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Factors affecting written distance-learning feedback: the tutor's perspective
Παράγοντες που επηρεάζουν τη γραπτή ανατροφοδότηση στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση: η οπτική του καθηγητή-συμβούλου

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Στο πλαίσιο της έναρξης της εξ αποστάσεως διάδρασης φοιτητή και καθηγητή-συμβούλου, οι διδάσκοντες της πρώτης ενότητας του Μεταπτυχιακού Προγράμματος Ειδίκευσης Καθηγητών Αγγλικής στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο βάζουν τα θεμέλια της αυτονόμησης των φοιτητών τους, μεταξύ άλλων, και μέσα από την κατάλληλη γραπτή ανατροφοδότηση στις γραπτές εργασίες τους. Αυτό προϋποθέτει συστηματική ενασχόληση με το περιεχόμενο και τη μορφή των γραπτών τους σχολίων σε σχέση και με το τελικό προϊόν, το κείμενο της εργασίας, και με τον ανθρώπινο παράγοντα (πρβλ. Goldstein, 2004), ο οποίος εμπλέκεται ιδιαίτερα ενεργά στην εξ αποστάσεως διδασκαλία. Στην ανακοίνωση αυτή εξετάζουμε τη στρατηγική και τις αντιλήψεις του καθηγητή-συμβούλου (πρβλ. Lee, 2004, 2009, μεταξύ άλλων) σχετικά με τις μορφές 'παρέκκλισης' που θίγει η γραπτή ανατροφοδότηση στις ακαδημαϊκές εργασίες των φοιτητών και τη σχετική βαρύτητα 'σφαιρικών' και 'τοπικών' λαθών (βλ. Ferris, 2002), το βαθμό αμεσότητας της διόρθωσης, το διορθωτικό ή διευκολυντικό χαρακτήρα των σχολίων καθώς και την αναλογία επιβράβευσης και εντοπισμού αδυναμιών (πρβλ. Hyland και Hyland, 2006). Διερευνάται ο ρόλος του διδάσκοντα ως αξιολογητή και/ή συμβούλου και υπογραμμίζεται η ανάγκη εξισορρόπησης των δύο ρόλων σε ένα περιβάλλον όπου οι δυνατότητες δια ζώσης ανατροφοδότησης είναι λιγοστές. Υποστηρίζουμε ότι οι πρακτικές της εξ αποστάσεως ανατροφοδότησης θα ήταν καλό να εμφανίζουν ένα βαθμό εξατομίκευσης, στοχεύοντας στη μεγιστοποίηση της ανταπόκρισης των φοιτητών και στην επίτευξη του στόχου της 'αυτονόμησης μέσα από τη γνώση'.

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Launching the distance-learning student-tutor interaction process, tutors of the first module of the M.Ed in English course at the HOU lay the foundations of academic student autonomy by means of providing – inter alia -- the appropriate written feedback on written assignments. In doing so, they need to gauge the content and form of their written comments systematically with regard to both output- and student-, that is human factor-related issues (cf. Goldstein, 2004), the latter being particularly relevant to the distance-learning context. In this article we discuss tutor policy as well as tutor perceptions (cf. Lee, 2004, 2009 among others) regarding written feedback on students' academic assignments in terms of aspects of deviance treated and the relative gravity of 'global' and 'local' errors (e.g. Ferris, 2002), the directness of the correction, the punitive or facilitative nature of

the comments provided as well as the relative balance of student strengths and weaknesses on the tutor's comment agenda (cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The role of the tutor as an assessor and/or counsellor is explored and the importance of striking a delicate balance between the two, especially in a context where face-to-face feedback opportunities are severely restricted, is underscored. We suggest that distance-learning feedback practices may need to be at least partially individualized to maximize student response and meet the goal of 'informed autonomy'.

Introduction

In this article we discuss the content and form of written feedback on the written assignments of M.Ed. in TESOL students at the Hellenic Open University and, more specifically, on the work of first year students attending the inaugural module of the postgraduate programme, namely 'Language Learning Skills and Materials (Oracy and Literacy)'. The importance of discussing feedback practices in this particular module, which is compulsory for all students of the M.Ed. and the first on the programme module agenda, is underscored by the fact that such practices create expectations to be nourished throughout the remainder of trainee-students' studies. Systematic scrutiny is also dictated by the fact that first module trainees come to the task of receiving and responding to feedback without any prior exposure to similar experiences, as the feedback they are provided with in their undergraduate studies besides an assessment grade is minimal.

