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Unravelling the complexities of tutors' feedback in distance education

Χαρακτηριστικά της ανατροφοδότησης του καθηγητή- συμβούλου στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση

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In distance education, where opportunities for face-to-face interaction are rather limited, tutors' feedback on assignments appears to play an even more crucial role, as it can affect students' motivation, performance, learning and development. This article reports on the results of a study on the feedback four tutors teaching Oracy and Literacy Skills in the M.Ed. of Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language at the Hellenic Open University (HOU) provide first-year EFL teacher-students with. More specifically, drawing on Wion (2008) and Hyland's (2001) multi-faceted frameworks of feedback analysis, and comparing them to the HOU feedback categories, we propose a new, more condensed model of analysis and examine feedback on four students' assignments through four lenses: content, organization, language accuracy and affect. This analysis attempts to shed some new light on the quantity and quality of Hellenic Open University tutors' feedback, spot similarities and differences between tutors' feedback which could be attributed to varying amounts of tutoring experience and explore to what extent students' emotions are considered. The study concludes by suggesting ways in which feedback on assignments can be improved to open and maintain a multidimensional dialogue between tutors and students in distance education and how it can contribute to students' development at several levels, such as cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, social as well as affective.

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Στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, όπου οι ευκαιρίες για προσωπική αλληλεπίδραση είναι πιο περιορισμένες, η ανατροφοδότηση των εκπαιδευτών προς τους φοιτητές τους φαίνεται να διαδραματίζει έναν πολύ κρίσιμο ρόλο, καθώς μπορεί να επηρεάσει τα κίνητρα, τις επιδόσεις, τη μαθησιακή διαδικασία και την ανάπτυξή τους. Η παρούσα εργασία αναφέρεται στα αποτελέσματα μιας μελέτης η οποία εστιάζει στην ανατροφοδότηση που παρείχαν τέσσερις διδάσκοντες της ενότητας παραγωγής και κατανόησης προφορικού και γραπτού λόγου στο Μεταπτυχιακό Δίπλωμα Ειδίκευσης (ΜΔΕ) της διδασκαλίας της Αγγλικής ως ξένης/διεθνούς γλώσσας στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο (ΕΑΠ) σε εργασίες

πρωτοετών φοιτητών-καθηγητών Αγγλικής Γλώσσας. Συγκεκριμένα, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη τα μοντέλα ανάλυσης των Wion (2008) και Hyland (2001) και κατόπιν σύγκρισής τους με τις κατηγορίες ανατροφοδότησης που χρησιμοποιούνται στο ΕΑΠ, προτείνουμε ένα νέο, πιο περιεκτικό μοντέλο ανάλυσης, στο πλαίσιο του οποίου η ανατροφοδότηση εξετάζεται μέσα από τέσσερις κατηγορίες: περιεχόμενο, οργάνωση, γλωσσική ακρίβεια και συναίσθημα. Η ανάλυση αυτή διερευνά την ποσότητα και την ποιότητα των σχολίων, τις ομοιότητες και τις διαφορές μεταξύ των ανατροφοδοτήσεων των τεσσάρων εκπαιδευτών, και εξετάζει αν θα μπορούσαν αυτές οι διαφορές να αποδοθούν στο διαφορετικό βαθμό διδακτικής εμπειρίας τους. Επίσης, εξετάζει σε ποιο βαθμό τα συναισθήματα των φοιτητών λαμβάνονται υπόψη στην παρεχόμενη ανατροφοδότηση. Τέλος, προτείνονται τρόποι με τους οποίους η παροχή ανατροφοδότησης μπορεί να βελτιωθεί έτσι ώστε να ανοίξει ένας πολυδιάστατος διάλογος μεταξύ εκπαιδευτών και φοιτητών στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση και διερευνάται πώς η ανατροφοδότηση αυτή μπορεί να συμβάλει στην ανάπτυξη των φοιτητών σε γνωστικό, μεταγνωστικό, παρωθητικό, κοινωνικό αλλά και συναισθηματικό επίπεδο.

Key words: feedback modes, feedback types, feedback dialogue, students and tutors' emotions

1. Introduction

Hundreds of research studies on the topic of feedback highlight its instructional power and its influence, both positive and negative, on students' learning, achievement and motivation (Epstein et al., 2002; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Narciss & Huth, 2004; Price et al., 2010; Shute, 2006). In distance education, where opportunities for face-to-face interaction are rather limited, tutors' feedback on assignments appears to play an even more crucial role, as it can steer learning, improve performance and sustain motivation (Hyland, 2001; Wion, 2008). Nonetheless, research has also shown that students are generally dissatisfied with the feedback they get and they do not actually use, as, in many cases, they do not seem to understand it (Beaumont et al., 2008; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017). There are even cases in which students appear unwilling to discuss it with their tutors (Hyland, 2001). In this sense, Boud & Molloy (2013) rightly claim that significance also lies in the feedback tutors get from students regarding the feedback they provide them with. Tutors and students' expression of emotions can be perceived as feedback that cannot be ignored and deserves to be closely explored in this context, as new research findings highlight the role emotions play in all learning contexts (Martínez Agudo, 2018; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010).

