

Correcting tool or learning tool? Student perceptions of an online essay writing support tool at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

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This paper reports on the initial data from an extension project that intends to further develop *Marking Mate*, a self-directed assignment writing support programme developed at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) by Eoin Jordan and Andy Snyder. The study explores how students currently use the programme and how they would like to see it being improved. In this paper, we explore the apparent tension between students wanting to use *Marking Mate* as a correction tool and its potential as a learning tool, with reference to the specific Chinese context of the university. An additional tension between a highly contextualised and locally developed programme (such as *Marking Mate*), and widely available online tools that allow for potentially similar outcomes (such as *Grammarly*), is also discussed. It is argued that the programme may be more effective if it is explicitly presented as a learning tool, rather than a correction tool.

Keywords: Student Writing Support Tool, *Marking Mate*, Online Learning

Introduction and background

Marking Mate (n.d.) is a “free web-based academic writing feedback tool for East Asian learners of English” (Jordan & Snyder, 2012), developed at XJTLU by Eoin Jordan and Andy Snyder. It was created in response to the perceived needs of learners in an East Asian context, and the related suggestion that commercial options of Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) tools, such as *Grammarly* or *Writer's Work Bench*, were not context-specific enough to address the needs of Chinese students studying at an English Medium of Instruction (EMI) institution. In addition, while there is considerable literature about automated grading tools (e.g. Ware & Warschauer, 2006), there is significantly less about automated systems to provide students with feedback (e.g. Czaplewski, 2009), and even then, it is still often linked to grading (Matthews, Janicki, He, & Patterson, 2012).

Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE), which is about providing feedback to students, has been the subject of some research in recent years, including a focus on how it can be used to provide formative writing feedback (e.g. Li, Link, & Hegelheimer, 2015; Wang, Shang, & Briody, 2013; Grimes & Warschauer, 2010). However, there is a lack of freely available AWE software, and commercial options are not tailored to the needs of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners in an East Asian context (Jordan & Snyder, 2012; Jordan, 2012).

Marking Mate allows users:

...to input texts, such as essays or reports, and receive instant formative feedback on common stylistic issues for East Asian learners, as well as on some grammar problems. Issues that users are currently able to search for include: emotional, informal or clichéd language, use of contractions, lack of hedging language, excessively repeated vocabulary, conjunctions at the start of sentences, the presence of many consecutive short sentences, redundant phrasing, personal pronoun usage, question and exclamation usage, citations not matching references, and uncountable noun plurals. (Jordan & Snyder, 2012)

Marking Mate has been in use at XJTLU since 2012, and the project that we report on in this paper is aimed at evaluating both its current use and potentially different uses, depending on what student users (and lecturers) tell us. The project is funded by the XJTLU Teaching Development Fund, the objective of which is to stimulate innovation in learning and teaching at the university.

XJTLU is a joint venture between Xi'an Jiaotong University in China, and Liverpool University in the UK. The university is based in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, and was founded in 2006. It is unique in that it merges two different higher education systems. While this creates exciting opportunities, it also creates potential challenges, especially as they relate to culture and differences in educational traditions. XJTLU, as an EMI Institution in China, is unique in that it offers a degree which is partly UK-designed and needs to comply with UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requirements, and partly contextualized, making it distinguishable from the 'home' degrees in terms of format and content (Eland & King, 2015). However, different expectations about learning outcomes and educational values are not the only challenge in this context. Other factors include cultural differences, language issues, and differences in educational backgrounds in a context where the vast majority of students are mainland Chinese, while most of the teachers are from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Thus, as Zhou, Xu, and Bayley (2011) note, "EFL teachers [or any other teachers in the XJTLU context] are both teachers and learners of intercultural competence in their teaching" (p. 163). This is significant in the context of this project as it affects the way some students respond to a tool like *Marking Mate*.

As has been widely documented, in general the Chinese education system is characterised by a heavy emphasis on exams and rote learning (Li & Cutting, 2011; Wang & Byram, 2011; Yu & Suen, 2005), which reflects particular educational traditions. However, it is also important to emphasise firstly that there is considerable diversity within Chinese education, and secondly that the education system in China is undergoing significant changes and shifts, and the establishment of XJTLU is in itself part of such changes. As Jin and Cortazzi (2011) note, China has in recent years officially emphasized 'quality education', which includes "a turn to more modern approaches to teaching and learning, including learner-centred ones" (p. 2). However, such changes do not necessarily have much impact in the short term, for "the reform of teaching methodology does not necessarily go hand in hand with a change in teachers' beliefs, especially where these are closely linked to cultural heritage" (Li & Cutting, 2011, p. 40). It is not our intention here to present a value judgment about culturally-based approaches to teaching and learning, but rather to suggest that educational traditions are likely to have an impact on how students perceive an online writing tool such as *Marking Mate*, and in particular, how they then engage with such a tool, and furthermore, how they would *prefer* to engage with such a tool.

