

Mark My Words: Technologies for Supporting, Managing and Responding to Student Writing

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ABSTRACT

'Mark My Words' is an MS Word add-on that makes online resources available to students during the writing process and as part of the feedback on their written assignments. It can significantly reduce instructors' marking time while increasing the quality and quantity of the advice and corrections they provide to their students. It can be customized to support writing and feedback on any subject so that students can be supported in taking an autonomous, discovery-based approach to their own learning, and so that their instructors can give systematic, comprehensive and resource-rich comments as part of their feedback. This presentation will show how the program can specifically be used to promote effective, accurate and fluent composition in English.

Keywords

Written feedback, process-writing, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), grammar-checking, language tools

INTRODUCTION

A continuing need at all levels of education in Hong Kong is to make high-quality, high-interest and relevant language instruction widely available to students, while also improving the management of language learning for hard-pressed language teachers. This talk will illustrate one aspect of a web-based language learning and assignment management system and some of the resources and tools which it provides to students and their teachers. This system has been used to run the online element of English language courses for the HKUST College of Lifelong Learning since its inception, and is also currently used for online delivery by a number of undergraduate Language programs at HKUST.

The component of this system I will focus on in this talk is an integrated suite of tools (*Mark My Words*) that makes online resources available to students during the writing process and as part of the feedback on their written assignments. It encourages students to take an autonomous, discovery-based approach to their learning. It also allows instructors to give timely, systematic, comprehensive and resource-rich comments as

part of their feedback. This program can be customized to support student writing and instructional feedback in any subject and in any language, including Chinese. It is the aim of this technology.

- To reduce the tedium of error correction;
- To make feedback more timely, consistent and adequate; and
- To assist teachers in prioritizing and identifying errors and in explaining subject concepts, and to make these concepts more easily understood by learners.

This presentation will show how the program can be used to guide novice writers, especially learners of English, in composing effectively, accurately and fluently in English.

A LEARNING AND TEACHING PROBLEM

Novice writers – learners of English in particular – are often ill prepared when they enter university for the written work required in academic subjects. They lack facility with the conventions of various formal types of written English (including academic composition in general, as well as the specific skills required to produce business reports, scientific writing, etc.). This weakness extends from difficulty with sentence grammar and vocabulary to wider problems of logic, consistency, organization, etc. Student writers may not even be fully aware of the need for accuracy and clarity, and they are often misinformed as to how to formulate arguments and how to take a position and most effectively communicate this to various types of reader.

Most undergraduate students require a high degree of individual guidance in mastering the subtleties of formal written discourse. They have to be taught how to take a systematic approach to academic writing and need support at all stages of the writing process, from drafting to re-writing and submission. They require help in identifying and correcting errors of commission in discourse and style, as well as in grammar and vocabulary, and they need guidance in overcoming errors of omission in all these areas. They also need guidance in textual aspects of appropriate organization, proper citation techniques, etc. At the same time, if they are to become independent professionals, they need to be weaned from direct dependency on instruction. Relevant and accessible resources must be located or created; and students must be taught how to use these, and made accountable for using them appropriately. These requirements are well beyond the scope of current instructional resources both in human and financial terms.

A PARTIAL SOLUTION

Mark My Words is an add-on toolbar for *MS Word* designed to help students compose, proofread and submit their written assignments and to help instructors provide guidance in the specific requirements for writing in their specific subject areas, as well as to manage student assignments and to provide feedback on their students' written assignments. As an editing tool, the program can replace or be used in addition to such *MS Word* tools as 'Insert Comments', 'Track Changes' and 'AutoCorrect'.