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Canning (2013, p.2) aptly summarises the value of feedback by illustrating its significance for both tutors and students. Tutors need to be able to provide students with good quality feedback and students need to be able to understand and use it effectively. In the case of less able students, good feedback cannot be exploited, no matter how high the quality of the feedback is, while most able students cannot be benefitted if the feedback they are given is poor.

In distance education contexts, the significance of feedback is even more vital, as most tutor-student communication takes place in writing (Hyland, 2001). Jarvis (1978), after examining feedback in detail, concluded that it can function as a means of assessment, as a

means of communicating knowledge and as a means of facilitating learning, the last level being the most important, because it promotes a 'dialogue' between tutors and students and it can enhance students' autonomy and independence through a more reflective approach to learning (Carnwell, 1999).

Yet, despite its importance and the slow movement towards alternative forms of assessment (Heywood, 2000), studies have revealed that the feedback higher education institutions provide their students with is inadequate and academics' practices have been very little influenced by innovative ideas and research findings in the field (Boud & Molloy, 2013). In addition, the increasing number of students, funding reductions and the fewer number of assessed tasks or the less knowledge students get as tasks are squeezed in fewer weeks lead to further deterioration of the situation (Hounsell, 2007).

Most studies exploring feedback attempt to discover ways in which it can be made more effective. Wion (2008) in particular highlights the importance of tutors' feedback in distance education, as it affects learning at several levels, and attempts to explore and define supportive feedback as feedback that supports the learners and the learning process, offers them opportunities to reflect on their work and develop towards fulfilling their training goals. The aim of Wion's (ibid.) study was to extend Blanchet's (1985) work on styles and provide researchers with a framework for supportive feedback analysis. This particular framework was utilised in the present study in order to explore whether the assignments under examination include any such features and how useful these features can be when providing feedback in our context.

More specifically, Wion (ibid.) analyses feedback in terms of style and type. As regards style, there are three categories: declarative, reiterative and interrogative. In declarative style, tutors use declarative verbs, such as 'I think', 'I believe', and so on, to show their position on the students' assignment. In reiterative style, the tutor repeats or reflects the students' point of view or content in an attempt to facilitate their knowledge development while in the interrogative style the tutor asks a direct or indirect question and reopens a dialogue with the student, showing real interest in the content of the assignment point and, consequently, in the student's of view. The second approach to feedback analysis which Wion (ibid.) proposes is that of the type of feedback, which comprises the following categories: affective, cognitive, developmental, metacognitive, motivational and social. Feedback is classified as affective when the tutor acknowledges learners' feelings and guides them through those which make them feel uncomfortable. It is cognitive when tutors recognize what is right and what is wrong and help learners connect their existing knowledge with new information. Developmental feedback is forward looking and promotes further growth and improvement of skills in optimal learning settings adjusted to learners' individual potential while metacognitive feedback promotes critical thinking and students' reflective skills so that they can apply the knowledge they acquire in future assignments. Motivational feedback encourages students further or acknowledges their efficacy. Last, social feedback promotes interaction and collaboration with peers or academic advisors or knowledgeable others. This framework of feedback analysis, despite being described rather vaguely and containing many categories (see presentation of findings in section 4.2), can offer useful insights to researchers who wish to explore academic feedback, but it can also provide tutors with a useful yardstick in evaluating the feedback they provide. What is worth highlighting is the fact that this framework has acknowledged the importance of students' emotions and suggests analyzing feedback in terms of affect as well.

Another study focusing on academic feedback in distance education is Hyland's (2001). It concerns L2 users and appears well-founded, as it examines feedback both from the tutors' and from the students' perspective, using a number of research instruments. After analyzing the data collected, Hyland concludes that there are considerable individual differences in tutors' feedback as well as variations in what students expect from the feedback they receive and in the extent to which they exploit it to their benefit. Hyland examines feedback both as a product and as a process. At product level, content, organization, language accuracy and presentation are examined while at process level, encouragement, reinforcement of learning materials and suggestions for improving the language learning process are explored. Feedback on content focuses on the ideas and the information transferred, organization deals with cohesion and coherence matters, language accuracy relates to grammatical and lexical problems while presentation describes features such as spacing or indentation of paragraphs among others. As regards feedback at process level, although encouragement appears to be particularly important, in the assignments examined by Hyland, encouragement feedback tends to be general and vague. Linking feedback to useful learning materials is also beneficial, as it reinforces learning and guides students towards spotting solutions to problems. Last, suggestions for using strategies to improve language learning were also evaluated. In her study, besides the individual nature feedback exhibits and the different priorities tutors set, Hyland concludes that students' reluctance to discuss feedback further with their tutors, especially over the telephone, is quite surprising while self-reliance seemed encouraging and suggests creating mechanisms which will promote feedback discussion between tutors and students as well as support and training for tutors so that neglected areas of feedback, such as reinforcement of learning materials and processes are catered for more effectively.