The project we report on here was originally conceptualised with the aim of extending *Marking Mate*'s use and potentially improving students' experience with the tool. Based on students' and lecturers' feedback we will then develop some improvements and features. In response to a student's question of "What's a comma splice?", we thought it would be inconceivable that the explanation would not be on the *Marking Mate* site, but perfectly possible that the student would not have been able to find it. Thus, we have set out to make the site potentially more user-friendly and/or clearer in its functions. Moreover, if students are willing to find out more as a result, why not provide them with the tools to learn how to address their errors themselves directly from within *Marking Mate*? We believe that it is 'just in time' when it matters most (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011), for example when preparing an essay for assessment, that students will most likely use self-study tools. As noted, in this paper we report on the first stage of the project, which is student feedback on *Marking Mate* as an online tool.

Method

The research question for this project was: How can *Marking Mate* be optimized to enhance student writing, self-directed learning, and the overall user experience? The approach and methods were as follows:

Disseminate an online questionnaire about *Marking Mate* to all XJTLU Language Centre (LC) tutors and use the results to guide specific improvements and refine our thinking; 17 out of 185 LC staff replied.

Disseminate an online questionnaire to students across all departments. This included students who may or may not have used, or may or may not be aware of, *Marking Mate*. The survey was made available to all first and second year students at XJTLU, 129 of whom responded and took the survey, out of a possible 5217. 88% of those who responded replied that they knew what *Marking Mate* was, while 84% of respondents said they had used the program in the past. This gives an indication of the penetration of the program within XJTLU, albeit with significant limitations due to the overall response rates. Thus, we needed to exercise caution in making generalisations based on these data.

Conduct a series of focus groups with student who have used *Marking Mate* to gauge their perceptions and collect their feedback on the tool. We held a total of four focus groups from June 3 – 15, 2016, which consisted of first and second year students, with 4, 4, 4, and 8 students attending, respectively.

Based on the feedback of stage one, the next (second) stage of the project is expected to map potential improvement and apply those improvements to the tool.

This is then expected to be followed in the third stage by another round of testing and student feedback, in order to test if the improvements have the anticipated impact.

Results

Theme 1: How students currently receive/perceive feedback from Marking Mate

First and second year students at XJTLU generally use *Marking Mate* as a tool to find errors in written work to be submitted for assessment, fulfilling a function within an EAP context by looking for commonly assessed items such as: informality, excessive repetition, lack of hedging, unsophisticated sentence structure, and too-brief paragraphs. At a basic level, students expressed satisfaction with *Marking Mate*; however, some responded to the ‘emoticons’ system it uses to indicate the level of students’ work. Some students expressed confusion about the meaning of the faces, while they also asked for a percentile score based on particular areas of focus within *Marking Mate*. To get more specific information, users need to rollover the highlighted and comment sections for definitions and examples, which are all presented in a small font. In addition, students repeatedly complained of the lack of variety in feedback provided.

Theme 2: Informal versus formal language

Perhaps the most commonly expressed desire by students was for more guidance on substituting formal, academic language for terms flagged by the software as informal. Regularly updated word banks, examples uses of specific terms, and a range of synonyms and examples of usage were some further desires expressed by students. As one focus group participant commented, “[I]f the website provides you with some synonyms maybe you could [write more formally], but we don’t know which one is better in this situation”.

Theme 3: Usability

A repeated theme was the difficulty of finding information on *Marking Mate* about what students’ individual issues actually were and how to fix them. Related to this is the fact that many of the tools and instructions are hard to locate, and therefore often go unused by students. The grammar, spelling, punctuation, formal language and length measures are clear, and this is what students use.

Theme 4: Repeated words and discipline and subject-specific vocabulary

Marking Mate will flag words used frequently; however, students expressed frustration at receiving lower scores from the program when they repeat necessary content words. For example, an essay on the topic of ‘bad credit’ will feature the word ‘bad’, which would normally be highlighted by *Marking Mate* for replacement with a more ‘academic’ term. Students also repeatedly expressed frustration with *Marking Mate*’s apparent ignorance of specialized discipline-based vocabulary, as well as a lack of recognition of names, particularly of academic authors. On a similar note, students expressed a need for different structures for different types of academic writing and genres; for example, an essay for an English student has a different form than a report for a chemistry student.

