Audiovisual Feedback in EFL/ESL Writing Classes

by **WILLIAM J. WOODARD**

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As an English teacher preparing students for university-level work in academic English, I have spent many hours poring over essays, red pen in hand. The process of reading and correcting was always time-intensive and grueling, and the results were usually as disheartening for me as they were discouraging for the emerging writers who composed the essays. Not only that, but the same problems would reappear later, the whole demoralizing process repeated through the draft, feedback, and revision process, assignment after assignment.

In my search for a better way, I have tried most of the standard techniques to give effective feedback to my students while decreasing the amount of time spent writing

such feedback. Whether handwritten or submitted electronically, the waves of essays kept coming, multiplied by regular increases in class size, and I sought any technique or innovation that would allow me to fit my family life into the troughs between the peaks. I used rubrics and handouts of abbreviations and proofreading symbols, some standard, some of my own invention. I created an array of Microsoft Word macros that I could access with the press of a key to insert such feedback as "This is a comma splice. A comma splice is when you connect two independent clauses using a comma, and it can be corrected in several ways. See page XX in your textbook for further information." Finally, I went minimalist and only circled or highlighted areas that needed attention, requiring students to visit me during office hours or consult with me during class time when they couldn't figure out their errors. Usually though, if students couldn't correct their mistakes on their own or by asking me in class, they would take a random stab at correcting their mistakes, not having the time or desire to make a special trip to visit me during office hours for an explanation. However, during the moments I spent with the few who did come to visit me for face-to-face feedback, I felt like I made the biggest impact, and both the quantity of the feedback and the quality of the experience were incomparably superior to those of any written feedback I had ever given. Not only that, but I was able to deliver better feedback in much less time than it would have taken to write it. I wished that there were a way to deliver that experience to all my students. That's when I discovered Jing.

Jing is a free application for PCs and Macs by TechSmith, a company that specializes in screen capture. Jing sits quietly on the edge of your laptop screen or desktop monitor—a small yellow half-sun—until you need it. At that point, you click on it and, using your cursor, select the portion of the screen you wish to record (it can include the entire screen). You then choose to take a screenshot or record a video. Choosing the video option prompts a three-second countdown and notification

that your microphone is on; after those three seconds, Jing records everything you do in the area you selected on screen, as well as your voice. Once you are done, you click the stop button, and Jing offers you the choice of saving your screen-capture video to your computer or uploading it to Screencast.com, TechSmith's free storage site, from which it can be shared with others.

My introduction to Jing was through a colleague who used it to produce helpful how-to videos for friends and family who were not as tech-savvy as she (e.g., how to upload and share files, how to mail merge in Microsoft Word, etc.). Jing is a great tool for such situations because you are able to show rather than tell others how to do something much more clearly and in much less time than you could if you were, say, writing an email description of the process under consideration. Imagine a colleague asking you by email how to share a Google Drive folder with students and create a Google Doc inside the shared folder. Although not an inherently complicated task, it would take quite a bit of writing to explain, and even if you could communicate by phone and coordinate the explanation while simultaneously viewing your individual computer screens, mistakes could still be made (no two browsers seem to work exactly alike). With a screen-capture app like Jing, such worries fall by the wayside. Jing videos have the advantages of being clear and exact, and they can be viewed as many times as necessary and at a time convenient to the viewer.

After getting to know how Jing worked, I was ready to give it a spin as a vehicle for delivering audiovisual feedback to students. I chose a student essay at random, clicked on Jing, and within five minutes I had gone over the entire five-paragraph essay (and had discussed numerous grammatical and vocabulary errors) and uploaded the resultant video to Screencast.com. The same amount of feedback in written form would have taken at least 30 minutes, maybe more. Was Jing the answer to my prayers? It was time to try it out with my students.