In considering written feedback on L2 (academic) learners' work, this article forms part of the ongoing L2 feedback-related talk, a talk which has blossomed particularly in the last two decades or so (see, among others, Ferris, 2003, 2006 for a review). On the other hand, while taking account of the form-content feedback dichotomy dominant in the feedback literature, our discussion adopts a more global perspective and attempts to counter a number of issues left relatively unexplored in the literature so far, namely the interpersonal component (cf. Goldstein, 2004, Hyland & Hyland, 2006) and the issue of autonomy. In foregrounding these particular issues, we side with a number of studies in the context of Open and Distance Learning (henceforth ODL) which point to the increased need for distance learner support (e.g. Dzakiria, 2008). Interestingly, the specifics of feedback provision have been relatively neglected even within this support-oriented tradition (but see Hyland, 2001, Wion, 2008). Further discussion therefore seems to be mandatory with regard to the nature, the form and the content of tutor response in a context where tutor-learner face-to-face interaction is particularly limited (cf. Hyland, 2001).[1] For when mostly written feedback on assignments constitutes a major form of communication between the parties involved, this feedback is inevitably fraught with a number of ethical issues. The finality of the printed word may have to be somehow moderated, in order for positive learner response to be encouraged.

As suggested in the title of this article, we will attempt to show that feedback provision largely depends on our image of ourselves as tutors as well as on the balance struck between the multiplicity of responsibilities we need to respond to and our trainees' needs. Our discussion will draw on our experience as HOU tutors but the issues raised are, we believe, generalisable beyond the confines of us as tutors and, potentially, beyond the confines of the specific distance institution, and may thus converge with a number of points brought up in relation to ODL generally. We begin by exposing some background issues crucial to the identity of our students' persona, talk about the features of this persona in some detail, illustrate how different types of feedback may interact with it

[1] Interestingly, Hyland (2001) adduces evidence indicative of students' unwillingness to make up for lack of physical contact with the tutor via conversation over the phone. This generally seems to agree with the trend observed among HOU students, too. As Hyland herself points out this is an issue in need of further research.

and, finally, propose a course of action in relation to written feedback practices, foregrounding certain points that may need to be reconsidered.

The background: The HOU distance learner persona

Any consideration of the type of feedback to be provided to students on our programme needs to take their triple role seriously into account. Thus, students come to us as relatively experienced EFL teachers, as distance learning (henceforth, DL) trainees, acting on and responding to the relevant academic study material, which is designed along the lines of distance learning methodology, and, importantly, as more or less novice academic writers, who have to perform specific writing tasks on the basis of their prior reading of the study material and the relevant literature. The feedback provided is thus meant to address all three roles, often not distinguishable and most often interdependent, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

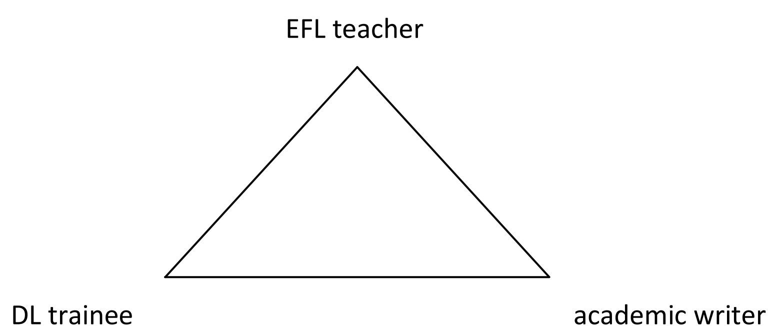

Figure 1. The HOU postgraduate trainee's triple (non-discrete) role to be addressed in feedback

This, it appears, is a particularly complex task. For one thing, the experienced EFL teacher's confidence may often conflict with the DL trainee and the academic writer's embarrassment. But let us look at some background issues, which will help shed more light on this triple role, in some more detail.