Apart from providing an enhanced version of these basic editing tools, the program includes a full Assignment Management System (AMS), including prompts for instructors so that they can specify basic parameters for each assignment (e.g., due date, length, organizational features, citation style, marking criteria etc.) as well as links to comprehensive explanations relevant to their subject area. Students are able, as they compose, to access relevant information provided by their instructors for any particular assignment. Students also have access to the tools described below (i.e., online resources and tools during the writing process). When they have completed all stages of the writing process, they can directly submit their assignment to the relevant server directory by simply pressing a button on their *MS Word* toolbar. This sends an email alert to the appropriate instructor that an assignment has been uploaded. The instructor retrieves the assignment directly from and into *MS Word* and can use the tools described below to insert comments and grade the paper. The instructor then returns the assignment by sending it directly from the word processor with a single click and the student is alerted by email that the commented, graded essay is available for review.

I will now illustrate some of the feedback mechanisms of this program by describing how it is used to embed and manage comments in essays written for English language courses.

AN ILLUSTRATION

This program allows instructors to provide detailed comments on all aspects of written work by inserting brief pre-written (and customizable) pop-up comments linked to more detailed web-based explanations, interactive tutorials, references, etc. Several UG and Cont. Ed. English language courses currently use this program to give novice writers access to lexical (idiomatic) and structural (rule-based) aspects of English that are normally only available to those with native speaker intuition of the language. As appropriate, students are pointed toward tools and resources that are either directive (e.g., grammar guides, dictionaries, etc.) or inductive and procedural (e.g., the ‘data-driven’ approach described by Johns, 1991). The feedback mechanisms of this program include:

- a) Feedback assistance in the form of dialogue boxes that assist the instructor to insert links to appropriate resources (including both discovery-based look-up tools and authoritative advice);
- b) An easily edited rule-based pattern-matching algorithm that functions as a grammar checker;
- c) A ‘vocabulary analysis’ module that measures the use of appropriate words and phrases; and a summary report of comments.

A Feedback Assistant

Figure 1 illustrates how the *Mark My Words* program can help instructors of English attach comments to students’ written language and to point students to appropriate look-up tools.

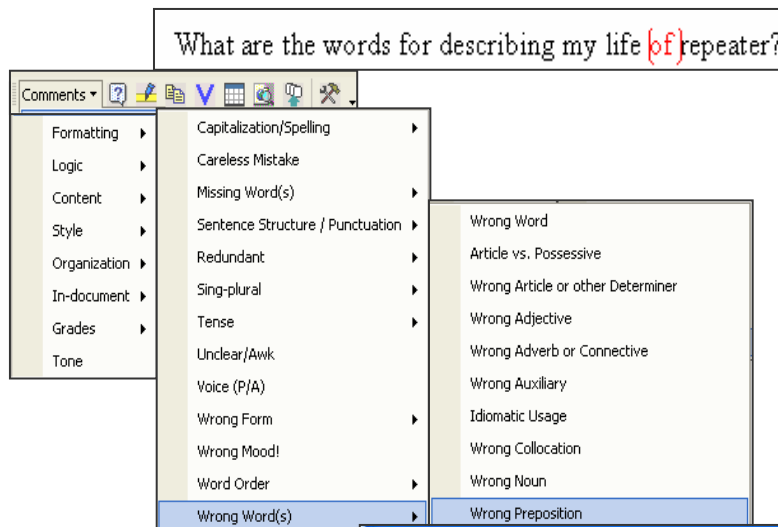
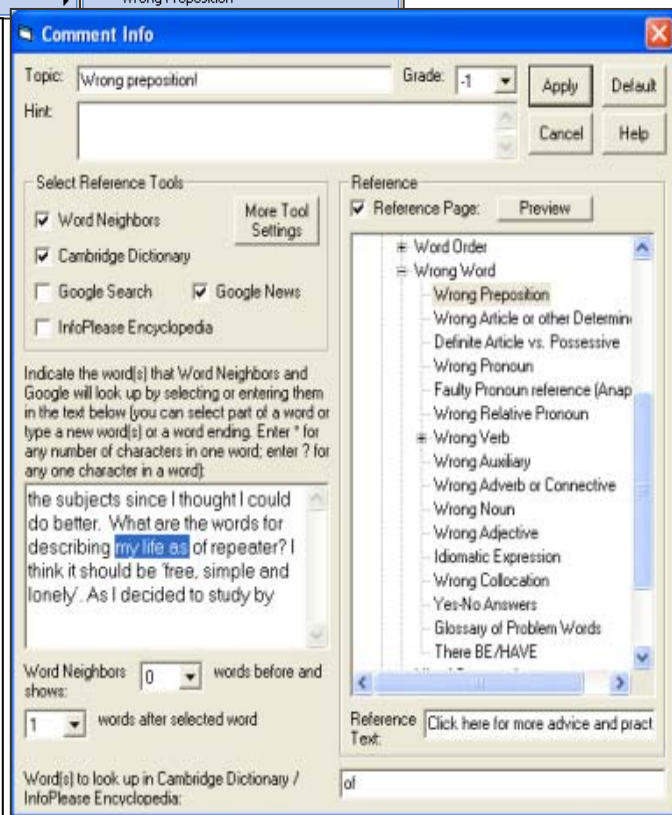