In my lower-intermediate academic writing and grammar class, we concentrate on developing paragraphs. We go over paragraph types, topic sentences, supporting sentences, and conclusions, in addition to concentrating on the grammatical and syntactical elements necessary to developing complex sentence structure. This class is a lead-in to the next level of writing classes, in which we expand paragraphs into essays. I chose this paragraph-level writing class to carry out my semester-long experiment in audiovisual feedback. First, I had my students create shared Google Drive folders with me and had them write their paragraphs as Google Docs. This gave students an easy way to turn in their paragraphs and made it simple for me to attach feedback to their work. For each document turned in, I went through the screen-capture-video steps outlined above. Jing does not allow videos longer than five minutes, and I was usually able to stay within the limits and give a complete review of the paragraph.

It was helpful for me to begin by giving the paragraph a quick read so that I had an idea of the types of problems I would be discussing in the feedback. In a few cases, I jotted down a word or phrase to remind myself of something particularly important that I would need to point out in the feedback, but I found that this step became less necessary with practice. On occasion, I needed to pause the recording to formulate my thoughts or rehearse my comments before speaking; I simply clicked on the pause button and later resumed the recording with another click. The pause feature was also helpful when I was interrupted because it allowed me to pick up where I had left off.

After finishing the recording, I chose to have Jing upload the audiovisual capture to Screencast.com, where I was given three options: (1) make the video public; (2) make the video available only to those with the link (which includes a complex string of random characters for extra security); or (3) protect the video with a password. I chose the second option because it is both secure and convenient. In Screencast.com, I clicked on the video and copied the secure hyperlink. Then I went to the Google Doc that I had open in another browser tab and pasted the link into it by highlighting the word *here* in a sentence at the bottom of the page and inserting the hyperlink: "To see and hear your instructor's comments, click *here*." Once I became accustomed to the procedure, it took only about 30 seconds to complete.

The reaction of the students to the audiovisual feedback was universally positive. Not only did they get a clear explanation of the areas in their paragraphs that needed work, they got the added dividend of being able to practice listening to English in a meaning-rich context. Many students said that they watched and listened to the videos several times while working on their corrections. I was not surprised when I got my students' course evaluations and many of them mentioned how much they liked the audiovisual feedback.

The next semester, I tried audiovisual feedback in my essay-writing class, and it was equally successful. In that class, we focused on developing and writing five-paragraph essays and using proper citation techniques. Again, five minutes was usually enough time to devote to audiovisual feedback, given that the students had had time in class and at home to work on their essays and ask me questions before turning them in. However, on occasion I ran up against the five-minute limit, especially when I was reading the first drafts by some of the lower-level writers and when we were working on research and citation; many students were unfamiliar with citation techniques, and errors were common. In those situations, I focused on only certain aspects of the essays, such as structure, development, grammatical and syntactical errors, or citation. TechSmith does offer other, more robust, tools (such as Snagit and Camtasia) that allow for longer videos and a variety of formats (Jing videos are in flash format); however, I found that the five-minute limit suited me well because it forced me to focus my comments concisely, another factor in reducing the time I spent giving feedback

on student work. I estimate that I reduced the amount of time I spent on correction and feedback by more than half. I even used Jing with handwritten assignments; I simply scanned the students' papers (using a portable scanner or a scanner app on my smartphone) and had them automatically converted and uploaded as PDF documents to my Google Drive before I "Jinged" them.

Having used Jing to provide audiovisual feedback to my writing students for about two years now, I am more than satisfied with the results. The advantages to audiovisual feedback are that it allows for more feedback of a higher quality, reduces the amount of time spent on grading and feedback, and provides an opportunity for students to practice listening. In addition, it can be used asynchronously, freeing students and instructors from the time constraints of office hours and appointments. The Jing application is free and secure, and it can be used in traditional, hybrid, and online settings. The potential disadvantages are that it requires reliable Internet and computer access, things that are not available in all English as a foreign or second language settings. However, the technology necessary for using applications such as Jing is available in many places and is spreading rapidly. I recently delivered a presentation on Jing and other web-based applications to teachers in Santiago, Chile. The audience included teachers from public schools and from private schools and universities. They all said that it would be possible to use Jing with most, if not all, of their students, and they were intrigued by the benefits it offers.

William J. Woodard is Associate Professor of ESL at Northern Virginia Community College. He holds an MSEd in TESOL and an MS in Spanish Linguistics. He was recently a visiting Fulbright scholar at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.