Students, who need to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience to enrol on the course, are required to submit four assignments over the academic year, on which they have received pre-text class feedback in the contact session preceding each assignment submission as well as one-to-one feedback during a telephone session prior to submission. After they have received post-text feedback, they are given the chance of student-tutor conferencing over the phone (but see note [1] above) as well as of class or one-to-one conferencing in the session that follows. The feedback provided in the contact and telephone sessions and the extensive written report on each assignment in particular play a crucial role in students' academic progress over the year, as they act as a major type of instruction. Thus, in preparing for their end-of-term exams, students are advised to carefully study and reflect upon 'grey areas' and consider how they would improve on them. This reflection should inform their responses in the written assessment process. It is therefore evident that students' academic development is closely linked to the quality of written feedback they receive over the year. Importantly, the written report incorporates an assessment grade, too. This is a point we will be revisiting later on. Let us now look at the make-up of the Greek DL trainee a bit more closely.

As noted earlier, crucial to all feedback-related talk within the distance learning context is the nature of distance learning itself as well as of the DL trainee persona. Where the chances of an *in vivo* discussion of learning difficulties are limited, the need for support on the part of the tutor becomes imperative, for it is this very support that can sustain the *in vitro* relationship between the learner

and his/her tutor as well as his/her studies generally. "Tackling assignments and dealing with failure" (Dzakiria, 2008: 103) are among the points necessitating both learner and learning support in the distance mode (cf. Simpson, 2002). Generally, however, distance learners are called upon to develop skills regarding their mode of study and the extensive monitoring of the overall process which might be pretty demanding and thus require systematic support on the part of the tutor. As McLoughlin & Marshall (2000: 1, in Dzakiria, 2008: 103) put it, distance learners "are faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self direction and self management of learning." This poses a number of demands on students and tutors alike, demands it would be beyond the confines of our article to go into in detail. With regard to feedback provision in particular, however, it becomes evident that, as we will see more clearly in the next section, tutors cannot overlook these issues in sending in their report on students' written work.

In view of these demands, then, and in relation to feedback provision, the tutor's voice acquires special dimensions. In Kelly & Mills' (2007: 153) words,

> "The tutor is the personal face of the institution for the student; the figure who mediates and individualises the standard course package. But the role brings ethical challenges. The tutor may never meet the student and the role of continuous assessment and correspondence teaching (providing not only an accurate grade but detailed teaching comments to help develop student learning) becomes very significant".[2]

We have all felt this pragmatic and ethical pressure on our shoulders. The DL trainee apparently hovers in the space between tutor support and disengagement, autonomy being a prerequisite of distance-learning work as much as encouragement and support. The image might get even thicker depending on the cultural idiosyncrasies of the community. In the Greek paradigm, for instance, within a relatively authoritative educational context, with hardly any training in non-conventional modes of study, trainees may find it harder to accept autonomy and may also be less prepared to benefit from it. This may be so even in the case of students with a first degree and tertiary education experience. The image of mortification at the thought of putting pen to paper is very familiar in our programme, too, and feedback practices need to take this carefully into account. On the other hand, they also need to take into account trainee characteristics such as motivation, attitudes and beliefs (cf. Lee, 2009), closely related both to trainees' age and to the multiplicity of their commitments at the time of study. In the section that follows we consider how all this may relate to the type of written feedback provided.

Types of feedback: A discussion

Global vs local feedback

The feedback taxonomy, as recorded in feedback-related literature, is quite rich and varied (cf. Ferris, 2002 among others). In this article, however, we do not address any single inventory of error types but, instead, target a variety of deviant instances, as dictated by the assessment criteria that have been postulated for our programme.

More specifically, these assessment criteria jointly address all three roles referred to earlier, namely that of the teacher, capable of transferring the theory into the foreign language class, the DL trainee,

[2] While in our case 'the standard course package' is designed so as to require no particular tutor mediation, this role being largely taken on by the self-assessment questions provided and the feedback included, and contact sessions are usually well attended, individual assignment feedback provided in writing is still crucial.

efficiently working their way through the distance learning material and achieving academic efficacy, and the academic writer, capable of presenting a piece of writing which appeals to the academic community. This would require both systematic processing of the theory and plausible argumentation, ideally going beyond a mere reproduction of the theory to introduce a novel combination of theoretical issues, for instance. Importantly, it would also involve presenting the relevant theory in an academically acceptable manner, namely by building on the relevant bibliographical sources, indicating how one's work occupies a little niche in the vast academic research universe. And then, it would involve creating solid, interesting and, ideally, original links between theory and practice, concretely emerging through the text. Needless to say, all this needs to be couched in academically apt, error-free language while also being arranged so as to fulfill textual requirements.

