getting greater understanding and to making sure of something. Several students gave the vaguer response of in order to improve my essay and a few saw it as an opportunity for a listening comprehension

Several students commented that the feedback process helped them with cohesion at paragraph and sentence level. A similar number noted that the process also helped them in clarification of word choice and grammar issues. Some students also saw the combination as being helpful in the understanding of referencing related issues. All but one of the students discussed their feedback with others during the session, both staff and/or other students. Half of these students specifically stated they had feedback with staff and a similar number did not distinguish between students and staff. The subjects which were most popularly discussed were cohesion, structure, referencing and clarity of markers' comments.

The overall response to Question 11 was very positive. Many of the students said they would like more of the same sort of aural/written feedback combination in their degree programs and even to extend the length and interactivity of the *Wimba* Voice tool. However, several

of the students pointed out that the follow up 1-1s were also relevant, seeing the feedback combination as part of a longer process.

Reflection and Observations

The results of the questionnaire have provided some interesting perspectives and insights on the part of the students. The message which seems to emerge from examining the student responses was that the experience was a positive one for most of them. They found the *Wimba* podcast easy to use and no student made any negative comments about the aural/written combination. Indeed, their responses to the first five questions show the basically the same pattern of distribution, suggesting that no single method of feedback was perceived as being more advantageous than the others. The number of times that many students 'moved' between the two types of feedback in the computer room could be indicative of their seeing it as a valuable mechanism to inform their understanding. Moreover, the number of times that the students revisited the podcast, and for a variety of reasons, also suggests that they were seeing it as having a number of functions. One such use, and one which we had not anticipated was their using it as a listening comprehension tool, perhaps with a focus on form as well as on message.

What was particularly interesting was observing the students interactions during the computer room session. All three staff members involved noted that the students were not just interacting with the computer screen but also with each other, discussing and sharing their feedback. This was a very different scenario from previous courses where giving written feedback (using both 'Track Changes' and an assessment sheet) was met with mostly silence and the occasional student to lecturer question. During the *Wimba* session, the students seemed more comfortable with sharing their work and the responses they had received. It could be that the novelty value of the mode of feedback precipitated more enthusiastic discussion than might otherwise have occurred with a more traditional mode of feedback delivery. However, the previously mentioned study by Ice (2008) indicated that, in a North American scenario, students constantly gave positive responses to aural feedback over the time of their courses. Such a longitudinal use of *Wimba* might well indicate similar findings, yet the context of the five week length of the IAP precludes similar evaluations from taking place.

One possible explanation for the positive response to the aural/written feedback in such a controlled environment could be that it catered to a variety of learning styles. The combination of 'track changes', draft assessment sheet and *Wimba* covered the same basic field as did the written feedback on previous IAPs, but the use of different media provided different pathways to understanding, whereby the whole was perhaps greater than the sum of the parts. Anecdotally, several of the students commented that they found receiving feedback in the form of a podcast somehow more personalised than just receiving written feedback. It could be that this 'personal' element is symptomatic of a learning style which values having a greater sense of interaction with the lecturer than might otherwise be the norm.

The flow on effect of the combination was evident in the follow up 1-1s, in the sense that students appeared better informed than they had in previous IAPs. This was particularly evident in terms of editing their papers. Instead of coming to their session with questions they wanted answered, before writing their next draft, many of the students, were turning up having acted on the feedback. Such students had already re-written or partially re-written the next draft, which was markedly different from the situation in previous IAPs. This seemed to suggest that, compared with previous IAP students, they were better informed and more confident in taking the next step on their own and seemed not to be using the session for

ascertaining what the written comments actually meant. As a result, the time spent in 1-1 sessions was reduced, thus nullifying the previously stated concern that the *Wimba* podcast would impact negatively in a time precious environment.

Possible negative impacts on time was also previously raised as an issue for staff in terms of time taken up for the recording of the *Wimba* podcasts themselves. In reality, the greatest amount of time was taken up in completing the formative written responses, both 'Track Changes' and draft assessment sheet and, once the (simple to use) technology was mastered, the podcasts took only three minutes per student. This time was easily offset by the reduced time spent in 1-1s with students who were better prepared and who had taken the draft development process further than their counterparts in previous IAPs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the response to the combination of 'Track Changes', draft assessment sheet and *Wimba* podcast, can be seen as positive from the perspective of both students and staff. In the computer suite, the students utilised the *Wimba* technology without problem, moved between the two types of feedback and were involved in enthusiastic discussions. Their formal response, by way of the questionnaire, reflected such behaviour and was largely appreciative of the combination. In addition to this, the students attended their follow on 1-1s better informed than in previous IAPs. From a staff perspective, the use of the *Wimba* combination was both pedagogically rewarding and did not have a negative time impact. In the 1-1s, in comparison with previous IAP groups, less time was spent on explanation and more on development and improvement, with the combined formative feedback having helped the students advance their essays.

