

A Corpus-based Study of Teachers' Feedback Commentaries on College Students' English Assignments

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ABSTRACT

According to Leki (1990) and Hyland & Hyland (2006), written feedback could offer potential value in facilitating students' future writing, and is one of the most popular approaches tutors used to communicate or interact with their students. This is because the feedback could offer a lot of informational comments, which could facilitate the students' writing ability and provide the opportunity for teachers to interact with students (Hyland, 2003). In this circumstance, feedback is generally acknowledged as pedagogically useful to offer informational reactions and advice to facilitate the academic essay writing (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcok & Lefkoeitz, 1994; Hendricks & Quinn, 2000). Besides the informational meaning, feedback is also regarded as the opportunity for teachers to express their "stance and beliefs" about writing and terminology in the academic writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p.187). As for teachers, the response to the students' writing is more than the form or content correction; it includes the "delicate social interactions" that could boost or destroy the effectiveness of the feedback and the pedagogical meaning (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.187). For students, feedback is also one of the most favorite and acceptable methods in their learning process (Tee, 2014).

KEYWORDS

Corpus-based study; teachers' written feedback; language features

In our context, the feedback includes four aspects: "knowledge and understanding of concepts; knowledge and use of the literature; critical reflection on theory and practice; and constructing academic discourse". From the assessment items, we can see that in our context, the teachers are usually not just assessing the grammar of writing but also are hoping to seize this opportunity to teach and reinforce the academic knowledge. Leki (1990) and Reid (1994) have proposed a similar opinion that teachers might fulfill different roles in assessing the writing: such as tutor, proofreader, facilitator, and discriminator. In other words, teachers often have to weigh their choice of comments to achieve a range of "informational, pedagogic, and interpersonal goals" at the same time (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 187). Therefore, the research of the written feedback has to consider the interaction between teachers, students, passage, and writing aims and therefore regard written comments as "multidimensional social acts" in their own right (Sperling, 1994, p.202). This paper aims to use a corpus-based approach to analyze these concerns in the tutors' written feedback on the post-graduate level assignment in Moray House School of Education. The essay aims to improve the efficiency of tutor's feedback language through giving some implications from the analysis of the tutors' feedback discourse in terms of genre, hedges, modal verbs and sentence structure.

1 Literature Review

The written feedback starts from 1980's, researchers (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982) began to investigate the response towards the students' writing, undergraduate students' writing. In 1990's, it is found that written feedback offers a potential value in facilitating students to correct their writing (Ferris et al, 1997; Leki, 1991) and also facilitating their writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990). Hyland & Hyland (2001) have proposed a similar opinion by saying that feedback is a very important process for the facilitation of the writing skills. This is because feedback could offer extensive information about the improvement of writing, which enables the students to be aware of their strength and weakness of writing so as to improve it (Hyland, 2003). In addition, it is also wroth for tutors to know that an effective feedback requires focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging characteristics (Lindemann, 2001).

Feedback is especially important because it lies at the center of the students' learning process and the centrality of the feedback to the students has been proved (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Therefore, providing the feedback to students is one of teacher's most important responsibilities, providing the personalized attention, which is nearly impossible under normal classroom contexts. Thus, feedback is generally admitted as pedagogically useful (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcok & Lefkoeitz, 1994). To be more specific, the students who receive the effective or transparent feedback are able to think critically of their writing and modify their later writing (Strake & Kumar, 2010). Hendricks and Quinn (2000) have proposed a similar opinion, suggesting the way in which lectures' feedback enables learners to gain the authority in academic writing through learning how to cite others' opinions to develop their own argument.

It is admitted that the effective and transparent feedback will exert the positive effects on developing students'

writing ability, while there also exists adverse effect of the tutors' feedback on students' academic writing. Taylor and Hoedt (1996) found that negative feedback exerted adverse effect on writer confidence and motivation, while teachers are more likely to write the comments on what students have done poorly and incorrectly (Daiker, 1989; Dragga, 1986). This is developed by Hunt (2001) by suggesting that the negative feedback could exert profound effect on a students' future development because the over criticized feedback could damage students' self-esteem and confidence (Hunt, 2001). In this circumstance, teachers should be aware that the praise in the feedback could encourage the writing of students while there is a potential risk of damaging the students' motivation and self-confidence to write if there is too much criticism (Connors & Lunsford, 1993).

Besides, on the written feedback towards the students' assignment, there is also a potential risk that students misunderstand the written feedback (Chanock, 2000). The feedbacks those contain 'too much description or narration, and not enough analysis' could more likely lead to the misunderstanding (Chanock's, 2000, p.96). Spinks (1998) has considered the impact of lexico-grammatical choices, especially moralizing selection, have on the guidance of students' into use academic discourse community. Lillis and Turner (2001) have pointed out the confusion caused by the tutor's use of terminology, such as the plagiarism, explicitness and argument etc. In addition, although positive feedback could have a positive effect on students' writing, insincere and premature praise is unlikely to facilitate good writing and sometimes may confuse the students' future writing (Brophy, 1981; Cardelle & Corno, 1981).