In terms of the content- versus form-related error distinction raised in the introductory section, the assessment criteria employed in providing written feedback on written assignments in our programme could be said to lean on the content side. Thus, there are three content-related criteria and two more or less form-related ones. The former correspond to the efficiency of students' rationale and analysis, the adequacy and effectiveness of their bibliographical documentation and the application of theoretical principles, that is the establishment of concrete links between theory and practice. The latter are associated with macro- and micro-structural organization as well as with language and presentation issues. The first group could more readily qualify as 'global' in Ferris's (2002) terms, in the sense that it 'scans' the totality of the written assignment in search of argument-building and coherence of ideas, for instance. The second group might fall either within the 'global' set, in so far as it deals with macro-structure, and within the 'local' one (see again Ferris, 2002), focussing on micro-issues, as is the case with (some aspects of) cohesion and specific choice of lexis and grammar, as well as spelling. It appears, then, that global forms of deviance are given the lion's share, which makes the process of providing feedback more demanding, as response to content, an issue generally neglected in the L2 literature,[3] is obviously harder to formalise or even discuss than its form-focussed counterpart. In the rest of this section we will have a closer look at some aspects of particularly global error feedback involved in dealing with our students' writing.

Directness

An important parameter running through the backbone of most written feedback-related talk is directness. Should errors be fully identified and, if so, should they be fully corrected by the feedback provider or would this amount to 'spoonfeeding'? What is the desirable degree of overtness? And might this correlate with error type, the global-local distinction made earlier? Importantly, how exactly does this relate to the tutor's treatment of postgraduate distance learners as academic writers and prospective members of the academic community generally? Let us consider each of these points in some detail.

Research among conventional (that is, non-distance learning) university students has generally pointed to the need for some kind of problem-solving in written error feedback in the sense that error identification is welcome but full correction isn't (see Leki, 1991, Komura, 1999, Ferris *et al.*, 2000, Rennie, 2000, among others; cf. Κάλφογλου, 2003 for a review of the literature and a discussion). This finding leans on the side of indirectness, somehow minimizing the feedback provider's authoritativeness. Yet, it is indeed interesting to note that some allusion to ways of putting the error right has also been treated as more than welcome. Identifying the problem without providing any help as to how it can be rectified is not a popular course of action on the part of the teacher. In other words, we seem to be presented with a middle-ground situation, where overt correction may be disfavoured but helpful tips on how things can improve are not. This seems to be

[3] Content-related feedback is not so seriously underresearched in *L1* studies, however – see Straub (2006) for an overview.

in line with the exploratory spirit of Open and Distance Learning as noted in Κόκκος (2001), for instance. On the other hand, the research referred to revolves around local, form-related errors, which, as shown above, do not constitute the majority of deviant instances in our programme. The degree to which students might welcome indirect as against direct *content* feedback has been underresearched. Thus, direct transfer of practices needs to be treated with caution. Local, form-related errors being easier to pin down, for instance, they might well make exploration on the part of trainees more desirable.

In actual fact, quantitative research in the area of content errors (Calfoglou, 2010) reveals that distance learning trainees welcome tutor suggestions on how specific problem points could improve, which underscores the need for systematic guidance but, on the other hand, they still value the tentativeness of an interrogative comment quite highly, which indicates their need for self-regulation and autonomy (cf. Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα, 2001). Thus, feedback comments of the 'Does A follow from B?' type, as an identification of a coherence problem, received substantial support from the research participants, for, as was reported, they are 'food for thought'. By contrast, characterizations allowing no room for further processing of the problem identified, as in 'I find your arguments + an evaluative adjective', for instance, were extremely unwelcome. At the same time, however, the need for active tutor support is evident in students' preference for attempts to reconstruct meaning, as in 'Are you suggesting …?', for example. It appears, then, that, though it may be tempting to argue, following Ferris (1999), that less directly treatable (global) errors may need to be corrected more directly than more directly treatable (local) ones, it seems to be safer and more appropriate to accept the fuzziness of the directness-indirectness distinction where more complex errors are involved.

