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Comsem.net: An Online Platform for Providing and Tracking Delayed Corrective Feedback

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by James Hunter

Summary: Delayed corrective feedback is a way to provide recasts and reformulations on oral production without interrupting communication. This article describes comsem.net, a free online platform for providing delayed corrective feedback.

Keywords: delayed corrective feedback, oral production, CF, comsem.net, recast, reformulation

What Is "Delayed Corrective Feedback"?

Teachers typically provide corrective feedback (CF) on learners' spoken production immediately, most often with recasts, elicitation, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback and so forth (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Recently, researchers have begun to explore the value of delayed corrective feedback, that is, feedback that is provided after an activity is completed (Nassaji & Kartchava, 2017; Rolin-Ianziti, 2006). Quinn (2014) notes that both immediate and delayed CF can instigate the retrieval and reconsolidation of linguistic forms but argues that delayed CF is better equipped to do so because it allows more time for both retrieval and reconsolidation to take place. Conversely, Li et al. (2016, p. 280) conclude that "explicit CF appears to be more effective than implicit CF, but there is plenty of evidence to show that both recasts and prompts are effective." I propose (Hunter, 2012a, b; 2021) a form of delayed CF that promotes uptake and repair, allows for more consistent learner review, and enables longer-term tracking of learner output. This was originally accomplished by means of an Access database, but for the past four years, I have been working with computer science students at my institution to develop a web-based version, comsem.net.

How Does Delayed CF Work?

Whatever the communicative activity, the teacher takes notes of items of student language that would benefit from CF. These items are entered into "worksheets" on