Both Wion (2008) and Hyland's (2001) typologies appear to have a lot in common with those aspects Hellenic Open University (HOU) tutors address in the feedback report they compile when they evaluate their students' assignments. More specifically, HOU tutors comment mainly on product, that is content in terms of rationale, analysis, use of literature and application of principles to practice and on structure in terms of organization, structure, presentation and language. Process is not explicitly catered for and this is corroborated by a number of observations made and conclusions drawn after a detailed faculty discussion of the quality of feedback HOU tutors provide their students with over the years, which took place during the academic year 2014-15 (Hellenic Open University, 2015). After examining fourteen assignments from different modules of the programme and their respective feedback reports, all tutors acknowledged how enlightening it was to see how other tutors dealt with feedback and compare it to their own approach and reflect on their practices as well as on the reasons why students complain. The feedback features which were most commented on can be summarized as follows:

- discrepancies between tutors' quantity, quality and focus of feedback
- differences in tutors' understanding of the feedback criteria included in the report
- holistic or analytic approach to feedback
- presence or absence of in-text comments
- direct or indirect correction of errors
- provision of guidance regarding problematic areas
- presence or absence of suggestions for improvement
- degree of concreteness or vagueness in comments
- balance between praise and constructive criticism
- presence or absence of encouragement
- suggestion for collaboration with peers or further communication

In conclusion, it was admitted that improvements are needed so that tutors' feedback on written assignments enhances students' motivation and contributes to their academic development. Also, tutors should avoid correcting every single problem they spot, as this approach could hinder students' creativity and taking responsibility for their academic development. Yet, in this discussion there was no reference made to how students might feel when they receive feedback and how students' emotions could be taken into account by their tutors.

Through this very brief presentation of feedback-related literature, it is clear that students' emotions, despite the increased interest in emotion research and the recognition of their role in learning, have not been given much attention. Rowe et al. (2014) maintain that, since assessment involves 'high-stakes', feedback unavoidably triggers strong emotions in both students and tutors, which may affect both its transmission and its reception. In their literature review, they pinpoint that emotions in feedback have been explored mainly from a cognitive point of view, thus ignoring the wider learning context, and are limited to individual differences and do not seek to understand functionality of emotions in higher academic contexts. In their research they examine which emotions are associated with feedback and the role they play in it and conclude that students experience a range of both positive and negative emotions when they anticipate or receive feedback.

In the HOU context, Touvlatzis & Kalogiannakis (2015) investigated emotions experienced by HOU learners during their studies and the factors that create positive or negative feelings in them. More specifically, regarding students' emotions related to written assignments in general (and not feedback in particular), their data analysis shows that the most dominant emotions are satisfaction and anxiety, followed by trust/security, relief, excitement as well as nervousness. They also note that women appear more stressed than men.

Thus, the present study, besides analyzing feedback in terms of the aforementioned models (see next section) in order to explore both its quantity and its quality, seeks to synthesize the most important feedback categories and explore the presence and/or absence of expression of emotions in the feedback given by four HOU tutors.

3. The Research Design

3.1. The context

The M.Ed. in Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language is one of the oldest and most successful programmes run by the Hellenic Open University (Papaefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis, 2011). In an attempt to improve it further as regards feedback provided to students, in 2015 the head of the programme created a pool of sample assignments and feedback reports of all modules and asked tutors to review them so that all tutors could be informed and a discussion could ensue. A number of tutors reported their thoughts in writing and a discussion took place during the tutors' meeting in June 2015 (Minutes of Tutors' Meeting, 7-6-2015).

Triggered by that discussion and the issues raised, this paper reports on the results of a small-scale study on the feedback HOU tutors of the Oracy and Literacy Skills module of the M.Ed. in Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language provide on first-year EFL teacher-students' written assignments. The researcher taught the specific module in 2016-17 for the first time and she underwent some informal training at various stages in the academic year. She also sought and received advice and guidance from colleagues whenever

she needed support. Through this process and, despite following the HOU guidelines, it was clear that tutors adopt different approaches when grading academic assignments and providing feedback.