James and McInnes (2004) have concerned the way written text used as the exemplar position markers of institutional discourse. For example, the usage of imperatives can lead to the authority, which represents the comments as truth and the use of present tense also could construct the sense of 'truth' (Hyatt, 2003).

Corpus-based approach (CBA) is used to analyze the language features of teacher's written feedback. This is because CBA could probe into both written and spoken texts (McCarthy, 1998). There are several advantages of using CBA, for example, the research of word usage, frequency, collocation and concordance (McEnery and Wilson, 2001). The fundamental features of corpus-based analysis include the following also match with the research aim of conducting an empirical research of analyzing the written feedback corpus (Biber et al, 1998; Conrad, 2002).

Besides, using the CBA enables researcher to explore patterns that cannot be analyzed through the perception and intuition of linguistics or lexicographers (Hyatt, 2005). Besides, it allows for the analysis of "a number of different occurrence" of language and then analysis of the individual contexts (p.434). In this circumstance, CBA enables to research the feedback in different occurrence and also to analyze it in specific context.

According to Biber et al. (1998), Lexicography, grammar, and interest in ESP study are the three areas of CBA, which is also consistent with the research aim. This essay mainly focused on the third one, particular interest in the academic English discourse. In this research, the corpus is an tool to analyze and understand the discourse under a specific academic context, from which get some implications for future improvement.

From the previous literature review section, it could be found that the corpus-based approach could enable us to analyze the feedback language features so as to improve the efficiency and transparency of the feedback and to improve the students' academic writing skill. Thus this research is pedagogically meaningful. Besides, there are lots of discourse analysis research conducted before about the issues or potential problems related to the written feedback (Ferris, 1997; Connors & Lunsford, 1993). However, there is no empirical research done in the University of Edinburgh, School of Moray House. Thus, this essay will conduct an empirical written feedback analysis and deliver some teaching implications for future improvement.

Q1. What are main comment types teachers used in the feedback?

Q2. What are the most obvious language features in the written feedback?

2 Research methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed in answering the two research questions. The feedback texts were first coded through the comment points that focus on a particular aspect of the text. In total, there are 223 texts, which consists 7819 words. Having identified the feedback points, and then the texts are schemed into five categories proposed by Hyatt's (2003). The analysis of the corpus of feedback suggested that the five categories types of feedbacks have their subcategories. And some illustrative samples from the feedback corpus are offered in this section.

3 Results

First, teachers are more likely to comment on the content and give the suggestions for future academic writing according to the table1. Except one individual comments who have got distinctive marks for several courses, the Phatic comments in our context is rarely seen (only 4 Phatic comments), which means teachers are unlikely to show their

surprise or interest on students' assignment except the distinctive one. This is because 3 out of 4 phatic comments were coming from distinctive assignment. Besides, in our context, teachers comment less on the structure of the assignment (2%). This may be because the structures of the assignment are always settled or offered by course tutors.

From the second calculation, we could see that when teachers express their interests or surprise, 75% the comments will include the personal attribution, such as 'I was impressed...' or 'I was pleased...'. Besides, we could see the largest hedging proportion is used in developmental and content comments, which is 62.2% and 42% separately. We will analyze this language feature in detail in the following section.

In the feedback, the paired acts are employed frequently through combining suggestion with criticism, or praise. The format of paired act is used in offering suggestions or criticism because teachers know that the feedback is kind of social interaction, and over-criticism could undermine the effectiveness of feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Thus, one of the most obvious features from the previous analysis is that 61% of negative evaluation of the feedback are used the paired act patterns, in which they combine the praise with the criticism with the praise. In addition, 27% developmental comments are also given through the paired act pattern. This format could be more acceptable than the direct criticism for the students so as to improve the feedback efficiency.

There is also an interesting phenomenon that the positive evaluations (praise) are always less specific than negative evaluations as the teachers will always explain why they think the point is not good with specific examples. This is opposite to the previous research findings that the negative feedback is likely to be highly formulaic on the vocabulary and grammatical structure by Johnson (1992). The teachers always tend to give the specific example on the negative points or elaborate the reasons of the criticism, which could be more pedagogically meaningful.

However, there is a finding that some tutors are likely to make claims when making suggestion for future improvement. These claims always start with the personal attribution by saying 'I think...' or 'I would...' without further explanation. We can see from the comment below that teachers make claims by saying 'go much further' and the 'master's level' without explain why or how to achieve. In this circumstance, it could be hard for students to understand the comments or accept the suggestions effectively in their future academic writing. Thus, the efficiency of the suggestion may be undetermined.

4 Conclusion

This essay analyzed the language features of the written feedback through analyzing the generic features, hedges, modal verbs used in the feedbacks. The results show that some features facilitate the academic writing, which is pedagogically meaningful, while some of the features may undermine the effectiveness of the feedback. Thus, teachers should be aware of these potential misinterpretation caused by written feedback. Besides, teachers should be aware that the feedback is not only a way to deliver advice but also has the function of building up the interpersonal relationship. Due to the time limitation, teachers' attitudes' and students' attitudes towards the feedback cannot be analyzed, which could be further researched in the future.

About the Author

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