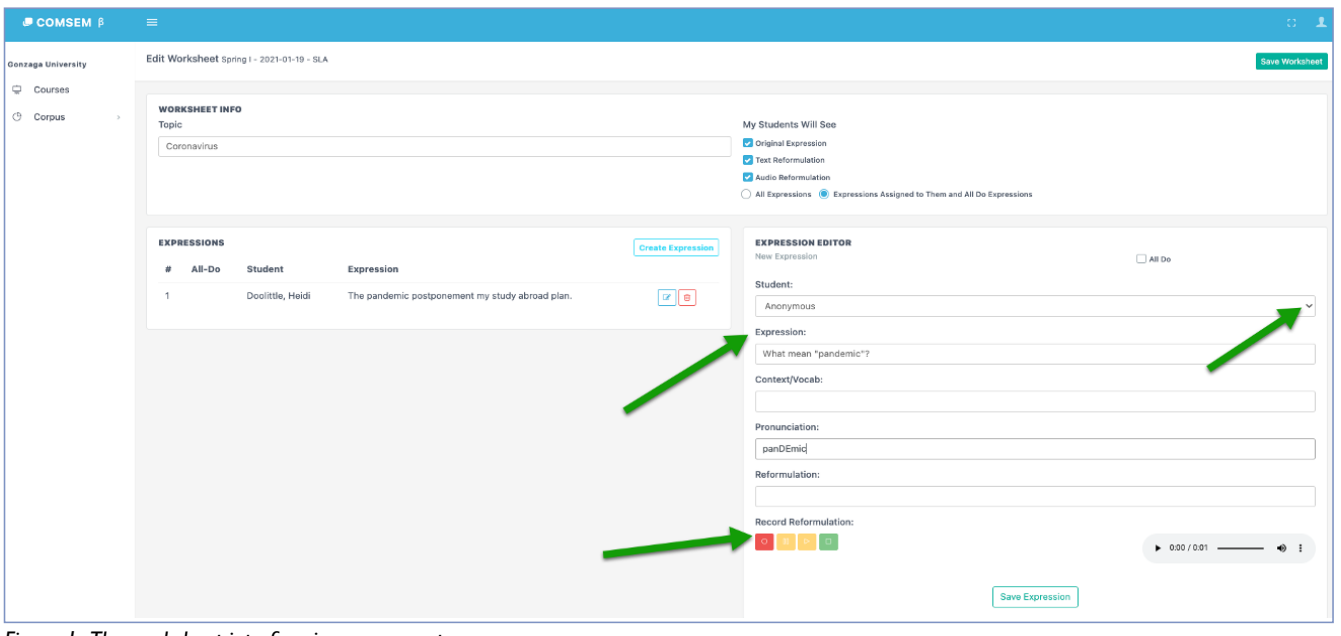

Figure 1: The worksheet interface in comsem.net

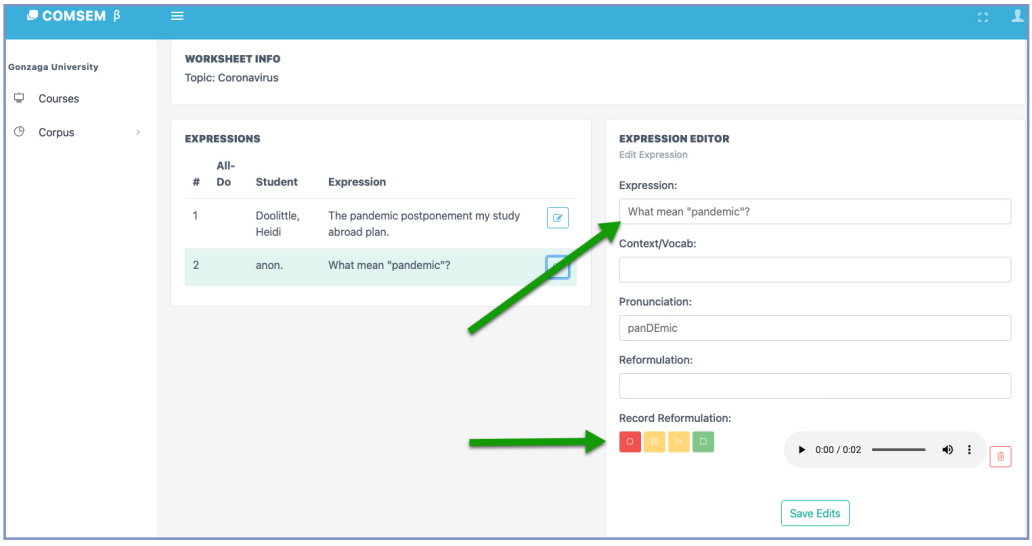

Figure 2: The student submission interface on comsem.net

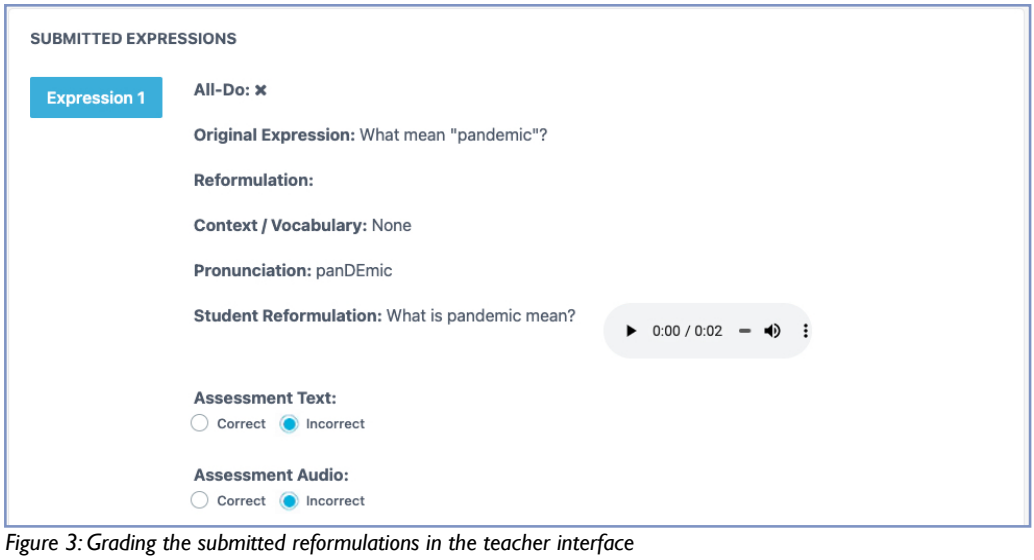

Figure 3: Grading the submitted reformulations in the teacher interface

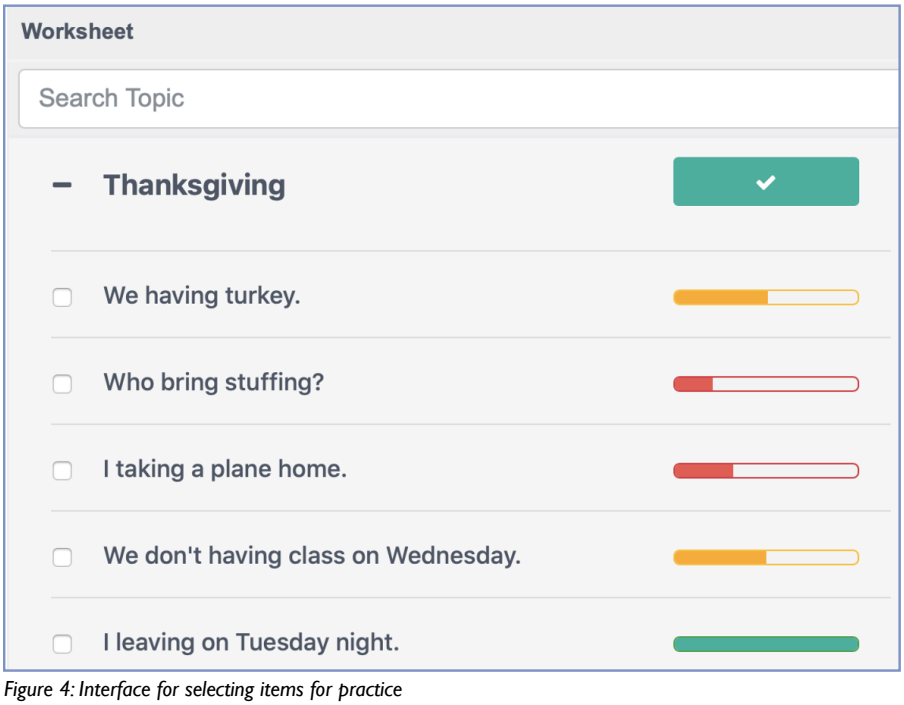

Figure 4: Interface for selecting items for practice

comsem.net (Figure 1) and assigned to specific students– or left anonymous, if that is what the class prefers. The teacher can also choose to assign an item to all students to correct. Next, the teacher records a reformulation of the item, saves the item (and worksheet, after all items have been entered) and releases the worksheet to the students. The teacher can also decide how much support to give the students: text and audio reformulations, or just one or the other.

On the student side (Figure 2), the students can see the items assigned to them (or to all students), listen to the reformulations, and record and type the corrected version. We are currently incorporating a speech-to-text function to transcribe the recorded version automatically, which will provide immediate pronunciation assessment as the students attempt to reformulate the item. The student then submits her reformulations back to the teacher for grading (Figure 3).

Practice Functions

While there is currently no assessment functionality on comsem.net, learners can practice items in a limited way. Assuming they will respond faster to items which are more automatic, we have added a kind of timed grammaticality judgment test, using the learner's own items. The learner selects items for practice (Figure 4), using a visual guide that indicates whether the item needs attention (red or orange) or is consistently correct (green). This indicator is based on previous accuracy and judgment time: incorrectly judged items and items that take longer to judge are those that need more attention. In this way, the system discriminates between "mistakes" and "errors" and thus represents "a much

more sophisticated study and analysis of errors than is usually accorded them" (Corder, 1967, p. 167).

Once the items have been selected, the system presents items one at a time, drawn from the pool of correct and incorrect reformulations, in either text or auditory form. In this way, the learner is seeing/hearing her own language production and judging its correctness. The system gives the learner ten seconds to make a judgment (Figure 5), which is considered a reasonable compromise between time pressure and psycholinguistic processing time. The assumption here is that more established, automatic language items–whether correct or not–draw on implicit knowledge, while items which require the learner to use explicit knowledge to make a judgment will take longer to judge (Ellis, 2005).

Corpus Functions

Because comsem.net stores each item, it is possible to use the resulting "corpus" as a tool to investigate errors. Behind the scenes, the system adds a part-of-speech tag to every word, so that it is possible to search for specific types of errors, for example go + VERB (Figure 6).

Teachers and researchers can use this tool to find authentic language errors for analysis and classroom focus on form.

We are currently developing an error-tagged corpus interface, to enable teachers to mark items for specific error types and search the database for error types (Figure 7). We are also looking into the possibility of using machine learning (neural nets) to automatically detect errors in items (see for example Lau, Clark, & Lappin, 2017), particularly the most common error types: noun phrase, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and tense errors (Green, 2006).