Figure 1. The instructor identifies a student remark that requires feedback (top center); then selects the appropriate comment type from the toolbar (top left). In this case, the problem is an error in the choice of preposition. A ‘Comment Information’ dialogue then appears (bottom right). The instructor can accept the default tools, links and comments, or give more explicit advice and point the student to alternative resources. In some cases, such as this, it may be necessary for the instructor to reformulate the expression for the student, but instead of seeing it as a reformulation, the student sees authentic contexts in which the accurate expression is used (see Figure 2).



In the case of assignments marked for language usage, where authoritative advice is most appropriate, links are supplied to an online *English Grammar Guide*. This is a web site consisting of over a thousand pages, containing comprehensive explanations of common errors. Interactive quizzes are included for each grammatical concept. These quizzes help students test their ability to identify the various errors of commission and omission in vocabulary, grammar, style, discourse, etc. The instructor can also select links to online dictionaries and encyclopedias. Where it is more appropriate to provide discovery-based (or ‘data-driven’) look-up tools, links are given as well as to other look-up tools, including *Google* searches and a concordancer (*Word Neighbors*).

Figure 2 displays another excerpt from a student's English language assignment. The comment shown links to Word Neighbors and The English Grammar Guide, which are considered relevant for this problem and this student.

What are the words for describing my life of DM21 DM31repeater?

Wrong preposition!
 Look up more contexts of the correct word(s) in [Google Search](#).
[Click here for more advice and practice on this error.](#)

MARK: -1

Google "my life as" Search Advanced Preferences

Web Results 1 - 30 of about 482,000 for "my life as". (0.12 seconds)

News results for "my life as" - View all the latest headlines

My life as an ex-slob - The Times (subscription) - 30 Apr 2004

My Life as an American

My Life as an American
www.kafkaesque.blogspot.com

my life as an ape
 profile. +39 aka tozaki
). recents. [04/04/01]sk
 39.img8.com/ - 6k - Ca

My Life as an Elk
 Welcome to "My Life as an Elk"

English Grammar Guide - Microsoft Internet Explorer

Contents Word Neighbors CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARIES ONLINE Ask Dr. Grammar

Preposition choice

Review the guidelines for using [prepositions](#): using the wrong preposition is one of the **most common errors** made by learners of English.

- The choice of which preposition to use is usually determined by the word **before** or the word **after** the preposition. If you are not sure what preposition to use (or whether to use any preposition), always look up the context of the word with [Word Neighbors](#).
- The choice of preposition is also often determined by the [word class](#) of the word (e.g., [is it a noun or verb?](#)).

For example, a common error by learners of English is to write:
 ✗ The demand of energy is growing all the time.
 demand is used as a noun in the construction *demand* + preposition + noun.
 demand is used as a verb, it is not followed by a preposition:

of conversion or change:
 ideas to English.
 ideas into English.