3.2. The research questions

The present study aspired to shed some light on the approaches HOU tutors adopt when grading assignments and providing students with feedback, so that students can reflect on their performance and improve it in the future. More specifically, it aimed to explore:

- a) The quantity and quality of the feedback tutors provide
- b) Possible differences regarding various feedback aspects between experienced and novice tutors
- c) To what extent students' emotions are considered in tutors' feedback
- d) Whether tutors themselves express their emotions in the feedback they give

3.3. Sampling

For the purposes of this study, four written assignments focusing on listening and ranging from 6.5 to 7.5 (out of 10) in grade were scrutinised. Listening was chosen as it is the first skill first-year students are presented with and, thus, the first assignment they have to submit focuses on this skill. Two of the assignments chosen for the present analysis were graded by two of the most experienced tutors of the program while the other two by two novice tutors teaching the specific module for the first time during the academic year 2016-17. The selection of the sample was random in the sense that the researcher first refined the type of assignment she was interested in exploring (number of assignments, skill, score-band, experienced/inexperienced tutors) and then convenience sampling was applied through searching among her personal archives and reaching out to colleagues willing to provide her with their assignments and feedback reports. The principal aim was to compare and contrast the way in which experienced and inexperienced tutors provide their students with feedback in the specific module, spot differences and use these findings to inform the training of novice and/or inexperienced tutors as well as the retraining of experienced ones regarding assignment feedback. The specific average grade band was chosen so that the sample could have some homogeneity and neither too many nor too few comments as a result of students' very low or very high academic profile respectively.

More specifically, the four assignments discussed in the present study were selected as follows: Assignment 1 was chosen from a pool of students' assignments of various course modules. As mentioned earlier, these assignments were made available to all tutors by the head of the HOU master's programme for EFL teachers in 2015. All assignments and feedback reports in the pool were anonymous. Assignment 1 was written in 2014 and was selected because it was the only assignment on Listening. Assignment 2 was written in 2012 and was provided to the researcher as a sample assignment along with its feedback report, as part of her training. Assignments 3 and 4 were written in 2016, were graded by two novice tutors and fitted the grade criterion set by the researcher.

3.4. Research methodology

First, a quantitative approach was applied, and some characteristics of each assignment were tabulated, while all tutors' comments¹ were numbered manually. Then, adopting a qualitative approach and following Wion (2008) and Hyland's (2001) frameworks of feedback analysis (see section 2), the tutors' comments were categorised. Adopting Wion's (ibid.) classification, in-text feedback was categorised in terms of style (declarative, reiterative, interrogative) and type (cognitive, developmental, metacognitive, motivational, social and affective). Following, and slightly modifying, Hyland's (ibid.) classification to fit our context, the tutors' comments were also categorised as regards content, organisation, language accuracy, presentation, encouragement, reinforcement of learning and suggestions for improvement. Last, a new analysis was attempted with a view to synthesizing the previous two models and incorporating the main categories HOU tutors apply when they provide students with feedback on their assignments in a more condensed manner. In this analysis students and tutors' emotions are brought to the foreground and are included in the four main categories devised to classify comments: content, organisation/presentation, linguistic accuracy and affect/motivation.

4. The findings

4.1. Quantitative features

Figure 1 presents the main quantitative features of the assignments considered. More specifically, it displays the year in which the assignments were written (column 2), the grade they received (column 3) as well as the number of words the main body of the assignment comprises (column 4). It also displays the number of comments each tutor has written on the assignment (column 5) as well as the number of words they wrote in their in-text comments to their students (column 7). Column 6 displays the ratio of the number of words written in the assignment by the student (column 4) divided by the number of comments the tutor has made (column 5). Although inexperienced tutors (see Assignments 3 and 4) appear to be closer in the number of comments they wrote (56 and 78 respectively) as well as in the ratio of tutors' comments to students' text (one comment/38.75 words and 1 comment/34.11 words respectively), it is clear from this tabular representation that the number of comments each tutor has written on the specific assignments does not seem to correlate with the tutoring experience they have but could be attributed to their personal style in giving feedback (see discussion below).

Two other aspects worth mentioning are the limited number of comments written by Tutor B as well as the large number of words used in the comments by Tutor A. The comments on Assignment 1 are in the form of "track changes", that is suggestions for deletions, additions, corrections or commentaries, while all other tutors provided comments using comment boxes in either .doc or .pdf format. In addition, Tutor C explained to her student in one of her first comments that she would be using yellow highlights to indicate linguistic inaccuracies and would not provide the student with the correct option. An aspect that appears somewhat more homogeneous in the assignments examined is the average number of words included in tutors' comments, which ranges from 8.1 to 12.5 words per comment.

¹ The term 'comment' is used to describe any form of a tutor's intervention on the student's text, such as addition or deletion of word(s) as well as commentary. Commentaries often comprise more than one period, and their content may belong to more than one category, as can be seen in the presentation of findings and the corresponding figures. This fact accounts for discrepancies in the total number of comments when applying different models of analysis.