Conclusion

Comsem.net, a free, web-based platform for providing delayed corrective feedback, overcomes some of the major limitations of immediate CF: its ephemeral and often ambiguous nature, its tendency to interrupt communicative flow and stigmatize the speaker, and the lack of systematicity in the ways it is provided. Students and teachers currently using the platform have given it positive reviews –student users in a recent survey responded "Helpful" (40%) or "Very Helpful" (60%) to the question: Does it help your English to see your mistakes and correct them on comsem.net?–as well as providing invaluable comments on functionality and suggestions for improvements, such as improved workflow for teachers, a "dashboard" to monitor completion of assignments, and (self-)assessment functionality. These will be incorporated, if possible, into future versions.

For those interested in trying out the platform with their students, contact the author.

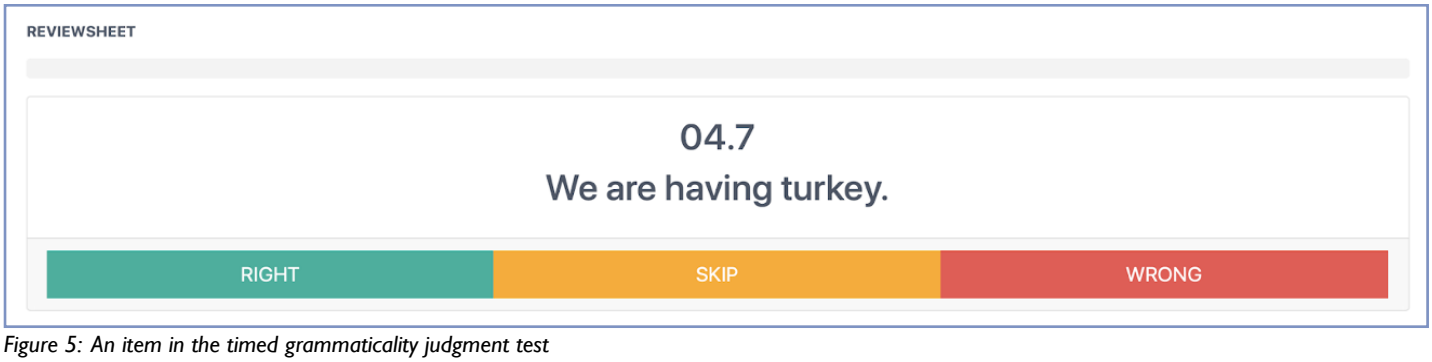

Figure 5: An item in the timed grammaticality judgment test

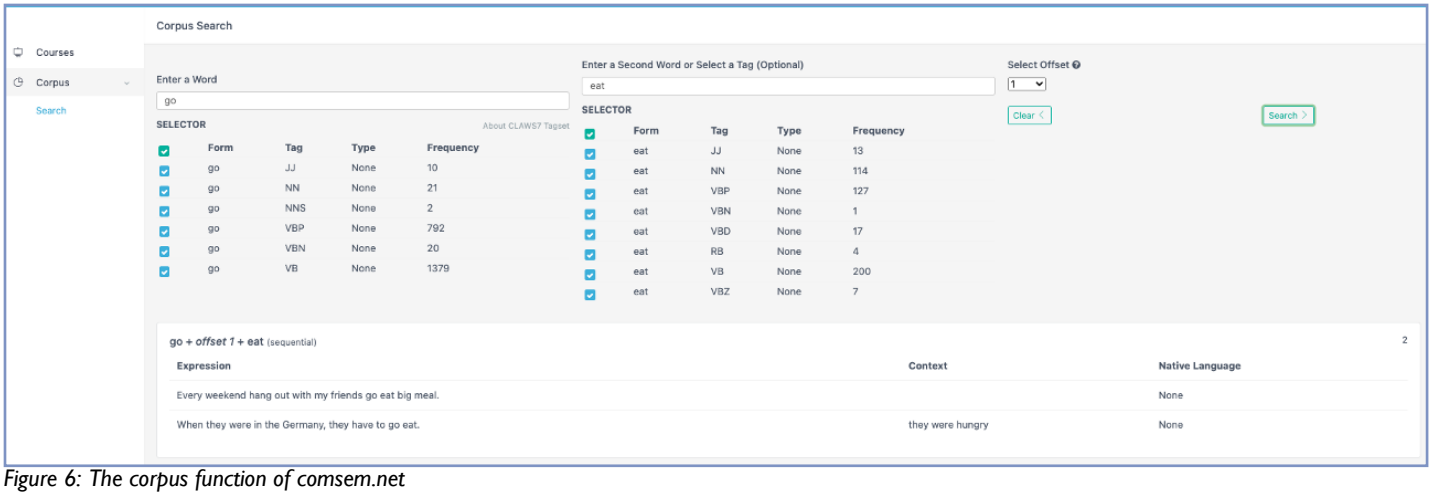

Figure 6: The corpus function of comsem.net

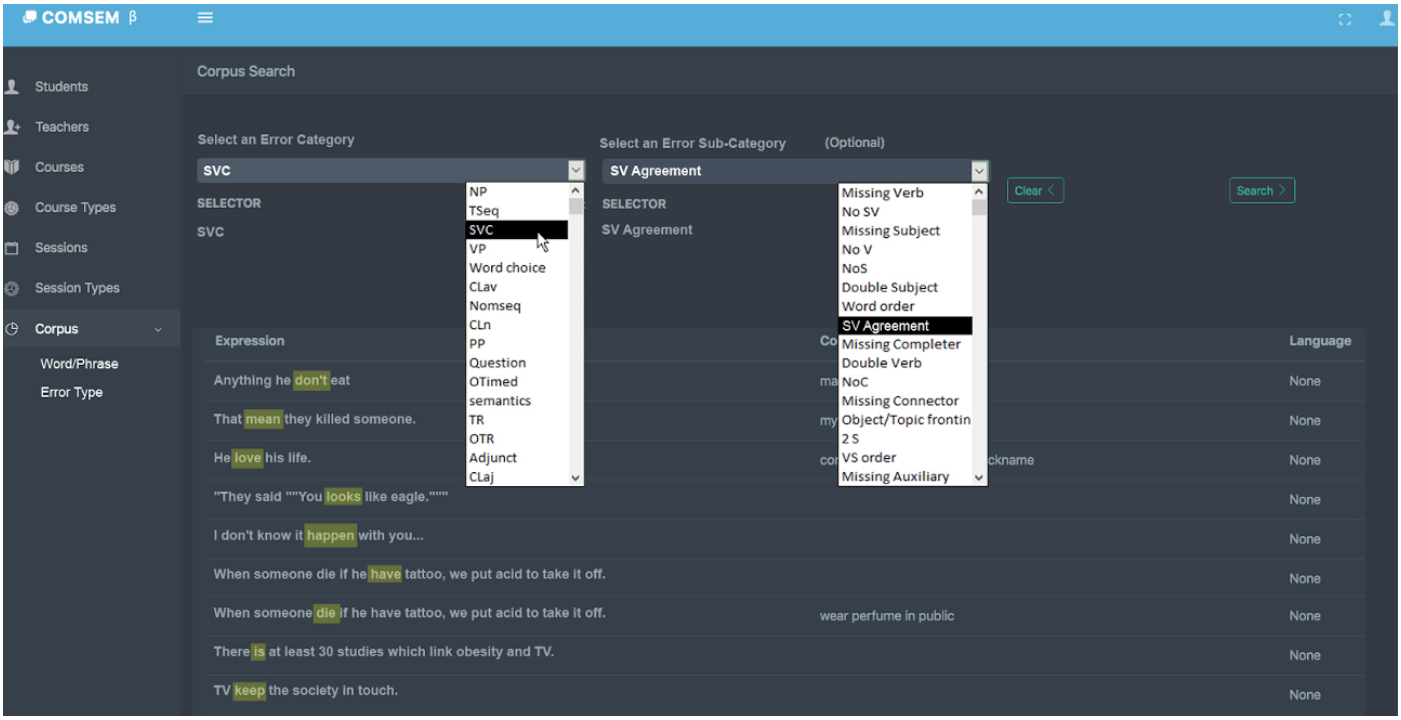

Figure 7: The error corpus in comsem.net, currently under development

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James Hunter has taught ESL/EFL for over 30 years and is the director of TESOL Programs at Gonzaga University. He has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham, UK, and his research interests include Second Language Acquisition, corpus linguistics, construction grammar, instructional technologies, and teacher development. You can contact him at hunter@gonzaga.edu.