Learner exploitation of written feedback in the case of such more complex errors is also a complicated issue. Experience has shown, for instance, that students have more trouble improving in terms of macrostructure, plausibility of argumentation and consistency-coherence, seminal features of especially academic writing, which means that this is an area in need of further exploration. In a similar vein, it appears that it is crucial to explore distance students' preferences with regard to the treatment they wish their errors to undergo, following the tradition of exploring learner preferences in relation to the way they wish to be taught at tutorials (cf. Sander & Stevenson, 1998 among others; cf. Stevenson *et al.*, 2006).[4] This exploration may well be seen as boosting our "awareness of the psychology of giving and receiving feedback" (Yorke, 2003 in Carless, 2006: 219), a key determinant of the whole process and, perhaps, the only way to get over the 'emotional barriers' (Carless, 2006) the evaluation process involves.

Facilitation vs. punishment

Directness of correction strongly correlates with the choice we make between feedback as a form of negative reinforcement, 'punishment' of some kind, and feedback as a way of facilitating trainees' choices in composing an assignment. This is, then, another point that merits attention. Our M.Ed. written feedback practices involve generally disfavouring aphoristic statements expressing downright disapproval of trainee choices, as in the case of 'bad choice', 'wrong!', 'can't understand!', for instance, and opting for more tentative, negotiation-encouraging comments like 'why don't you consider …?' or 'Have you thought of …?'. The question arising in this context, however, is how one can drive the message home without sounding disapproving. How plausible is Hyland & Hyland's

[4] Yet another particularly fruitful area of research, which would shed further light on the advisability of a specific course of action in the feedback provision process is that of examining the longer-term effects of specific forms of feedback on learner performance. Truscott (2007), Truscott & Yi-ping Hsu (2008), for instance, come up with some truly nihilistic findings suggesting little, if any, positive impact of error correction on students' subsequent writing. Even though experience shows such a generalization is unlikely, the issue needs to be studied more closely.

(2001) argument that excessive tentativeness, through the presence of hedges and mitigators, may lead to misinterpretation, especially if we consider the fact that we are dealing with a context where the chance of an *in vivo* remedy is rather poor? If, indeed, higher education students in a conventional context often find it hard to interpret written feedback (Chanock, 2000; cf. discussion in Carless, 2006), in the case of ODL students the balance between facilitation, as referred to above, and clarity needs to be sought very cautiously.[5] In other words, the degree of indirectness and tentativeness to be endorsed, especially in the context of globally relevant errors, should be subject to systematic reflection. In the Greek context, in particular, where trainees are not really used to trainee-teacher negotiation, excessive tentativeness may even invite trainee questioning of the tutor's authority as face-losing. Generally, however, overtly evaluative comments with especially a negative tinge, untempered by mitigators of some kind, may need to be avoided.

The relative balance of strengths and weaknesses: Interpersonal issues

Crucially related to the punitive or facilitative nature of tutors' comments on students' written assignments is the relative degree to which the strengths and weaknesses of these assignments are underlined. As tutors, we make a point of underlining whatever is positive in a DL trainee's piece of work, even in cases where this is minimal to non-existent. Put differently, 'think of what is good in what you have done first rather than of what is in need of improvement'. This is more or less standard tutor policy but an interesting question to pose in relation to this policy is whether it might no longer produce the desired encouragement effects once students are inured to its formulaic use. Students have actually reported quickly skimming through the positive comments in search of the 'but' that normally follows. Interestingly, the strengths-weaknesses issue is also one of the questions posed in students' assessment of their tutor, carried out on a yearly basis, which foregrounds encouragement as a major determinant of distance learning tutor behaviour. Preventing it from developing into an only-to-be-expected aspect of the feedback provided is an issue that deserves attention, however. Making the strengths part concrete by referring to specific instances of praiseworthy behavior in the student's paper may be one way of solving the problem.

Related to this, primarily humanitarian, aspect of feedback provision are a host of interpersonal issues. In Hyland & Hyland's words (2006: 222),

> "feedback not only communicates beliefs about writing, language, or content but also expresses and negotiates human relationships. Teachers often take great care in phrasing their end comments on ESL trainees' essays, using praise, criticism, and suggestions to structure their response and mitigating directness in various ways".