Having described the quantitative features of the four assignments used in this study, let us now proceed to the presentation of the data stemming from the frameworks applied and attempt a qualitative evaluation.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Year	Assignment grade	Number of words (main text only)	Number of tutor's comments	Students' number of words/number of tutor's comments ratio	Number of words in comments	Average number of words per comment
Assignment 1 / Tutor A	2014	7	2427	147	16.5	1483	10
Assignment 2 / Tutor B	2012	6.6	1812	9	201.3	113	12.5
Assignment 3 / Tutor C	2016	7	2170	56	38.75	455	8.1
Assignment 4 / Tutor D	2016	7.4	2661	79	33.68	750	9.4

Figure 1: Quantitative features of assignments and assignment feedback

4.2. Qualitative features

4.2.1. Wion's model: Feedback style

Using Wion's (2008) feedback framework, the in-text comments² of the four assignments were classified as shown in Figure 2 to demonstrate the prevailing feedback style of each assignment/tutor.

As can be seen from the number of comments in each category, the declarative style prevails while the reiterative one is almost non-existent. More specifically, there are only three reiterative comments in Assignment 1 and two in Assignment 3. Tutors also choose to use questions to provide feedback, yet, this is done at a less frequent rate (see discussion of findings for examples of comments of different styles).

² Not all comments in the form of additions/deletions of letters/word(s)/phrases were included in the number of comments we analysed in section 4.2., as they could not be appropriately categorized.

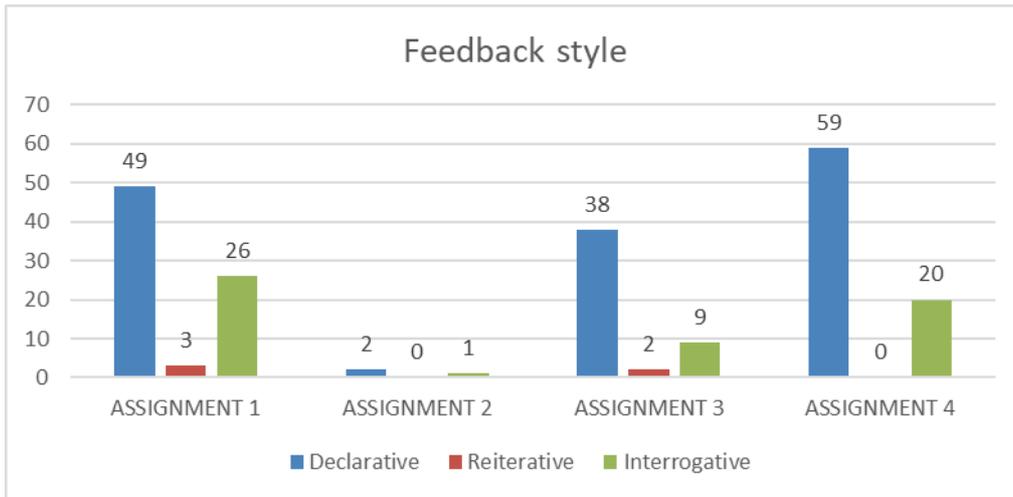


Figure 2: Feedback style

4.2.2. Wion's model: Feedback type

As far as feedback type is concerned, following Wion's (2008) classification and the descriptions provided, very few comments in the assignments we examined could be clearly assigned to these categories. Figure 3 shows that the greatest number of comments in these four assignments can be categorized as cognitive, in other words, it relates to content knowledge students should have when completing the particular module regarding the teaching of the listening skill. Another type of feedback which tutors have used is motivational, commenting on the students' performance, ideas or way of writing. All the other types of feedback, i.e. affective, developmental or metacognitive are almost non-existent:

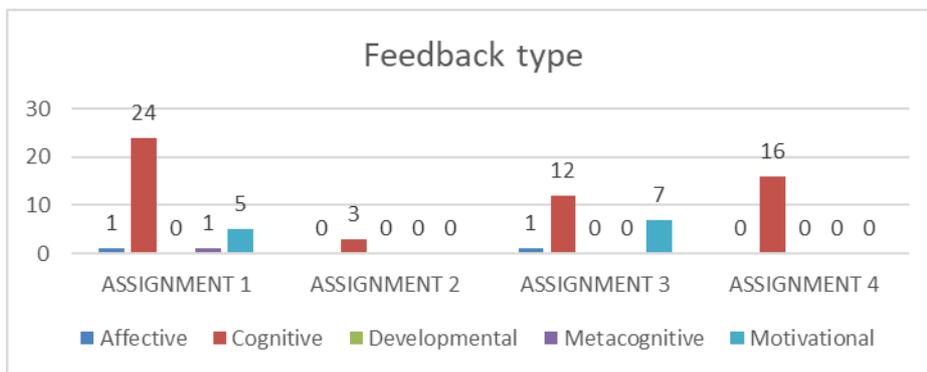


Figure 3: Feedback type

Despite the fact that Wion's analysis offers multiple lenses through which feedback can be viewed, not all tutors' comments in the assignments we analysed could be clearly or exclusively assigned to one specific category, thus rendering this framework of analysis complex and not very practical. For instance, by comparing the number of comments that appear in Figures 2 and 3, we can see that only 31 comments out of 78 of those in Assignment 1 could be categorized under a specific feedback type. More specifically, there were often comments in the form of word deletions or word replacements which could not

be classified in the style category, such as the following comment, in which the word *teaching* is replaced by the word *instruction*.