Consideration of different ways of use of the *Wimba* podcast and evaluating such use, would seem to be the logical next step. This could include such recommendations as:

1. Consider the utilisation of a control group during the next IAP
Such a control group might allow more meaningful comparisons between contemporary groups of students, doing the same program, regarding the impact of the *Wimba* podcast in the provision of formative feedback. However, there is the issue of ethics which makes such a scenario unlikely.
2. Ensure clarification of focus of *Wimba* with students
Some of the students thought that it would be more interactive. The *Wimba* Voice tool does however, have a reply function which could be incorporated into the use of the Voice tool with IAP students in future. This would give students the ability to make comments on their feedback to help inform the lecturer for the 1-1 meeting.
3. Increase the length of the sound bite
During this course, the sound bite was for three minutes. The *Wimba* Voice tool allows this time period to be extended. Five minutes could be a more appropriate time period in order to maximise information/explanatory content prior to 1-1 meeting.
4. Use the *Wimba* Voicetool for other writing tasks
The *Wimba* combination was used, in this case, in relation to an argumentative essay. Evaluating its use in relation to other genres of academic writing could also be considered.

The generally positive response from both students and staff suggests that the *Wimba* podcast was a worthwhile inclusion in the formative feedback process for this student cohort. Modifications taken from the above recommendations will be utilised in the next

IAP and will inform further research on the use of the *Wimba* Voice tools in combination with more traditional written feedback, to meet the particular needs of LBOTE students.

Endnotes

1. *Wimba* is the company name of a US based provider of education focused collaborative software.
2. This was a member of staff, Barbara Wake, who was not actually teaching on this particular IAP.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the valuable support and encouragement which my colleague Deborah Coleman-George gave me throughout the process of putting this paper together. The paper began life as a collaborative presentation at the ERGA conference in September 2007 for which Deb was the principal contributor. Her original conceptualisation of the pedagogical application of the *Wimba* Voice tools informed the project development and these insights informed the presentation.

I would also like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of both Catherine Irving, who was the principal creative force in both the design and content of the questionnaire and Barbara Wake who gave of her own time to be the *Wimba* assessor for all of the students.

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Appendix 1

Introductory Academic Program (IAP) Assessment (feedback) criteria for research paper

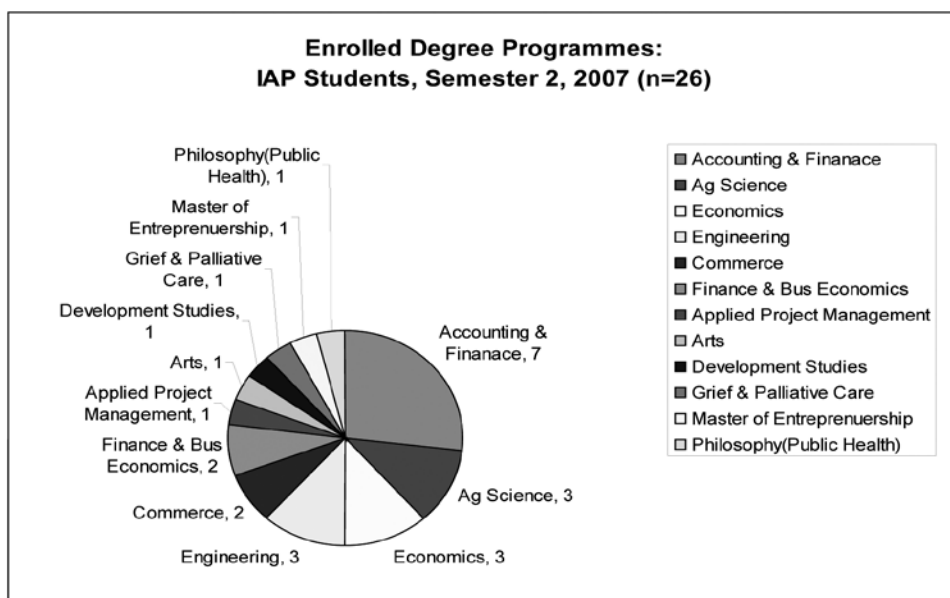
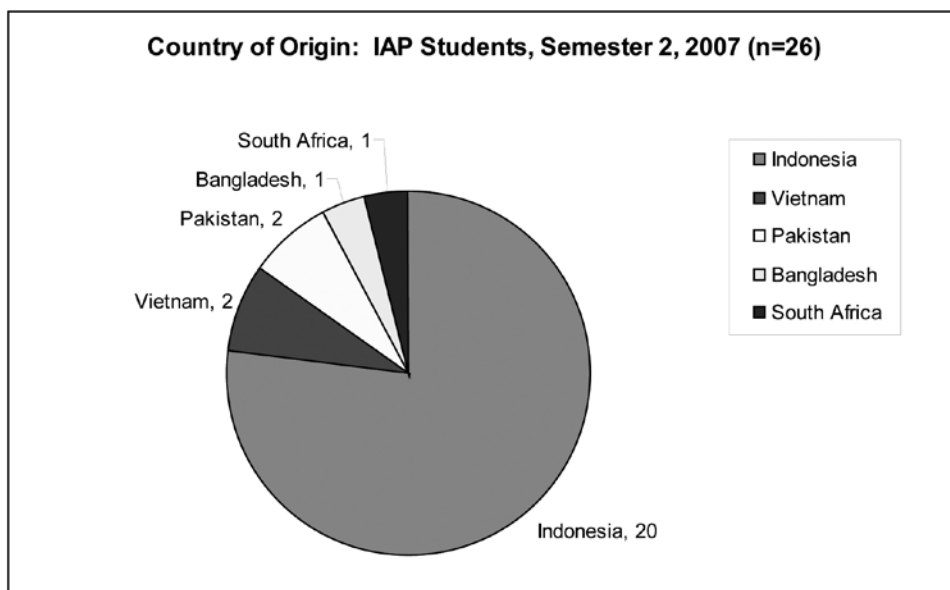
Student name:.....