Theme 5: No references

Marking Mate does not check reference lists, which was of great concern to students given the centrality of citation and reference to academic writing, even if it does point out that in-text citations need coordinated references.

Theme 6: Just a checking tool

Some students indicated they used *Marking Mate* simply to check their work, not to learn how to fix mistakes when writing: “It can be just used for academic essays... That’s for checking, last checking.”

Discussion

Theme 1: How students currently receive/perceive feedback from Marking Mate

The more specific or advanced the context, the less well *Marking Mate* functioned. For example, students writing scientific lab reports were encouraged by lecturers to use short, clear sentences, which *Marking Mate* flags as insufficiently academic. If *Marking Mate* were to offer percentile markings, it would certainly cause friction if the resulting score differed from scores given by teachers and tutors.

Theme 2: Informal versus formal language

Students expressed frustration at not knowing which terms and phrases were actually suitable substitutions for informal language. They asked for a relevant dictionary to be linked to the site. Many students said that they begin the process of choosing different synonyms by going to *Youdao*’s Chinese-to-English dictionary, even though they know it is inaccurate for the purposes of academic writing. They then go to other sources and programs such as *dictionary.com* or use the software available through *MS Word*, which they reported as being very time-consuming, or, as one focus group participant put it, “I think it’s not convenient.”

Theme 3: Usability

Student experience and learning could be maximized if they understood all the other features of the site, especially the links to help for specific areas of writing. Clearer instructions about the site and where students need to make decisions is necessary, specifically, it should be made clear to students exactly what an automated writing evaluation tool will and will not do. There are currently clear delineations on the site; however, these are given in a pop-up with a grey background, which are ignored by almost everyone who uses the site. An easier approach, such as a short video explaining and demonstrating the appropriate use would help to manage student expectations and to make their use of the site more effective. In addition, a better effort to explain the utility of the site should be coordinated by XJTLU's Language Centre. The low response rate by LC tutors to the survey request is cause for some concern in this respect.

Theme 4: Repeated words and discipline and subject-specific vocabulary

Students said they just ignored *Marking Mate* when it flagged a necessary word as repeated; however, they also expressed a disquiet about the apparent lack of accuracy in the tool. Students need to be made aware that issues such as repetition of key words and subject-specific vocabulary can be accounted for by customizing the settings of *Marking Mate* or by using their own judgment in appraising AWE-generated comments on their work. In addition, students pointed out that new expressions, like *netizen*, are not recognized as correct.

Theme 5: No references

Given the variety of referencing systems and requirements of different disciplines and lecturers, a versatile, accurate check of references is beyond the purview of *Marking Mate*. As citation and referencing are necessary components of academic writing, general guidance on referencing as well as links to different referencing formats and e-tools would be easy to provide, including exercises about constructing references in specific formats. As a basis, a clearer (multi-modal) statement of the limitations of any AWE should be provided.

Theme 6: Just a Checking Tool

Some students expressed a desire to be able to do more with *Marking Mate* so that they could self-study. Ideas included linking to a series of multi-level grammar exercises so that students could actually learn how not to make the errors *Marking Mate* flags, as well as providing models of essays at different levels and in different genres. Several students expressed their belief in the superiority of *Grammarly*, as it allows writers to edit their work while using it, which *Marking Mate* does not, and it also offers more detailed information in a visual parallel to a writer's essay, whereas *Marking Mate* requires rollovers with the mouse. Moreover, students expressed disappointment that feedback from the program can only be used on the site, not linked to a social networking system or email, nor does it automatically allow users to search for information about flagged issues. Many students also commented that while they were in the midst of composing, they would have liked examples for genre structures and styles made available. Linking the site with a lexical dictionary or language corpus would be able to directly give examples of words in use, providing context for students choosing appropriate academic language to assist with self-study in this specific area.

Finally, linking *Marking Mate* to a multi-level bank of exercises where students could find activities useful for learning grammar, which would leverage the potential of the tool as a 'just in time' self-study aid, provided students understand how to use it; this would make it a tool for learning rather than mere checking.

Conclusion

In a Chinese higher education context, and especially in the context of a transnational university such as XJTLU, where the focus is on increasing active learning approaches, rather than more teacher-centred exam-focused approaches, a self-directed online tool such as *Marking Mate* offers a lot of potential, which may be actualised if the tool can be clearly positioned as a learning tool, rather than a checking tool. The initial student feedback as reported in this paper will be used to inform that process, as another small step in a rapidly changing Chinese higher education environment.

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