‘My current listening instruction [teaching] is mostly focused on full comprehension of texts’

Similarly, there were comments, such as ‘Lessons are based on the coursebook’ (Assignment 4) which did not clearly belong to any of the previously discussed feedback type categories. As Wion’s framework of analysis proved inadequate for our purposes, Hyland’s (2001) model seemed worth exploring.

4.2.3. Hyland’s model of feedback classification

As noted earlier, Hyland (2001) uses the feedback categories of content, organization, language accuracy, presentation, encouragement, reinforcement of learning materials and suggestions to improve the learning process (see discussion of findings for examples of each category). Applying this framework to our data and attempting to classify all tutors’ comments so that they fit Hyland’s descriptions as closely as possible (see Table 1), we can see that four categories include the greatest number of feedback comments: language accuracy, presentation, content and suggestions for improvement:

	Focus on product				Focus on process		
	Content	Organisation	Language Accuracy	Presentation	Encouragement	Reinforcement of learning materials	Suggestions to improve
ASSIGNMENT 1	27,1%	5,9%	37,1%	15,9%	1,2%	0,6%	12,4%
ASSIGNMENT 2	27,3%	0,0%	27,3%	27,3%	0,0%	9,1%	9,1%
ASSIGNMENT 3	20,0%	0,0%	14,7%	51,6%	0,0%	0,0%	13,7%
ASSIGNMENT 4	31,5%	6,7%	32,6%	20,2%	0,0%	0,0%	9,0%
AVERAGE	26,3%	4,4%	29,9%	26,6%	0,5%	0,5%	11,8%

Table 1: Focus of feedback for all four tutors

More specifically, content feedback amounts to 26.3%, organization to 4.4%, language accuracy to 29.8%, presentation to 26.6%, encouragement and reinforcement comments are scant while suggestions for improvement are almost 12%. Although content would be expected to be the focal point of feedback in this type of academic work, in examining the four assignments, it is clear that language accuracy is an area that attracts tutors’ attention more often, followed by comments on presentation issues and content, which gathered similar percentages. Yet, exploring each tutor’s pattern and ratio for each type of feedback³ (see Figure 4), we can see that no similarities can be spotted, which supports the view that

³ In some cases the total number of comments is higher in *Figure 4* because one comment may consist of more than one period and may refer to more than one aspect. Therefore, it is classified under more than one categories, e.g. one comment may refer both to organization and presentation or content and language accuracy.

the type of feedback tutors provide could be associated with various parameters, one of it being personal style (see next section). In other words, it might be one tutor's preference for language accuracy that leads her to correct or comment on linguistic problems more often while another tutor's attention is more easily drawn to presentation or organization issues.

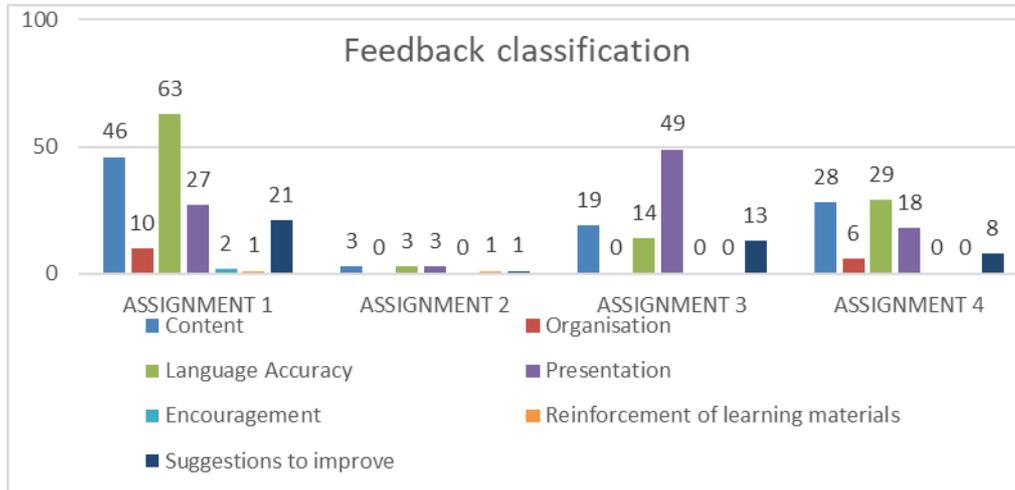


Figure 4: Feedback classification

As can be seen in Figure 4, comments on language accuracy prevail in Assignment 1 while presentation issues appear more often in Assignment 3. Comments on content and language accuracy seem to be balanced in Assignments 2 and 4. Yet, these differences could also be attributed either to the assignment per se, the tutor or both.