Presentation and formatting of research paper	Comments
Student's name is included Paper submitted by due date and time Appropriate formatting (1.5 spacing) Appropriate length (1000 words) Title clearly states the specific focus of the research, eg: Focus is too broad: <i>The impact of global warming: future considerations</i> Specific focus of research is clear: <i>The impact of global warming on rural water resources in developing countries: future considerations</i>	
Abstract	
Abstract includes clear statements of the: • Topic • Aim (optional) • Writer's point of view or argument • Outline of topics or themes in the paper	
Introduction	
Introduction includes clear statement of the: • Background to the topic (may include the problem, current issues ...) • Writer's point of view, argument or focus of the research • Outline of topics, issues or themes of the paper • Scope of the research (optional)	
Body of the discussion	
Overall the topics or issues are discussed logically • Paragraphs include: • a topic sentence/s which sets out the focus of the discussion in the paragraph • possibly more information to expand on the topic sentence • Use of evidence • reliable evidence from refereed publications • evidence logically develops and supports writer's argument • evidence is integrated into discussion effectively • evidence is appropriately acknowledged (not plagiarised) • the evidence is paraphrased, not directly quoted (with exceptions eg definitions, quantitative data) • weak author orientation used • in-text referencing is accurate • a summary statement which states the effects, consequences or leads to following discussion	

Conclusion	Comments
The conclusion summarises: • main issues • purpose or aim of the research (optional) • point of view or argument • main points in the evidence • qualifies the point of view (optional)	
Cohesion	
Overall cohesion, ie development of the focus and/or argument, is logical Each clause has a clear Theme – New structure Each clause is linked either Theme – Theme or New – Theme	
Grammar & lexis	
Overall sentence grammar conforms to appropriate and accurate patterns of written academic English • sentence/clause structure • nominal group structure • use of articles • use of prepositions • noun-verb agreement • tense choice • use of verbs and verbal groups • use of modal verbs and adverbs eg may, can, possibly Word choice is appropriately formal Punctuation is correct	
Documentation of sources	
• Documentation of references is consistent throughout the paper • Documentation of references follows a standard format • References or Bibliography is in alphabetical order, publication details are accurate	

Other comments:

Appendix 2



Appendix 3

IAP Symposium Paper Feedback Student Evaluation

Dear IAP student,

This is a questionnaire to survey student responses to your IAP draft assignment feedback. There are no right or wrong answers – we would like to understand the value of the various kinds of feedback you have received. So, please do not discuss this with your classmates, just fill it in independently.

Instructions

There are a number of questions below. Some require that you place a circle around the number which best corresponds with your impressions and also provide more detail.

1. How useful was the 'track changes' editing?

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not useful</i>	<i>quite useful</i>	<i>useful</i>	<i>very useful</i>	<i>extremely useful</i>

Why?

2. How useful were the comments in the text (i.e., those that were in brackets)?

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not useful</i>	<i>quite useful</i>	<i>useful</i>	<i>very useful</i>	<i>extremely useful</i>

Why?

3. How useful were the marking sheet comments?

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not useful</i>	<i>quite useful</i>	<i>useful</i>	<i>very useful</i>	<i>extremely useful</i>

Why?

4. How useful were the audio comments?

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not useful</i>	<i>quite useful</i>	<i>useful</i>	<i>very useful</i>	<i>extremely useful</i>

Why?

5. How useful was the combination of written and audio comments?

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not useful</i>	<i>quite useful</i>	<i>useful</i>	<i>very useful</i>	<i>extremely useful</i>

Why?

6. Approximately how many times did you listen to the audio in the computer room?
7. What particular information were you listening for in the audio?
8. If you listened to it more than once, why did you do that? For example, were you unclear about some particular words or meanings or, were you trying to find out something else?
9. Was there anything in the written/audio feedback on your paper that you think you could apply in your future assignments? Please explain.
10. Did you discuss your feedback with anyone else (staff or students) in the session? If so, what kinds of things did you talk about?
11. Do you have any other comments/suggestions about this feedback session?