Figure 2. The student's submission is automatically saved as a web document and appears on the appropriate web page for marking; the instructor then opens the document and inserts comments using the marking tool, *Mark My Words*. When the assignment is returned to the student via the web, the student sees relevant pop-up comments, from which resources such as *Google*, *Word Neighbors* and the *English Grammar Guide* can be accessed.

Such comprehensive pre-defined comments can be inserted in written work in about 20% of the time it takes to mark up paper submissions. Tedious individualized correction is minimized since many, and often most, errors made by students are recurrent, and the students are held responsible for using deductive processes, such as Google and other text retrieval programs (e.g., the Word Neighbors), to correct their errors. Instructors can also use the normal commenting and tracking features of a word processor to make individualized remarks if necessary (these remarks can then be archived or incorporated into the online guide).

Pattern-Matching Grammar Checking

This program also automatically identifies a wide variety of common grammatical and lexical errors. It checks students' texts for language errors using an advanced pattern-matching algorithm. Table 1 lists some of the language errors identified and flagged by *Mark My Words* which are either not flagged by current grammar checkers such as the one available in *MS Word*, or the 'correction' provided by the conventional grammar checker is misleading.

Nonstandard English	Standard English
They sing often. It is because they like to.	They sing often because they like to.
It worth studying hard.	It is worth studying hard.
There have three students there.	There are three students there.
For my parents, they are young.	My parents are young.
This will benefit to you.	This will benefit you.
I born in Hong Kong.	I was born in Hong Kong.
There are many peoples there.	There are many people there.
He demanded for an explanation.	He demanded an explanation.
I want to discuss about this problem.	I want to discuss this problem.
I requested for a form.	I requested a form.
Pay effort on your studies.	Concentrate on your studies.
Make effort to study.	Try to study.
Listen my advice.	Listen to my advice.
No matter they come or not, we will do it.	No matter whether
Even they don't like it, we will do it.	Even if they don't like it, we will do it.

Table 1. The list of English sentences on the left contains common grammatical, lexical and stylistic errors produced by speakers of Cantonese. *Mark My Words* identifies these expressions and does not throw up false negatives for the correct versions (on the right).

This program takes a more learning-focused approach than conventional grammar checkers: the students' writing is not simply 'corrected', but rather students are pointed to resources that they themselves can use to reformulate their writing.

Vocabulary and Grade Analysis

Mark My Words can also generate a vocabulary analysis of a student's assignment to show the range of active vocabulary for each assignment. This is useful for displaying the range of a student's active vocabulary for a particular subject. Of relevance to language learning, it also highlights overused and underused words and word classes (parts of speech) and thus indicates expressions that novice writers may rely on too much (e.g., clichés) and structures that are typically avoided by learners of English (e.g., certain verb tenses, complex sentence structures, etc.).

The program also generates a summary of comments for each student, each set of assignments, etc., and allows instructors to maintain a record of comments given to particular students and groups of students from one assignment, semester, course and instructor to another. In this way instructors can maintain a database of frequent positive and negative comments, and track student progress, identify learnability problems, and so on.

CONCLUSION

This program makes a rich set of resources available to student writers. It encourages students in independent discovery-based learning by directing them to resources which they can use to solve whatever problems that they or their instructor have identified.

By allowing instructors to insert pre-written authoritative comments and links to detailed web-based advice and resources, it also provides resource-supported feedback that can significantly reduce instructors' marking time while increasing the quality and quantity of the advice and correction which they can give their students.

It also allows instructors to track students' learning by logging comments and corrections. Instructors can access a record of how students in one or more class, semester or program compare to each other, and whether instructions the students have received from one semester to another have taken effect.

Mark My Words can be downloaded from http://webtools.ust.hk/mmw/Mark_My_Words.htm. This site also contains sample students' assignments marked with the program as well as a comprehensive guide and animated illustrations of the program.

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REFERENCE

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