4.2.4. A synthesis

While studying the data and attempting to interpret the findings (see next section), a new classification, which would synthesize useful aspects of Wion (2008) and Hyland's (2001) models and incorporate HOU feedback categories, seemed promising. As shown in Figure 5 and as noted earlier, this new categorization comprises four types of feedback: tutors' comments on content (rationale, analysis, use of literature and application of principles to practice), comments on organization/presentation, comments on language (linguistic accuracy and academic style) and comments related to emotions (affect and motivation):

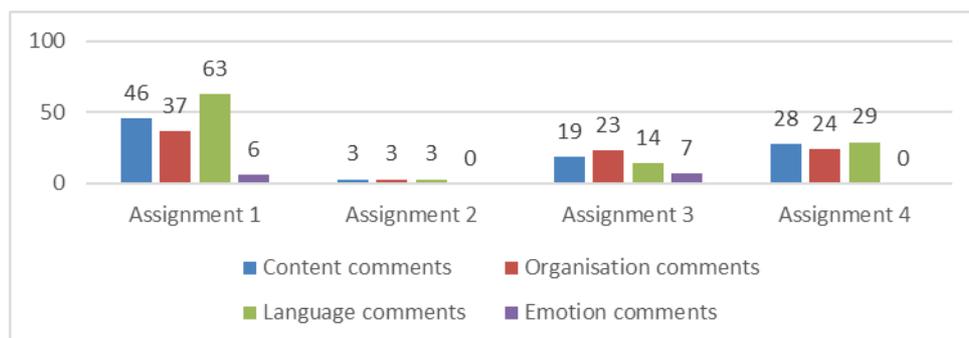


Figure 5: A synthesis

In this type of classification comments seem more evenly distributed in the first three categories, that is content, organization/presentation and language. Yet, the absence or limited number of comments on students' emotions remains striking.

5. Discussion of the findings

Despite the fact that this study is limited, and only tentative conclusions can be drawn, there are a number of interesting aspects related to the research questions we set that are worth commenting on.

5.1. The quantity and quality of the feedback tutors provide

The presentation and analysis of the data stemming from the assignments examined for the purposes of this study provide us with evidence that tutors have an individual style of giving feedback. Both the quantity and the quality of the feedback given to students differ among tutors. Tutors' comments exhibit great variation in quantity (see Table 1) but they are also diverse regarding what they choose to comment on (e.g. product/process, content/language accuracy and so on), how they do it (e.g. using comment boxes or the track changes option), the style they adopt (declarative, interrogative or reiterative), whether they provide students with the right alternative or with guidance as to how to do better and whether they encourage them by praising their strengths.

The declarative style adopted in the majority of the comments was direct and did not include phrases like 'I think', 'I believe', as described in Wion (2008). Tutors generally write a comment focusing on the point they want to make, without using a personal tone or smooth introductions to what they wish to say. For instance, in Assignment 1, the tutor writes:

A comment is needed at this point. First, this is your lesson description section, so you should only describe the steps, adding perhaps the relevant objective. The justification of the tasks should form part of the next section. Second, in order for this justification to cohere with the rest of your text, you need to have created a criteria section with all these criteria needed in your justification and refer back to it.

This is a long declarative comment which analytically explains to the student what she should have included, where she should write the justification and how she should use a backward reference to tie everything into a coherent whole. In other words, the feedback comments on the content, the organization and the presentation but also suggests how it can be improved.

No reference to the appendix (Assignment 2) is another example of a declarative comment which is written in an elliptical form, but which clearly conveys its message.

The third example comes from Assignment 3:

OK it's good you chose samples to evaluate but you were expected to present an overall evaluation of the materials you are using as regards listening or to say that what you have chosen to evaluate is representative of the book.

Here the tutor acknowledges the student's effort and smoothly but rather indirectly clarifies what the problem is and offers some suggestions for improvement.

Another example of declarative style comes from Assignment 4, where the tutor just tells the student what she should do: *You have to explain what you mean by 'task sequencing'.*

At other points, tutors choose to pose questions in order to stimulate students' critical thinking. Sometimes they may also offer them alternatives. For instance, in Assignment 1, the tutor asks:

Yes, but is this all? Don't you need a criteria section, in which you will talk about the need to develop listening micro-skills (or strategies), top-down vs bottom-up processes and learner engagement, the activation of prior knowledge ...?

Or, in the following comment in Assignment 2, the tutor uses a question tag to facilitate the learner and trigger her reflective and critical thinking skills by writing:

But this is actually testing the student, isn't it? How do you make sure the learner is actually learning?

Reiterative style in comments is very rare despite the fact that this type helps the students realise what the tutor-reader understands when they read their assignments. In the following example the tutor summarises and rephrases the student's idea by saying:

So, the overall idea is that the inputs are performed by professional actors, flawless and fully scripted. This would do.