This statement sums up a number of the arguments we have referred to in our discussion so far. Feedback is about performance and improvement but, above all, it is about creating an appropriate tutor-trainee framework within which the positive impact of all comments provided can be maximized. This is especially poignant in the case where the feedback provided is related to the (originality) of the content or the idea strength of the text. As Hyland & Hyland (2006) again put it, "teachers tend(ed) to be more reticent about criticizing students' ideas than about commenting on form …". It is in such cases in particular that context-specific factors, related to the cultural background, the personality as well as the psychology of each individual trainee, are given priority. Especially in so far as the first module is concerned, students run the risk of being demoralized by failure, given their academic 'freshness'. The tutor's role as a counsellor rather than 'punisher' is therefore crucial.

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[5] Carless (2006) actually proposes 'assessment dialogues' as a means of tackling misconceptions in the feedback provision process. Taking feedback action on the basis of research-driven student-preference findings may be yet another form of such a dialogue.

Replicability

Yet another parameter which may need to be taken account of in judging the effectiveness of feedback practices is the replicability of the behaviour recommended in tutor comments, that is the generalisability of these comments. Research in the distance learning context (see, e.g., Knight & Yorke, 2003) has shown that students seem to attend more to feedback they can make use of in later assignments, so it might be necessary, in selecting which errors to focus on, to think of their generic or non-generic nature, just as it might be necessary to provide comments that encompass more than a single point and can thus provide more global guidance. Coherence- or style-related problems, for example, may suggest that the student is in need of generic guidance in creating a unified whole or upgrading their style to meet the demands of the academic genre and tutors need to grab the opportunity to point in this direction. The importance of general feedback is also underlined in Carless (2006: 225), who argues that such feedback "has the potential to 'feedforward', into future tasks rather than back to completed assignments".

Now, is this not what we always, perhaps unwittingly, have in mind when expecting students to make progress from one assignment to the next? And would this perhaps suggest that comments unifying individual points and identifying the pattern behind them may be more effective than overspecific corrections, often missing the wood for the trees, as in 'There are several points in your work where the transition from one point to the next is not particularly smooth. Consider, for example, …' as against 'On page … the transition from one point to the next is not so smooth …'.[6] Selectivity is also part of the story, for underlining instances of deviance with a common convergence point may be preferable to exhaustive correction which fails to capture the overall image in the text evaluated. On the other hand, this generalisability issue is also related to whether the written report can be made to relate not to the specific end-product alone but also, or primarily, the process, that is the specific learning route followed by the individual trainee over the academic year.

What is proposed

Against such a rich and varied background of feedback-related considerations, what do we propose as most appropriate for trainees on our programme? It is first of all important to note that all the issues above are largely determined by the specific needs of individual students. Goldstein (2004: 67) presents an inventory of individual student – but also teacher – needs, which need to be considered in order for feedback to be truly effective:

> "The unique interaction between teacher factors and individual student factors will affect how we respond and how students use our commentary in revision. Teacher factors can include, but are not limited to, teacher personality, the teacher's pedagogical beliefs about how to comment, attitudes towards specific student characteristics, attitudes toward each student, attitudes towards the content about which students are writing, knowledge of the content about which students are writing, expectations of students at a particular level, and expectations of particular students. Student factors include, but are not limited to, student personality, age, goals and expectations, motivations, proficiency level (which, even though advanced in the case of postgraduate students in our programme, may still vary considerably; *our addition*), past learning experiences, preferred learning styles and strategies, content knowledge and interest, time constraints, attitudes towards the teacher, the class, the content, the writing assignment, and the commentary itself."

[6] Needless to say, the efficiency of generic global error feedback also hinges on broader ideological issues, namely convincing students of the (debatable?) need to conform to the academic genre. But this is a point that goes beyond the bounds of the present article.

'One size fits all' can therefore be no solution. It appears that, generalizations apart, there are students suffering more from writer's block, in need of more guidance as well as more intimidated by the prospect of failure than others. Quite characteristically, we could report on trainees in the same module favouring some kind of problem-solving and others pointing to the need for more coaching. In Calfoglou (to appear), for instance, some trainees report that they would welcome comments like 'Are you sure this is so? Think of …' because of the thought-provoking interrogative while others make the choice because of the guidance that follows in the second part of the comment. In other words, there are less and more autonomous trainees and, as long as this is so, more or less directive comments may be needed. This is why, as noted in the previous section, more systematic exploration of trainees' attitudes towards and perceptions of errors and feedback, an aspect of feedback provision also generally neglected in the relevant literature, in the form of both quantitative and qualitative research is needed. In any case, however, we would suggest that feedback needs to be individualized, even though this may take up time often unavailable.