Regarding type of feedback, a great number of comments on all four assignments focus on language accuracy. Yet, there is variation in this as well, since some just mention the problem while others correct the error spotted. Here are some examples:

- *Be consistent with tenses used to describe the lesson* (Assignment 1)
- *She learns* [not she is learning] (Assignment 2)
- *Awkward phrasing* (Assignment 3)
- *Learners'* [replacing learner's] (Assignment 4)

Comments on organization such as the following also appear quite often:

- *You do not need this subsection. It is too short and does not add anything to the organization of your text. Appropriate paragraphing would suffice.* (Assignment 1)
- *A table of contents should have been included* (Assignment 3)

Last, some encouragement can be found in comments in Assignments 1 and 3 such as these:

- *There are excellent points included in your description, like the position and function of listening, but your discussion should focus on listening alone*
- *Very good presentation and analysis of the listening input characteristics based on the criteria seen in the module. Key terminology is adequately defined and the literature is used mainly to explain terms but not to support your views.*
- *Good suggestions but they are not complete.*

Yet, these comments, despite containing praise, come with a 'but' section which might actually degrade the value of encouragement that any positive words used may have.

5.2. Similarities and differences between experienced and novice tutors

From the specific samples we collected and analysed, it cannot be inferred whether tutoring experience affects feedback. The two experienced tutors differed both in the quantity and in the quality of the feedback they provided (see Table 1 for quantity and Figures 1, 2 and 3 for quality) while the assignments graded by the two novice tutors seem closer in the number of comments focusing on content (see Table 1) only. A similar conclusion can be drawn by the synthetic approach we tried; tutors C and D seem to be somewhat closer in the quantity and the distribution of the comments they make along the four categories, with the exception of the comments on affective aspects. Yet, as the sample examined is very limited, the similarities and differences found can by no means act as a clear indicator of tutoring experience.

5.3. Emotions in tutors' feedback

Taking into consideration how important acknowledging students' emotions in achievement contexts such as academic assignments is, an attempt was made to trace all emotion words included in the tutors' comments in the four assignments we examined. Out of 2,801 words used by the four tutors in their comments, only two words can be considered emotion words according to Bednarek's (2008) typology. More specifically, the words 'confusing' and 'confused' were used by Tutor 1 in the following comments:

- *'I find this glossing a bit confusing'*
- *'I'm a bit confused at this point.'*

Clearly, the words 'confusing' and 'confused' reveal the tutor's feelings and describe how the tutor feels towards the student's text. Yet, there are no instances displaying acknowledgement of the students' emotions. This very limited use of emotion words in the tutors' feedback seems to be an area that could be in need of substantial improvement. Tutors, for instance, can show their understanding of the students' academic challenges by acknowledging the way they feel. Using expressions such as: *'I understand you may feel disappointed by...'*, *'I think you should feel proud...'* or inclusion of expressions that describe the tutors' emotions, such as *'I was really happy to see...'*, *'I felt slightly confused...'* could ameliorate distance learners' feeling of isolation, boost their motivation and open up more genuine communication channels between tutors and students.

As was presented earlier, feedback triggers strong emotions in both students and tutors and affects the learning process (Rowe et al., 2014). This is also observed in distance education, where positive and negative emotions can enhance or hinder learning (see Touvlatzis & Kalogiannakis, 2015; Zembylas, 2008). Yet, what it is of utmost importance to bear in mind is the fact that positive feedback does not always guarantee positive emotions only; nor does negative feedback necessarily initiate negative emotions (Fong et al., 2017). Therefore, if tutors express their emotions and acknowledge their students' emotions in the feedback they provide, they might actually help students bridge the gap between their performance and their learning goals.

6. Concluding remarks

This small-scale study, despite its limitations, offers some new insights on the complexity of feedback. First, it displays how diverse tutors' feedback can be in terms of quantity and

quality and in terms of style and type. It also underlines that this diversity does not necessarily relate to the tutor's experience but could be attributed to a number of other parameters (such as personal style), which are worthy of further investigation. Last, the fact that emotion words are practically non-existent in the samples examined suggests that tutors could adopt a more affective stance in the feedback they provide their students with and experiment with the outcome such an approach might have for the students' academic success.

As effective feedback practices are of great concern, feedback criteria should be clearly defined so that tutors are aware of what they should include in the assignment feedback they give their students. A number of approaches could also be utilised to facilitate this process and promote a constructive dialogue between tutors and students. Nichol (2010) and Ramsden (2013) (quoted in Canning, 2013, p. 4) make a number of suggestions, such as offering students access to all feedback comments for a particular assignment and encouraging them to identify comments which could be relevant to their work, providing peer feedback and tutors commenting on the comments, formal opportunities for tutors to discuss feedback and what a good answer should contain or even having standardised comments in some contexts, such as multiple choice tests.

Choosing the right words to provide students with constructive feedback is a challenging task for teachers, as a number of emotions are triggered when students receive it and their learning and academic performance may be affected either positively or negatively. By foregrounding these emotions in the comments tutors make, tutors may make students feel more encouraged and less intimidated in engaging in feedback dialogue which could promote the learning process more effectively.

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