Second, as already suggested, decisions regarding the form and content of the feedback provided are inevitably as well as often unwittingly determined by the role tutors visualize themselves as possessing in the teacher-trainee context. Opting for the non-tempered or the punitive usually implies a view of oneself as an omniscient punisher while choosing the milder side may be indicative of the tutor's willingness to negotiate things with his or her students. The choice seems an obvious one but it appears that we may all have a long way to go before we eradicate latently authoritarian tendencies. And, as already explained, the image is further blurred by the multiplicity of variables that need to be taken into account. The idea of the tutor being the only source of feedback can be deflated through support of networking and peer assessment, both at a pre-text stage, as students are preparing to 'put pen to paper', and at a post-text stage, that is once they have completed their output. Electronic networking may be precious in this respect (MacDonald, 2001).

Third, the permanent nature of written comments is not to be overlooked. Despite the transience of the electronic mode of tutor report delivery, written feedback is in a sense indelibly engraved on the page and thus generates an increased sense of responsibility. This means that the roles we visualize ourselves and our trainees as possessing are emphatically projected in the process. As suggested in Boud (1995: 43), cited in Carless (2006: 221), "We judge too much and too powerfully, not realizing the extent to which students experience our power over them". As Boud again argues, all this is associated with the emotional underpinnings of feedback. Thus, fine-tuning the form and content of feedback may help blunt the acuteness of being judged. On the other hand, we may need to consider disengaging feedback from assessment altogether to enhance less power-driven student response and maximize benefits. This will mean, however, that the assessment process needs to be radically revised to encompass more than end-of-term exam skills alone.

A final point to make is related to the seminal issue of 'informed autonomy'. We want our trainees to develop the strategies needed for them to study independently and develop autonomy through awareness of how they can monitor their work as well as of why they may be making this or that decision, both in their mode of study and in their choices in writing (cf. Lee, 2004, 2009). This will, in turn, enable them to pursue autonomy in their learners, working on their reflectiveness, just as their own critical and reflective skills are being sharpened (see Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα *κ.ά.*, 2003 and literature therein). The ultimate purpose of written feedback, and all forms of feedback for that matter, should be not to further nourish trainees' dependence on the tutor by patronizing them but to help them develop the metacognitive awareness needed in steering their way through their studies and lifelong education generally. In view of our students' triple role referred to earlier, namely that of a relatively experienced EFL teacher, a distance-learning trainee and an academic writer, it is important for them to be able to become autonomous in all three respects and, predominantly, in the all-engulfing sense of being efficient decision-makers. In this way, the goal of 'informed autonomy', autonomy through awareness, will have been achieved.

In view of all this and considering the points raised earlier, we need to carefully monitor our tactics in relation to feedback provision. Most importantly, we ought to make sure we are not replicating the typical mismatch between teacher feedback-related beliefs and practices (Lee, 2009), advocating autonomy while 'strangling' it at the same time. Students could thus be trained to work on their own errors and self-correct, considering all the caveats above, so as to take control of the feedback process and be driven one step closer to autonomy. Clear as well as enlightening and facilitative feedback is also crucial in this respect. As pointed out in Hounsell (2003: 67), cited in Carless (2006: 219), "We learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need to do in order to improve" (cf. Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Importantly, students should not have the feeling that they are being left unaided, for, as already noted, Open and Distance education involves both *learning* and *learner (trainee)* support. As indicated in research done in relation to Greek distance learning students (see, among others, Λιοναράκης, 1998, Κόκκος, 2001, Αγιακλή, 2003, Κάλφογλου, 2003, Calfoglou, to appear, Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα *κ.ά.*, 2003), ODL feedback needs to be primarily supportive. As tutors on the first module on postgraduate trainees' agenda, we need to be particularly cautious in our policies, as newly recruited students may get discouraged and drop out, just as we need to make sure that the triple role of our students, referred to from the beginning of this article, is consistently addressed. It is hoped that we have managed to show some of the ways in which this could be accomplished.

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